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The Day of Compassion

"The problem is whether we are determined to go in the direction of compassion or not. If we are, then can we reduce the suffering to a minimum? If I lose my direction, I have to look for the North Star, and I go to the north. That does not mean I expect to arrive at the North Star. I just want to go in that direction."

—Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (1987)

This week, I hope I made a difference.

Every Friday I meet my husband after work, and we travel home together. Often while I'm waiting for him, I grab a coffee and sit outside at a table to wind down and watch the world go by. Sometimes a young homeless man wanders by asking for spare change, and if I have any, I give it to him. After a few months, the man and I began recognising each other and saying hello, and I'd buy him a sandwich or a hot drink when I could, but I never did anything that changed his situation; I was just reacting to the "social responsibility norm." On the Day of Compassion, however, I wanted to do more.

I thought about how we are all more tightly linked than we realise and that the more we bother to be a good influence in the world, the better the world will be—not just for others, but for us. I'm normally quite shy, but with these ideas in mind, I took a deep breath and waved the young man over when I saw him on the Day of Compassion.

I ordered him a coffee and asked him to sit down. Then I listened to his story. Living in London or any other big city, it's easy to become desensitised to the world around you, just as it is to become desensitised to violence in the media (Englehardt, Bartholow, Kerr, & Bushman, 2011). The problem of homelessness is omnipresent in London to such an extent that people huddled in doorways become invisible to passersby.

As the man continued telling his story, I became more and more moved; my feelings of empathy grew as I learned about the factors that led to his homelessness. He told me about his childhood, his mistakes, and his dreams, and he said that he had become homeless after an argument with his father many years ago, when he was still a teenager living at home. He'd packed a bag, caught the first train to London, but for one reason or another had never been able to find his feet.

I thought about research on bystander inaction (Latané & Darley, 1970) and decided to take action rather than ignoring his plight. This time I didn't just give him a couple of coins to ease my conscience; I wanted to help. We talked a bit longer, and I asked if he had tried to contact his family since he left home. He hadn't. I offered him my phone and said he could use it to call home. He replied that he couldn't; he thought he'd made irrevocable choices, and he seemed immobilised by the shame of living on the streets.

After a few minutes of chatting about something else, though, he asked whether I would phone his family. I placed the call, told his mother that I was a friend of her son, and said that he wanted to see the family again. She was overwhelmed and overjoyed (apparently, the family had no idea what had happened to him), and she was desperate to talk to him.

I handed him my phone and watched his face change before my eyes as years of doubt and loneliness faded away. His family wanted to drive up to London to get him right away, but he felt ashamed and uncomfortable about his situation and didn't want them to find him like this. I thought the best solution would be for him to travel home instead of staying in London, which can be a wonderful city if you're lucky but a very lonely place if you're not. I then gave him money for a bus ticket back to his home town.

Analysis

Afterward, I questioned my motives and wondered whether I had acted out of altruism or egoism. I can't deny that I felt feelings of pride and satisfaction. Maybe there can be no such thing as a purely altruistic act that is free of self-interest. Regardless, I concluded that an act should not be written off as selfish or self-motivated simply because it includes some element of self-interest.

Perhaps the most insidious force that gnaws away at our ability to feel compassion is habituation and the way we get used to things that initially stimulate strong emotions (positive or negative) but then fade over time. We become blind to the things we see every day, and this blindness makes it hard for us to feel compassion. After the Day of Compassion, I hope to continue being more compassionate in everyday life. To quote Wangari Maathai, "I will be a hummingbird; I will do the best I can."

References

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