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## The Day of Compassion

This assignment was probably the most pleasurable of the course, yet the most difficult to write. I found the idea of the Day of Compassion exciting from the beginning, and I spent a long time in advance trying to imagine how to live it. However, the most exceptional event connected to my Day of Compassion happened *after* those 24 hours had ended, offering proof that the Day had an enduring effect on me.

First, let me introduce myself, or at least my "compassion background." Although non-religious, I have very strong moral values and believe in compassion. I have adopted a child in Africa and constantly allow people to enjoy my business services for free when I know they cannot pay. I have always endeavoured to live in a compassionate way because it simply makes me happy. I found the research cited in Lecture 6.2 about "buying happiness" extremely insightful and true. I'm often happy when I spend my resources on the needs of the others.

### My Day of Compassion

I started my Day of Compassion from the moment I got up: Simple actions such as preparing an extra treat for my husband's breakfast or spending a few more minutes cuddling my toddler before taking him to his nursery. A nice word to the helpful nursery staff, a few more words of appreciation to the people serving me coffee. I also had a few mishaps, such as angering a man driving behind me because I stopped to let a cat safely cross the road, or people missing their subway stop because I tried to let an elderly woman off first—when she actually didn't need to!

I kept considering other people's point of view for the whole day, opening my eyes to what I might have missed around me in the past. Perhaps I fell victim to a self-induced confirmation bias, but I started to see that compassion *was* working. The people around me seemed to notice my acts of kindness and appreciate them, and I started wondering whether they would in turn do the same for others. This question took me back to Week 5 of the course and the miraculous act of Ronnie Edry, an Israeli who's now leading a love campaign toward Iranian people and generating unexpected positive results.

I could keep talking about the little events that marked my Day of Compassion, but I will not. Instead, I want to tell you about something that happened after the Day of Compassion.

I was walking down the same road that I always take on my way to work, and I was about to stop at a local Starbucks for my usual coffee. Then I noticed a homeless man who sleeps in the same spot nearly every day but hadn't been there on the Day of Compassion. At the time I was walking, it just so happened that I was thinking about the Day of Compassion, so perhaps I noticed him because I was primed to pay attention to people in need.

Regardless, I ordered a cappuccino for him when I bought coffee for myself, and I offered him the beverage. He looked surprised but accepted, probably expecting me to leave right away, but I didn't. I wanted to know more about him and see the person behind those rags more clearly. I asked some innocent questions about how he was doing, and he started talking to me, smiling and clearly pleased to have a conversation.

Little by little, he told me the story of his life and how he ended up living that way. He was a carpenter who had emigrated from the East to work for his family. Sadly, they died: Children, wife, everyone. He was suddenly alone, without any goal or motivation, and lost in the shock.

He didn't tell me how it happened, and I didn't ask because he had begun crying. I felt horrible. The conversation went on with him repeating, "Hey, it's life... It's life..." But I see it differently; no one should be left alone, abandoned to their tragedies while attempting to improve the life of their loved ones.

In that moment, I felt compassion and understood what compassion really is. I wasn't pitying him or trying to cheer him up. I was feeling his pain, his misery, his grief. His tears tore my heart. The experience was awful but great at the same time because we were bound together in an intense feeling, two human beings sharing pain and working it out as one.

When I left, I promised that I'd return later, and I then spent the rest of the day searching for organisations able to help him. I came back the next day with a representative from an aid organisation and introduced them to each other. At first, he didn't want to even look at the representative; he apparently feared that he was about to be arrested or confined somewhere. Then the representative explained how the group works, and he finally agreed to give it a try. I never felt so happy in my life: he now has a chance to get back on his feet.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The Day of Compassion relates to many of the topics covered in the course, such as empathy, happiness, bystander intervention, persuasion, attribution, and attitude-behavior consistency. Looking back on the experience, I found compassion to be both exciting and overwhelming. The contagious positivity that compassion triggers is in many ways the counterpoint of contagious antisocial behaviors triggered by deindividuation, obedience, and group pressure. I wonder what would happen if we managed to extend the Day of Compassion outside the boundaries of this course. Would it affect people in an irresistible way, starting a wave of prosocial conformity?

Perhaps worth trying.