

Sympathetic Joy and Sympathetic Sorrow

The Buddha defines compassion with such clarity. Compassion is sympathetic sorrow – sorrow over another’s sorrow. And sympathetic joy - delight over another’s delight.

This is the stuff of profound teaching. It is sacred for its homely truth, rhymes well with do unto others as you would them do unto you.

Sympathy is grounded in the fact that we or someone we love did or will experience the same thing as those we take care of. It’s just a matter of time before you or a loved one is ill, perhaps hospitalized. One of two men and one in three women will die of cancer.

We know, don’t we, it’s just a matter of time (how much?) before you or someone you dearly loves dies.

We diminish our own hearts if we deny the common jeopardy that *is* the ordinary truth of being human and mortal.

“How far you go in this life,” writes George Washington Carver, “depends on you being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the strong, because one day you will have been all of these.”

Our stories about sympathetic sorrow and joy carry great feeling and can make our feeling life a vehicle for compassion, can take us beyond ourselves. We live in these stories much of our lives. They instruct our souls in the range of sorrow and joy that makes every human life a common and blessed thing.

The work of awakening compassion in a health care provider involves gathering the seeds of these stories because it is they that most convincingly connect the soul to common humanity. Sympathetic sorrow and joy are so much the fabric of everyday life, so often renewed with each new life experience that they are the raw material out of which a compassionate life is discovered and lived.

“Joy and woe are woven fine

A clothing for the soul divine” writes William Blake.

We all know sympathetic joy.

Your friend’s HIV test comes back clean, your sister had her first child and she’s a doll, the lump in your aunt’s breast turns out to be benign, your cousin finally got out of a very bad marriage and she’s starting to smile again.

I emphasize suffering not to deny the sheer blessed fact of being alive but because the denial of suffering is a machine that generates such suffering! “Joy” that relies on the denial of suffering is a superficial and fragile fiction that will be undone.

Misery can be the shadow of an overly optimistic culture but the common ground of suffering awakens compassion. Linking my personal suffering to that of my patients is a gift to me and through me to them.

A few examples.

Roland has AIDS, and will likely die soon. He’s only thirty-five. I lost my friend Charlie, a Vietnam vet who worked with the criminally insane, to AIDS when he was the same age. My friend Alberto had AIDS too. A month before he died I did a Tarot reading for him and of course he picked up the Death card. He was so relieved to talk

about it openly. All of his friends in his large gay community had lost loved ones and it was unbearable to them that it was Alberto turn. "It's time," he said.

When I bathed Roland I think of Charlie and Alberto.

Amber is twenty-five and has leukemia. She loves the theater and at her bedside there is a photo of her in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For the moment she's undone by a stem cell transplant, her gums bleeding, asleep on ativan. My daughter is Amber's age and I whisper this to her father when I bring him a cup of coffee. A swift, silent understanding. Nothing more need be said.

My father's presence is with me as I work the cardiac unit. He died at fifty-two of a heart attack. Mr. Maxwell could be my father, the same world-weary expression after a heart attack, the same thinning black hair.

Mrs. Brown just had a mastectomy, as did my wife, Deena, and she is painfully self-conscious of her flat left side. Such was the rapport between us that I borrowed from my love of my wife's beauty. I laughed, "the running joke with my wife is that women with two breasts have come to look a little unnatural to me". Mrs. Brown confessed that she seemed to have more trouble with her mastectomy than her husband.

My brother Paul was psychotic. Mad, he wandered off into the New Mexico mountains and died there. Every young psychotic patient could be my brother.

Carl is homeless, in his early thirties, an addict and diabetic, cellulitis oozing on his left foot, soon to be an amputee. What broke him so? I was homeless for three years as a teenager. I'll know how to love him remembering how fierce and cold it can get.

Each of these stories are intimately real to me but when linked to another's suffering they are no longer "mine." Not now burden but opportunity of connection, a kind of

freedom. A naïve individualism infects the Western world so much so that we imagine freedom to be a lonely even alienated thing. The kind of freedom I speak of here is not independence but interdependence, the vibrant community of we who sustain one another and sometimes set free an other beyond the edge of this small and precious life.

Personal suffering clutched as private amplifies and distorts.

Our patients are ourselves. Grandmother and grandfather, mother, father, brother, sister. Friend, neighbor or the strangest of strangers. They deliver us to the family and community in us and community and next of kin that we are in

Our patients present an opportunity for self-compassion because we are not different from them. THEY present a vivid mirror and our measure of mercy is continuous with the mercy we extend to the one it reveals , the one who is trying to learn what compassion is.

We are most alive in the place between sympathetic joy and sorrow.

We walk through the life that we've lived even as we walk through whatever comes our way, the two meeting each other in a field of sympathetic sorrow and joy. Here we can see sorrow and joy as the possibility of compassion that lives within the stories of the lives and the lives we bear witness to.

The activity of compassion levels things out, frees us, heals us even as it challenges us. Water is drawn from the well in the center of the village and that well is a responsive heart. Without the responsive heart the well goes dry. A hospital that refuses sympathetic joy and sympathetic sorrow succumbs to what Aldous Huxley called “organized lovelessness.”

The spirit of kindness is deathless. Perhaps you've met it in moments but existed long before your birth and will persist long after your gone. It is the bedrock from which we all spring, the God that is love and the love that is God. Those who can meet another's joy with joy, those who have transformed a portion of their suffering into compassion are walking a very old path.

Many have walked this way.

I call the place of shared humanity the village. You are – we are all - of the village simply by virtue of being born.

Even self-compassion is about finding the path to the village from our sense of being forever marginalized.