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The Day of Compassion

Note: In writing this paper, I've chosen to share a very intimate and difficult part of my life—a wound that is still open. I ask whoever reads it to be considerate of my feelings when evaluating or writing about it. I was torn whether to share such a personal experience, and I hope that the benefit to others in a similar situation will outweigh the costs. Also, please be aware that I've altered certain details to maintain privacy.



My Day of Compassion took place on August 19th. To explain what happened on that day, I have to tell a brief story about something that occurred earlier this year, when I was living overseas in Puerto Rico with my former boyfriend, Jorge, who grew up in a dangerous urban neighborhood in that country.

I was working as freelance writer while Jorge studied and worked full time as the manager of a popular book store. We had an amazing relationship, and I was really happy (he was very attentive, intelligent, and caring). Things gradually changed, however, and with the stress of his work schedule, Jorge started to be verbally aggressive. Finally, one day I decided to leave him because the conflicts had escalated to the point that I was "accidentally" hurt a little physically. The second time this happened, I left our house while he was out working. The next day, we had a big confrontation on the telephone, and when I returned home to pick up my belongings, Jorge physically assaulted me.

After dealing with all the legal procedures the police put me through in order to gain "formal protection," I decided to fly back to my home country of Italy. On the few occasions when I interacted with Jorge after that, I called him a monster and refused to accept his apologies. Instead, I denied that he was the person I still loved and missed. A couple of months after I had left the country, Jorge attempted suicide and failed. I interpreted his suicide attempt as an act of violence directed at me because he went out of his way to let me know what he was doing.

Using Social Psychology to Understand What Happened

Thanks to this Social Psychology course, I started reconsidering the situation from a different point of view. With each new lecture and topic covered, I found myself reflecting on how the material might explain Jorge's behavior and what had triggered it. For example, when we studied attribution theory and the fundamental attribution error, I realized that I had attributed Jorge's behavior exclusively to dispositional factors without considering situational influences or the environment in which he lived and grew up.

The reading entitled "The Nature and Nurture of Aggression" was especially mind-opening from this perspective. In that chapter, I read about Albert Bandura's social learning theory and the tendency for people to imitate violence, both when violence is culturally accepted and common in one's social environment. As the chapter said on page 291, we learn aggression by observing others: "Physically aggressive children tend to have had physically punitive parents... and although most abused children do not become criminals or abusive parents, 30 percent do later abuse their own children—four times the general population rate... Violence often begets violence. The social environment outside the home also provides models. In communities where 'macho' images are admired, aggression is readily transmitted to new generations."

I believe that Jorge was powerfully influenced by these situational factors. He grew up in a tough neighborhood dominated by machismo, and his father was verbally and physically aggressive with him—even going so far as to break his arm on one occasion.

Puerto Rico is also a relatively hot and humid country, where the daily high temperature averages more than 80 degrees Fahrenheit year around. After learning about the link between heat and aggression, I began to wonder whether it was a coincidence that Jorge's increase in aggression took place during the hottest and most humid period of the year.

Aggression is also more likely under conditions of crowding and sleep deprivation—two factors that may have heightened Jorge's level of aggression. At the time, we were living in a tiny one room apartment, and he had been sleeping only 3-4 hours a night for several months.

And of course, aggression is often triggered in response to the perception of being attacked or threatened in some way. In the case of Jorge, his violence occurred soon after we traded very harsh words with one another.

In sum, I realized that I had attributed Jorge's behavior entirely to dispositional causes when in reality it was probably due to a mixture of situational and dispositional factors. Because I didn't consider any situational causes, I concluded that Jorge was a monster, and when I convinced him that this was the case, he attempted suicide.

My Actions on the Day of Compassion

On my Day of Compassion, I called Jorge and told him that I didn't think he was a monster or even a particularly bad person. I told him I didn't hate him but that I did think he could be "a better person." I also told him he was in control of his own life, and that he—and only he—could take action to change his behavior.

We had a long conversation, and I said that even though there are many understandable reasons for his aggression, they don't excuse what he did or mean that he's not responsible for his choices and behaviors. On the contrary, I told Jorge that it's in his hands whether to perpetuate a culture of violence, and I said that it's his choice whether to "contaminate" his future family or instead give them a home life free of domestic violence (he knows that I will not be his life partner, so I referred to his "future family" rather than me during our telephone call).

Jorge understood my remarks and decided to undergo psychotherapy to deal with his past traumas. He told me he had already thought of doing this before but never took the first step, because he had felt that he was beyond any possible "salvation." He had thought he was damned and deserved nothing because he had hurt the person who gave him love and affection. He felt ashamed and unworthy of compassion.

On the Day of Compassion, I gave Jorge the support he needed to change direction, and a sense of optimism that he'll be able to find the strength and motivation to take a better path than the one he was on. Only time will tell which path he takes...

