

Empathy

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The human experience is, unfortunately, filled with pain, loss and tragedy. Every day in the United States, nearly 7,000 people die. In every state, on each day on average, 135 families are afflicted by the death of a loved one. What an awful statistic! You do not have to be a veteran of personal bereavement to surmise how terrible it is to experience such a loss. Many, if not most of you, have gone through it and, therefore, know of which I speak.

Of course, for any individual, the magnitude and scope of impersonal deaths do not compare with a personal loss. In the latter case, the emotions are overwhelming, the pain is raw and the loss of a sense of normalcy is seemingly permanent. What about the former? How does a normal human being react to and deal with the ubiquitous, albeit usually impersonal, death that surrounds us?

The answer for the vast majority of us is: apparently rather easily. If the loss is not personal, we may spend a brief period reflecting on the pain of the bereaved, ruminating about the cruelty of fate, thinking that “there but for the grace of...” But in short order, the tragedy has evaporated from our thoughts and we are on with our lives.

This is so even if the impersonal tragedy is massive, dramatic or even infused by evil. I am referring of course to major calamities – whether caused by natural forces, terrorism or a horrific accident – which, alas, too often occur in our society. For example, hurricane Katrina, an airplane crash, or even 9/11. Events like these grab our attention, embroil our emotions, evoke our pity and sympathy – but only in an abstract and impersonal way. We feel sorry for the victims, express sympathy toward their relatives, even worry about the fabric of our society. But we do not feel the gut-wrenching emotion and severe psychic pain that follows the death of a loved one. The pain and grief of the latter can last for years, if not a lifetime. The trauma we experience from impersonal losses lasts only for a brief while, and almost never past the next public tragedy.

For most people!

There are those among us, people of great sensitivity, blessed (or perhaps cursed) with the trait of empathy, who feel the pain of an impersonal loss more intensely than the rest of us. They see the TV interview with a person who has just lost a spouse or child, and they truly can feel the pain of the bereaved individual. They watch the broadcast of a line of people awaiting news of the fate of passengers in an airplane crash, and they experience the anxiety and desperation of those about to receive horrific news. They read a news story about a missing or molested

child and they understand – in a deeply personal way – the anxiety, fear and horror experienced by the parents.

It doesn't quickly leave their mind like it does for most of us. Often they act on those feelings. They make contributions, join an organization, write letters, reach out to the victims. They see suffering, they feel it, they try to ameliorate it. God bless such individuals.

My wife Shelly was one of them. She had all the reactions I just described when tragedy struck – whether personal or impersonal. I will give two examples – one from long ago, one more recent; the former of the personal variety, the latter more impersonal.

Just after we were married in the mid 1960s, when I was in graduate school and Shelly was working as an executive secretary, we befriended an interesting couple. The young man, Kenn, was a fellow graduate student in the MIT Mathematics Department. His girlfriend, Tessa, who was from England, worked as a programmer for IBM. We became close friends. About 14 months after our friendship began, Kenn committed suicide. Naturally, it was devastating to Tessa, and also to Kenn's parents, who lived in Brooklyn. Perhaps the fact that Shelly's mother had died only 18 months earlier, just before we were married, caused Shelly to sympathize with Tessa more than she might have been expected to. But I think not.

As I've explained in these pages, Shelly was an extraordinarily empathetic person. And so, she could truly feel Tessa's pain. The comfort and concern that Shelly showed to Tessa was moving. However, within a few months, Tessa resigned from her job and moved back to England. As this occurred, Shelly insisted that we make a special trip to Brooklyn to visit Kenn's parents. The father was in a hypnotic state, the mother emotionally overwrought. Although we had never met Kenn's parents before this, I could see that Shelly felt their pain acutely. We did what little we could to inform them about Kenn's final days, and although Shelly tried to stay in touch with Kenn's mother, we eventually lost contact.

There are two postmortems to the story. First, about three years later, we received a note from Tessa's mother in England informing us that Tessa had been killed in an auto wreck. Shelly was distraught and hypnotized by the news for months. Second, Shelly named her first born Kenny.

The second story revolves around hurricane Katina. What a horrible national calamity – a natural disaster, made worse by the incompetence and indifference of many "in charge," both before and during the incident, and of course in its aftermath. The constant reporting on the story transfixed the nation – Shelly included. She spent many hours (she was retired by then) following the reports of the ongoing tragedy. Every day, when I returned from the University, I received a daily report on the suffering and I could see that Shelly was truly disturbed by the pain and loss she was observing. Moreover, she acted on her feelings: she sent money to approved charities assisting victims; donated clothing, bedding and medical supplies to

appropriate organizations; wrote letters and emails advocating action and telling people about the suffering she was viewing and how it was our responsibility to help. Unlike with Kenn and Tessa, we had absolutely no personal connection with anyone affected by hurricane Katrina. Well, I didn't. Shelly definitely felt a connection.

Let me close this tribute to Shelly's remarkable empathy by pointing out a dramatic change in myself. Since Shelly died, whenever I get news of a tragedy – personal or not – my reaction now is much more intense. When I hear of a terrorist attack, I can see the relatives of the dead and I believe that I really know what they are feeling. When a friend or relative informs me of the death of a mutual acquaintance, again the close relatives of the deceased come into focus and I know what they are feeling and thinking. Actually, it is awful! As I have written previously, the terrible feelings that I experienced following Shelly's death – confusion, anxiety, longing, abandonment, intense sorrow – these are still with me. Except now I can sense the same feelings in others – to a far greater degree than I could before Shelly's death tore a hole in my heart.

Thus, my admiration for Shelly is even greater today than it was when she died. It is true that Shelly's gift of empathy also enhanced her joy in life. Because of this magnificent gift, she could experience the happiness of those she loved in a more intense fashion. The thrill my grandson felt when he hit a home run in one of his school league baseball games; the euphoria of my son on his wedding day; my pride and sense of accomplishment when I received my PhD. Because of her empathetic gift, Shelly got to experience and enjoy these events as much as we did. Alas, the gift also enabled her to feel pain experienced by those who were both near to and far from her.

Throughout these pages, I have tried to show what a great lady Shelly was. Her ability to empathize with those around her was just one of her many remarkable traits.