

Compassion

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Center and a few other groups, I will more quickly give my resources to help animals who suffer due to human neglect and abuse than to help the human beings themselves.

I know full well that chronic and systematic abuse can often rob people of their sense of self-worth and dignity. And I know that in some suffering, there is no option to opt out; there is only enduring. My heart is moved almost instantaneously by such hardships.

Yet there is still an inner compulsion in me to hold the helpless human to a higher standard. It may be that I picked up a pair of rose-colored American dream glasses somewhere along the way. But more likely, I just hate seeing despair and desperation in faces that look so much like my own. (And so we're back to "There but for the grace of God go I.")

Regardless of the reason, my compassion has conditions. So does the compassion of virtually every person I know or know of. Yet, when the tragic becomes overwhelming, either in nature or numbers, those conditions disappear. The money flows almost as fast as the tears and everyone wants to know what they can do to help.

Why does it take epic and unimaginable suffering to make helping others seem like to only right thing to do?

Maybe that's because, as SIU Women's Head Golf Coach Diane Daugherty puts it, "I think we all have a helpless feeling deep down, thinking it could have been us."

I asked Diane and other Heartland women to help me navigate my forest of maybes, might-bes and what-ifs. Here is what they said.

"When service to others is a part of your regular lifestyle, this becomes just what you do irrespective of a crisis," said Town Square Market manager René Cook. "Selfless service is a part of many paths and religions. It means just that, serving others because it is the thing to do, not because you might get something in return. Perhaps if more people were involved in something that way, we wouldn't need crisis to motivate us."

"I think at times of crisis there's a recognition that we are all one," said psychologist Annette Vaillancourt. "Our heart opens to help out because of that. Something about a crisis or tragedy shocks the heart open and our separateness is seen as false. I believe our true nature is to be compassionate and loving, but we fall asleep to that. It takes a shock to wake that up and it takes a spiritual practice to keep waking up to that fact when there are not huge tragedies to deal with."

For graduate student Anne-Marie Patton, the ability to feel compassion for others has to begin with compassion for herself.

"When I was not feeling



You can't lend a helping hand without having a hand extended back to you in gratitude and relief.

good about myself, I attempted to fill my life with many things," she said. "I had become so empty and depleted inside that I had nothing to give. However, now that I am spirit-focused and gaining self-acceptance, I have enough inner strength and inner depth to reach out to the world around me. Giving comes from that place of peace and joy. 'From her profits she plants a vineyard.' Proverbs 31:16."

Alexander Technique teacher Liz Patula attributes the outpouring of compassion in crisis to just knowing what needs to be done.

"I think it's because it's so clear how to help in the moment: food, water, medical supplies," she said. "When we see situations such as a troubled teen, a drug dealer or poverty at large, we may want to help but don't know how. When someone is dying of thirst, you give them water. It's so clear.

"And the earthquake is a no-fault situation. There's no villain to blame, just solutions waiting to happen. Oh, imagine if every situation had such a clear solution! I do think treating your fellow woman with integrity, no matter what, goes a long way. That way, you always acknowledge the part of them that wishes to be free, even if they don't see it. Integrity doesn't mean 'I'll let you hurt me,' but rather, 'I see the beautiful part of you, even if you don't.'"

"Unfortunately people are very motivated by crisis, crisis and fear. It's the human condition, or at least the one we come in with," said Longbranch manager Elaine Ramseyer. "As humans, we have the incredible possibility of awakening, of enlightenment, call it what you like. Humans, unlike the rest of creation, are endowed with free will so we can choose to live a compassionate life and to live a life of service that is not a knee-jerk reaction to pain, fear and crisis.

"That, of course, is a spiritual calling and each person will answer that calling in their own way. Life is a spiritual journey that deliv-

ers us to that place of compassion ... the place that surpasses all understanding. Service is the true joy in life and it's available to everyone at every moment."

"Well, I wish I had a more profound answer, but my simple answer is that we get distracted by the business of everyday life and by our own natural tendencies toward self-preservation," said Pastor Sam Foskey. "We forget, for a while at least, that there are others traveling with us on this journey called life.

"It takes something big to remind us. And when it does, we generally respond with compassion. Furthermore, there is the matter of the 'tyranny of the urgent.' We get caught up in mundane matters that, at the time, seem urgent and overlook what is really important."

Floral designer MJ Zimmer agrees.

"Compassion is a such personal thing," she said. "Sometimes I think we get so caught up in the day-to-day activities of life that we take things for granted. It takes something so monumental like the situation in Haiti for folks to stop and take notice.

Heartland Women publisher Chanda Green attributes much of our lack of compassion to blighted empathy for others.

"The troubles of others motivate compassion, but not everyone has the capacity to feel sympathy or to empathize with others' pain," she said. Even fewer allow that emotion to motivate them to perform acts of compassion. I believe that compassion demands action, and that no one can truly say he or she has felt com-

passion for another unless they act on that emotion and reach out to help.

"There are quiet but profound acts of compassion going on every day, all around us, by individuals. For a country to show compassion, to reach out to another country – as we have seen many nations reach out to the victims of the earthquake in Haiti – it takes a consensus of compassion that goes beyond politics and power.

"I believe that the majority of our politicians and persons in power are incapable of compassion as a group or party, board or administration. There are many reasons for this state of affairs and all of them are profoundly sad to me.

"Our leaders, for the most part, do not reflect the best natures of the people they propose to represent. That's why, in my opinion, it takes a 7.0 earthquake to move the nations of the world to react."

Thanks to everyone who helped me find my way through this thorny maze. I'm grateful for your input and hope others have found some helpful insights here.

In the end, cultivating compassion is the only way for human beings to thrive on this globe. Amid tragedy or triumph ... or in the benign routine of everyday living ... we need each other. We need to become better at caring.

And perhaps in the process, that means cutting God a break, too, and realizing that some of the conditions placed on unconditional love may well come from us. Maybe God knows we'd never really learn to love without tragedy to light the path.

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