

## **"Got Pain When You're in an Other Guy's Shoes?"**

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### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

We are being called. You...me...all of us are being called. Called to walk that metaphorical mile in someone else's shoes.

If we actually did walk—even just a few steps—in that guy's shoes, we might "get-it"... "Get" that we truly are one. Then we'd behave with more compassion. We might even learn to make love instead of war.

Simple, isn't it?

Yes. But there's a problem with compassion: "Com" means "with." "Passion" means "feeling." When you "feel with" someone who's in pain, it usually hurts.

When compassion hurts, you might think that's a problem. But when it doesn't hurt that's when you have a real problem.

We are called to hurt and walk anyway.

### **Reading: "The Guy With the Pain in his Neck"**

*This is a story I wrote this week. It happened 20 years ago. But in the pain/pleasure center of my brain, it remains fresh and new.*

I've had problems with neck pain for years. Back when it began, I started to investigate ways to relieve the pain. One day—in 1990—I took my neck downtown to see a new chiropractor. It was about a mile. (And I walked in my own shoes).

The chiropractor looks at me and says, "Pain in the neck, huh?" Then, "Is it your husband or your kids?" When I didn't laugh at his metaphor, he asked if I had read Susan Sontag's book, "Illness As Metaphor." (It's about bodily symptoms as reflections of emotional pain.) He suggested that over the next week I examine situations in my life that might be metaphorical "pains" in my neck.

Next he asked me to give him the word for the opposite of pain. All I wanted was relief. So I said "relief?" He shook his head, "No." And asked the question again: I did NOT want to play his word game, so I answered: "The opposite of pain is being able to shake my head the way you do. Without having to move my whole body." This time it was he who didn't laugh. He turned very serious, saying: "The opposite of pain is "pleasure." Waving his arm back and forth between us, he described a pendulum swinging from pleasure to pain. He wanted me to learn to maintain a balance somewhere in the middle, avoiding either extreme.

"What's wrong with extreme pleasure?" I asked. I was thinking of Mae West's famously quoted: "Too much of a good thing is wonderful." His response seemed more like that of my puritanical grandmother, who preached the golden—do-unto-others rule. The difference was that his focus was on moving toward pleasure. Hers was on staying away from sin and shame.

He elucidated: "An excess of pleasure is just as bad as an excess of pain. Both extremes are so intense that they interfere with good judgment. In other words: Too much of anything puts your neurotransmitters into overdrive. You get carried away, and your brain stops working.

Next, he did one of those bone-cracking adjustments that chiropractors are wont to do. Then gave me a warm compress and told me to just lie there and let everything go. Ahhhh... Blessed relief! Given that I had been in such pain when I came in, this was as close to pure, ecstatic pleasure as I could imagine. After a few minutes, he asked me where my pendulum was between pleasure and pain. Fearing he might

scold me (or even shame me, as my grandmother had) for feeling too much pleasure, I said it was..."umm, somewhere in the middle."

When my hand was on his doorknob, he asked me, "feeling better?" I shook my head "no." Just to prove that I could actually move it side to side. Then I said, "yes." And yes. and yes! I grabbed the guy and hugged him in thanks.

"Not so fast," he said, and gave me a homework prescription. He wanted me to do something—at least one thing each day—for the sheer pleasure of doing it. Not too much pleasure. Just enough. Like, maybe, a warm, soaky bubble bath.

Ever since that day, whenever bodily pain becomes a problem, I look for its emotional metaphor to see if I can eliminate some psychological causes...

Soaky bath? Haven't had one in years.

### **WALKING THE MILE AND SHIFTING THE SHOES**

Walking back toward home, on 4<sup>th</sup> St., I noticed a homeless guy in that little alley opposite the B of A. He was holding his neck the very same way I had been holding mine an hour earlier.

Given the intensity of my newly pain-free state, I guess my body did go into overdrive. Because I had this amazing feeling that I was put on earth to ease that poor man's pain. I started to walk toward him. Then I remembered the chiropractor's warning about overdrive interfering with good judgment. I stopped. Then turned around...and continued my walk home.

But now I was in that guy's shoes. And they hurt.

All the way, I struggled against the impulse to go back and lead the man—gently—to my chiropractor's office.

If you're familiar with 4<sup>th</sup> street, and that little alley, you are also probably familiar with the photographer's window in the next block containing nothing but that huge sign with big bold letters saying, "love one another." The sign has always reminded me of my Puritan grandmother. The sign has been there as long as I can remember. But suddenly, it was compelling me to literally "love" the guy with the pain in his neck.

I wasn't yet a Unitarian, but I was well aware of the Universal principle of compassion. And I wanted to practice it. By this time, I had put on the homeless guy's shoes, and I was walking in them...with a great deal of emotional pain.

