

Responding to Suffering

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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The first time I learned about empathy was in second grade. I went to a Catholic school and Sister Elizabeth Ann introduced me to the New Testament story of the Good Samaritan. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a parable told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.^[1] It is about a traveler who is stripped of clothing, beaten, and left half dead alongside the road. First a priest and then a Levite comes by, but both avoid the man. Finally, a Samaritan happens upon the traveler. Samaritans and Jews despised each other, but the Samaritan helps the injured man. Jesus is described as telling the parable in response to the question from a lawyer, "And who is my neighbor?". In response, Jesus tells the parable, the conclusion of which is that the neighbor figure in the parable is the man who shows mercy to the injured man—that is, the Samaritan.

Empathy, I believed, meant being able to understand or relate to the suffering of others and respond to it, doing something to help. Empathy was the ultimate virtue, one that equipped you to enter the pain of another person. But is that true? Lately I've been rethinking empathy and its relationship to compassion—specifically, which is the better response to suffering. My struggle to define these words took on real-life weight when I traveled to New Orleans a few times after Hurricane Katrina. I arrived with a group that was meant to help the residents of the ninth ward clean up. If they did not have their properties cleaned by a deadline, they were at risk of having their homes bulldozed. I arrived to do cleanup, but it turned out I would engage human rights work. People were trying to bring their community back but were met with roadblocks from the local and federal government. You see, the ninth ward was home to many African Americans and some of the poorest in the city. Their lives were at risk of being bulldozed, losing their property, their home, their dignity, their rights. As I learned about the burdens they carry, my empathy seemed hugely inadequate.

If empathy means understanding what someone else is going through, it can't get us very far. No matter how good my imagination or how deep my sympathy, I'll never truly understand what these people were up against. I can't know what it's like to grow up in a poor, black community and be pounded with inhumanity. I just can't—and to claim otherwise seems dangerous. It seems like appropriation, taking on another person's suffering when I haven't earned the right to carry it. Suffering is a universal experience and is integral to living. While there are many causes for suffering, the theme of loss (in all its forms) seems to be a common denominator. Each person experiences loss in a different way. Suffering is therefore "idiosyncratic". One of the best definitions of suffering suggests that it is an unpleasant experience which arises from perceptions of impending destruction of an individual's personhood. Suffering continues until the threat of disintegration has passed or the integrity of the person is restored.

We know people are suffering by their demeanor and by what they say. In keeping with the definition, people will often describe themselves as "broken", "shattered" or "fallen into pieces".

It is important to realize that suffering affects the whole person. Suffering also challenges our particular world view, and may throw into chaos the very meaning and purpose of our lives. Relief of suffering, therefore, will often need a spiritual response such as compassion. This doesn't mean empathy isn't good and necessary—it is! But I think compassion is better. Sometimes “I'm sorry” is a more loving response than “Me too.” Several years ago, Leslie Jamison published a collection of essays called *The Empathy Exams*. In the opening essay she writes, “Empathy is always perched precariously between gift and invasion.” By this I think she means that empathy requires a big dose of humility and knowing that you do not know. It requires close listening and attention. It requires asking to hear people's stories—especially people who don't often get to share them.

“You're just a tourist inside someone else's suffering until you can't get it out of your head; until you take it home with you—across a freeway, or a country, or an ocean,” Jamison writes. Another way to say this: empathy can stall out at tourism or worse, voyeurism, unless it leads you into compassion. While empathy is important, it shouldn't be our end goal. And that's where compassion comes in, a gift that takes empathy one step further. The Latin roots of the word mean “to suffer together,” and I think this is key to our understanding of compassion.. Compassion is only possible—and effective—when we see ourselves as poor and wounded. We can only suffer with others if we understand that we are equally in need of healing. Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle writes, “Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a covenant between equals.” The story of the Good Samaritan, good news that tells us we are both broken and healed, makes compassion not just possible but likely. It makes it our daily stance.

Defining empathy and compassion is not an either/or question. Empathy can lead us into compassion, and compassion can lead us into solidarity. As journalist Krista Tippet put it, “Compassion is rarely a solution, but it is always a sign of a deeper reality.” Standing in solidarity with those who suffer won't take away their pain, but it can point to all that is good and remind us that we suffer with one another. One of our most difficult and confronting tasks as human beings is to respond effectively to those who are suffering. Sensitivity and gentleness on our part may play a crucial role in transforming brokenness and suffering into wholeness and healing. Yet, despite our sincere and best intentions to help, inappropriate responses may sometimes only make someone's suffering worse.

It's important to have some understanding of yourself when responding to suffering. Have some idea of what makes you tick, about your strengths and your vulnerabilities, maybe even your prejudices. What negative childhood experiences and feelings might be triggered when you talk to someone who is sick or helpless, and suffering? How might these feelings from long ago influence what you say and do in the present when you visit that person? Avoid attempting to fix the suffering, simply be present. I recall what the suffering Jesus asked of His disciples: “Watch with me”. Not, “Give me advice” or “Make me feel better”. No, just, “Be there”. This can be a most difficult step. Be attentive: use deep and active listening: aim to listen with your heart, as well as with your ears. What is this person feeling? Practice listening, not only to what is being said, but also to *how* it is said. Get used to sitting in silence. Listen with curiosity to the stories that people need to tell you; allow them to lament, “bleed the person of lament”. Be prepared to hear many unanswerable questions, especially “Why has this happened?”. Our role is to sit in the pain, with the other. When the unanswerable questions come, respond to the questioner, not the

question. People who suffer do not need a lecture or a philosophical dissertation, they need compassion. Let the other know that you are a witness to their plight.

There is clearly much more that could be said and written about how best to respond to suffering. It is often a very difficult and confronting job, especially when our natural tendency is to be “doing” something for someone. Remember that our role in responding to suffering, ultimately, is to nurture and sustain the other from brokenness, towards healing. And, as we respond to suffering, we become like a midwife, present to and mindfully-aware of the other as people journey from one experience of life to the next: from anguish to peace, from fear to love, and from death to new life. Let our hearts, our minds, our arms be stretched wide open with compassion. Let us be healers. Let us respond in making people whole again.

May it be so.