

Questioning compassion:

Why are some people better at giving than others?

Whig Standard Article- Nov 8/08.

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Recently I attended a conference in Kingston of the Canadian Women for Women of Afghanistan. This group has been helping Afghan women and girls by building schools in their country. Their commitment and passion were palpable at the conference, and it was humbling to see them in action. These Canadian women may have no personal connection to those far away women, and yet their compassion drives them to such acts of kindnesses.

The other day I was introduced to a young man's writings by his grandmother, and I was again overwhelmed by his passion for justice. He is in Palestine helping families to harvest their olives in the face of Israeli settlers' opposition, and writing about what he experiences there. He is a young man, and I have to wonder why he puts himself in harm's way, and why care about a people with whom he has no connections, except his humanity?

Then there is the example of Stephan Lewis who saw the suffering of African families where parents have died of AIDS, so that aging grandparents are caring for their grandchildren. He started an organization, and again there are so many Canadian grandparents who are helping them.

There are many such examples which thankfully contrast with stories of deliberate violence and cruelty – man's inhumanity to man.

What is it about some people that makes them compassionate and motivates them to help others? These individuals' altruism and empathy are such that they will place these above their own self interest.

What motivates them to reach out to those they don't even know personally? Is it their life experiences and values? Is it the Biblical injunction "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" of reciprocal caring that guides them? Do they have a stronger "unselfish" gene in them?

Is it not cynicism to belittle and dismiss all altruism as motivated by self interest or as another form of self gratification?

I know that for some, religion is a motivator, such as Mother Theresa. She and others are altruistic and empathetic because they believe that God will reward them in the hereafter.

All religions teach compassion, and in Islam, God is characterized most often as the Compassionate and the Merciful, and one of the obligations of faith is charity. The

Buddha said, "Compassion is that which makes the heart of the good move at the pain of others. It crushes and destroys the pain of others. It is called compassion because it shelters and embraces the distressed." He talks of "the heart of the good" which is moved, but what about others?

Does this mean that people are divided between those who practice their compassion, while others who are more influenced by self interest? If for some, altruism and compassion give meaning to their lives, does it naturally follow that they are more decent and honest as a group?

Is the opposite also true? Are there those of us who are more "wired" to arrogance, to treat others as less than human and therefore less deserving of compassion?

Many declared after the Jewish Holocaust, "never again," but sadly not enough people have taken this to heart, because of their lack of a "good heart" and a lack of ability to see others as just as human as themselves. Individuals and countries all suffer from this arrogance.

This arrogance has resulted in sanctioning of torture by some of our leading politicians, such as the government of the States. It seems to me that they do not allow empathy to enter their souls.

I think there are thoughtful people, and it is these that are compassionate, with the ability to put themselves in the place of others, and it is these who are guided by principle of altruism for their lives.

As a budding social worker, I read Viktor Frank's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, and can still remember his message of hope. As an Austrian Jewish psychiatrist he suffered horribly for three years in concentration camps, lost his young wife and parents, and emerged from these experiences with a philosophy for living.

Frankl based his practice of logotherapy on his belief that people were divided into two groups - those who are decent and those who are not. He said he found decent people amongst the guards and the prisoners at the concentration camps. His ideas are not only for those in therapy, as they are applicable to all of us.

He believed that even in suffering and death, people want to find meaning in their lives. Even in places such as the concentration camps, he said that there was an essential freedom of choice, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

He defines freedom of choice, not as a gift given to us by others, but it is our response to any given situation. The critical question being asked of us is not what we expect of life, but what life expects of us – it is our responses which gives us our freedom of choice. I think of this often even though it is difficult to practice!

For me, compassion, empathy and justice are integral parts of mercy – whether it be the mercy of God or of humans. As Shakespeare says,

“The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes...It is an attribute of God Himself; and earthly power doth show like God’s when mercy seasons justice.”