I knew that good judgment was to keep walking home. So I did. But, all the way, asking myself, "What would Mother Teresa do?" Of course, she would have taken the guy to the chiropractor. But I wasn't Mother Teresa. So I walked on, all the time rationalizing and justifying and trying to convince myself that I really should NOT go back, get the guy, and take him home with me for a shower, then supper, then sleep. Because, then I'd be stuck forever with him in my home. Or more likely I'd be on the streets with him because of my husband, who would have kicked both of us out.

Would you like to know the end of this story? Stay tuned.

### **SERMON**

This sermon is stored in my computer under, "My Sermons." It's called "Kindness." On my desktop, it's a file called "Shortcut to Kindness."

Now, I ask you: In real life, as opposed to my computer, is there a shortcut to kindness? While I'm asking questions, I have another one for you: This one was asked in a Dennis the Menace cartoon. Apparently Dennis has just annoyed Mr. Wilson yet one more time. And he's standing in the doorway of his own house asking his mother: "Do we have to be kind to our neighbors on BOTH sides?"

While you think about these questions, here's the rest of the story about the guy with the pain in his neck:

I continued walking the mile home. (By the way there was NO shortcut to get home.)

Mentally still wearing the neck guy's shoes, I watched my feet with care...Repeating...rhythmically... "Step on a crack...Break Mother Teresa's back."

There she was again. Bugging me to do the right thing and help the guy. Continuing my pace, I rehearsed a speech to convince my husband to do the right thing and drive back downtown to invite this stranger into our lives. I fortified my argument with a quote from the Dalai Lama who said "I've never met anyone I consider a stranger." My walking meditation morphed..."Step on a crack, ... break the Dalai Lama's back."

The only thing more certain than my husband's refusal to get involved with this "derelict," was his sarcasm. Once he came down off the ceiling, he said: with measured gentleness, "You need a church. One where you could get a brass plaque with your name on it. Only not on the back of a pew: On the floor. Where everybody can walk all over it."

He had some other pithy insights, which made me wonder if he were in cahoots with the chiropractor and his pain-as-metaphor prescription. Like: Are you trying to work off some old guilts or something?" "Or pay dues because you think it will get you into heaven?" "Maybe you just need to be needed." Perhaps it was all of the above (delivered by someone who knew me all too well) that convinced me to let go of my impulsive urge to rescue the stranger.

For the rest of his life, my husband was kind enough to never repeat all those remarks. But he never missed an opportunity to repeat the already too oft' repeated cliché: "No good deed goes un-punished." (It was Claire Booth Luce who said that, by the way.)

Over the next few days, he offered me some useful guidance on how to draw a line between being a person who is kind, and being a person who is conned, manipulated or used. Or worse yet, a person who is foolish, or even downright stupid.

Nevertheless, to this day, when I pass that little alley, or the photographers "love one another," sign, I feel a renewed twinge of pain. This twinge is in my neuro-anatomy. More precisely in my medial forebrain bundle. Which has something to do with my hypothalamus hippocampus, and nucleus accumbens."

This is a relatively new discovery in brain research. You have a collection of neurons (deep inside your skull) sometimes referred to as the "pleasure center" because it squirts pleasure-producing neurotransmitters when you touch, or are touched—literally or metaphorically. (I guess the chiropractor was trying to treat my neuro-anatomy when he prescribed that daily self-pleasure routine.)

But the human brain is not logical in the sense that my husband was logical. My pain was—and still is—a sense of loss for an opportunity missed: An opportunity to do the holy, spiritual work of easing the suffering of another human being.

Oaky...So... now that I know more about why I feel guilty every time I walk past the love-one-another sign, how can I get my brain out of this moral/ethical loop?

Perhaps the chiropractor was right about deliberately moving away from pain (yours or someone else's) by deliberately creating pleasure for yourself.

## **FORBIDDEN PLEASURE**

My grandmother lived by the Biblical obligation and duty to be good to your neighbor. She could not have guessed that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, brain science would prove that you're programmed, naturally, in your nervous system and brain, to feel pleasure when you're good to your neighbor.

The nervous system works to assure species survival by wiring us to hurt when we see someone else hurting. This is empathy. Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone. Empathy, goes deeper, where you actually feel the other guy's pain. And—because you feel the pain—you really, actually, genuinely DO care.

Back when I saw the neck pain guy, Bill Clinton was campaigning with the phrase, "I feel your pain." Of course I voted for him. That was my kind of guy. By that time, I was walking the neck guy's shoes. And I had visions of "Mr. Empathy," himself, walking in my shoes. Just think. My shoes, walking around the Whitehouse.

### **SOMEBODY WALKING IN YOUR SHOES?**

Speaking of someone else walking in your shoes, what happens when the pain is yours and some compassionate person cares enough to actually feel your pain? Brain science shines a light on this dynamic, also.

You know how when you're in the hospital, and nurses keep asking you to rate your current pain level on a continuum from 1-10? You report that number. The nurse records it in a computer. Then they measure your blood pressure, heart rate, etc. with little beeping machines.

In the olden days before electronic pulse metering machines, the nurse would actually hold your wrist and hand. The holding, itself, had to be gentle in order for the nurse to pick up the subtle signals of your pulse. Research studies claim that such touching can actually heal people.

Now, the same technology that produced the mechanical pulse taker has produced neuro-imaging machines that literally observe what happens in your brain's "pleasure center" when you are touched with compassion. (Physically, or emotionally.) Among other things, the imaging machines measure the increase in your output of neurotransmitters. Particularly those known as "endorphins" which reduce pain and often produce euphoria, when stimulated (by positive

circumstances) are known to produce what's called an "endorphin rush." Endorphins literally rush around in your brain to prevent nerve cells from releasing more pain signals. A particularly intense endorphin rush can cause feelings of exhilaration. In my case, I went into Mother-Theresa-overdrive and thought I could rescue the guy in the alley. Who knows what would have happened had I reached out to him. At some point, he probably would have had an inkling that I had put myself in his shoes. And his endorphins probably would have kicked in as well.

## **THE POWER OF SHAME**

It may be that not enough of us put out enough endorphins these days. Which brings us back to the chiropractor's prescription for "Self-pleasuring." Now, there's an interesting phrase. Self-pleasuring. Even erotic self pleasure is not the bug-a-boo that it used to be. My grandmother would have what she called a "conniption fit" if she learned about self-pleasuring of the kind that's implicitly—and explicitly—exposed in today's mainstream culture. But the legitimacy of erotic self-gratification is here to stay. And along with it, the legitimacy of responsible, balanced self-pleasure across the board.

History is rife with shaming cultures based on parenting styles that eschew kindness and even shame children for expressing it.

So, what does this have to do with me and the pain-in-the-neck guy: Here's the "relevant" state-of-the-art wisdom: My learned response was to control my impulse. Because "civilized" community life requires impulse control.

Mother Theresa or the Dali Lama might be able to get away with it. But for me, taking the man to the chiropractor or taking him home would have been a self-indulgent, self-gratifying act. An unconscious psychological strategy by my brain, designed to get pleasure squirts of pleasure hormones running around all over it.

Child development experts conduct experiments with babies who haven't yet had the compassion, empathy and caring socialized out of them. These little people, when confronted with another being (human, animal...imaginary friend) in pain—spontaneously show kindness to that being.

My inner baby is gratified by doing unto others as I would have them do unto me. But I'm not a baby any more. I've been "socialized" through conditioned learning. So when I care, I have to stop and think of the consequences that might arise if I act on my impulses.

A practical psychologist might have a logical explanation for my caring: That I "identified" with the guy because I had been suffering similar pain an hour earlier.

A practical anthropologist might see it in terms of group survival. Like wolves in packs—we, for the most part, cooperate and support our neighbors. (Yes. Dennis. The neighbors on both sides!)

People told me I was a kind person for supervising the homeless shelter here this winter. But I didn't feel much like a kind or compassionate person.

The biologist and anthropologist might say that I cared because I'm human; and humans are genetically programmed to care. Perhaps having the unsheltered women here—in my church home—fooled my neuro-anatomy into thinking they were family. And that's why I wanted to promote their well being.

Whatever the case, I feel a little guilty letting people think I'm a particularly kind person when I'm really not.

I was seriously questioning my motivation until Judith Pomeroy said it, most concisely—in the kitchen on the last night of the shelter program. She said, "I do this because I enjoy it."

Ah hah! Ureka! Light bulb! That's it! Thank you, Judith!

I actually took PLEASURE in putting myself in their shoes. I took pleasure in all those meetings here and at other churches! I took pleasure in fighting City Hall over a permit! I took PLEASURE in visiting St. Vincent's Soup Kitchen! And...Yes. I took PLEASURE in that 5:30 a.m. Monday wake-up routine! I even took pleasure (perhaps perverse pleasure) in wrestling with (and cursing at) the padlock on the big gate (sometimes in pitch dark rain and wind.)

On the last morning, as the women climbed into their van, and headed for another day on the streets and in the parks of San Rafael...and at the San Rafael library...they thanked me one-by-one.

Until someone mentioned it, I hadn't noticed that I was thanking them in return. My brain was obviously convinced that I was getting pleasure from all this.

As the van drove down the hill, I decided to wait until daylight to lock the gate...and climbed the meditation hill to contemplate my philosophical quandary: Does supervising a temporary homeless shelter automatically make me a kind person? What if I actually take pleasure in serving the homeless? What if I do it SO THAT I will feel pleasure?

The more I thought, the deeper I dug into confusion. Then I thought about the ladies going to the library. Ah, yes...the library. I hadn't been there for a long time. And I had committed to giving a sermon on kindness. Now I had to figure out what I wanted to say about it.

As I walked up the library stairs, I caught the eye of one of the homeless ladies who has turned to astrology for her guiding star. She was surrounded with celestial ephemera and charts. She wanted to tell me about angles, transits, and Mercury going retrograde. (Or something.)

I wasn't really interested in her take on all this. Nor did I want to spend my valuable library time on it. But I realized that my patient listening reflected my nagging thought: "There

but for the grace of God go I." And...Yes. I WOULD want her to listen to me if MY shoe were on Her foot.

As I listened, I realized that I was being there for her because I took pleasure in being there for her. I even enjoyed acting the way a kind and caring person would act.

Pursuant to my own library visit, after a respectable amount of time, I thanked her for the enlightenment, and walked over to visit the stacks, all the time reminding myself that I was looking for literate proof that it was okay for me to be kind to others *simply because* it makes me feel good. First I indulged myself in the philosophy section. Surrendering myself in the dying luxury of browsing for reading materials the old fashioned way. Yup. Leafing languidly through the dusty pages was downright sublime. Far more pleasurable than staring at a phosphorescent screen.

In the philosophy section, kindness, a seemingly simple virtue, has been turned into a complex exercise in logic: The kindness pendulum runs from selfish ego-gratification or sentimental indulgence to pure altruism (which clearly belongs in the fiction section.)

According to the ancient Greek philosopher, Seneca, a man sought friends for purely "instrumental" reasons, for the purpose of having someone to come and sit beside his bed when he is ill or come to his rescue when he is, quote, "hard up or thrown into chains."

Later, Christianity emphasized the obligation to be charitable. All this, while viewing people who are not Christians as sinful and damned. One English bishop went so far as to declare, "Brotherly love must embrace only brethren."

Eighteenth century philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau predated the neurological researchers with their brain-assessing, and endocrine-calculating monitors. Rousseau already recognized that our natural impulse is to be good and

generous toward others. Profoundly simple. But, from the looks of all the books, this assumption was too easy.

So I walked over to the psychology section. There was Freud's kindness(/)aggression dialectic: The love(/)hate thing—the double-bind that lasts from birth to death. And it's all your mother's fault. More than I wanted to know.

Seriously, folks: I'm starting to think that the brain research finding that we are a fundamentally empathic species can have profound and far-reaching consequences for the human race.

Does this sound too profoundly simple to you? Let's look at some evidence: They put someone's living brain (with the whole living body still attached) into an apparatus of some kind and documented the neurotransmitter activity in the person's brain's pleasure centers. First when they're thinking kind thoughts. And then when they are thinking un-kind thoughts. They spent thousands of dollars on instruments to conclude that compassion, empathy and kindness make us happy.

(Heck, I would have told them that for 5 bucks.)

Alas, somebody else is raking in the money, for a simple little inspirational book found in the self-help department: "How to be Happy." This author "operationalizes" some highly-funded research conclusions as follows: "...committing an act of kindness once a week over a six-week period is associated with an increase in well-being, compared to control groups."

(Heck, Lucy [You know? Charlie Brown's Lucy?] would "operationalize" *that* for one 5 cents.)

Whatever the philosophers and scientists end up concluding about kindness, I now see it as far more than the institutionalized benevolence, I thought I was practicing when I agreed (as a little old church lady) to get involved with these unsheltered folks up here in our winter emergency bedroom.

Where in the library did I find what I was seeking? In the children's section, of course: Today's Story for all Ages: Archbishop Desmond Tutu's little book, "God's Dream:" God's dream is that we will get it. Really get it: That we are one. It's really so simple.

Now for my big nagging personal question: "Is there something wrong with me that I do not feel I have done anything deserving thanks?"

I found the answer to this one in a little book of Buddhist wisdom: It comes from that famous guy "anonymous," who said: "To give and then not feel that one has given is the very best of all ways of giving."

So, is there a shortcut to kindness? Yes. Short and simple. Simply get-it: We are one. There is no separate self. The cut is short, but the learning curve can be very steep.

Meanwhile, the Dalai Lama has a handy hint: "If you want to be happy, practice compassion." Ah yes, compassion, the forbidden pleasure.

## **BENEDICTION**

Even when we seek the best in ourselves and try to be instruments of good for others, we are constantly diverted by our ego needs, especially our need to think well of ourselves. May we think, instead, of indulging ourselves with the exquisite pleasure of doing good for its own sake.