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The Day of Compassion

I just returned from a vacation visiting my beautiful home country Colombia, and guess what? I got to spend my Day of Compassion there. How amazing is that? Even more amazing is that it's the first time in nine years that I was able to go back for a vacation (I am a student and until now did not have money to go back). All of these factors came together to make the Day of Compassion the most incredible day ever.

To me, compassion means being there when needed even if not asked, listening to someone who just needs to talk, having patience and tolerance toward those whom I do not understand, and accepting others' beliefs even when I do not necessarily agree.

Well, here is the story of how I spent my Day of Compassion:

I woke up and decided that I wanted to visit *Juan, a friend of my father's whom I consider an uncle. I had heard that Juan was depressed and lonely lately, so I thought that a visit might cheer him up. The problem is that Juan, like many other Colombians from the baby boomer generation, was involved in drug dealing and was himself a heavy user of heroin and other drugs. At some point he got better, but I heard that he had relapsed and was again addicted to heroin. I had 10,000 pesos in my pocket (around \$5.00) and decided I would pick him up and invite him to eat some *arepas*—a typical food from my country—and spend some time with him.



As I arrived at his house, everything was dark and quiet, which is odd in Colombia. I knocked repeatedly at the door until finally he opened it. As soon as I saw him, I knew that there was something really bad going on. Research on thin slices of behavior immediately came to mind, so I decided to follow my first impression and see what was going on.

Juan was so surprised to see me that he started crying, and so did I. I told him to put on his shoes because we were going to go somewhere and eat together. I told him how much I missed him and how happy I was to see him again.

*Juan is not his real name; I have used a pseudonym to protect his privacy.

We talked about his troubled life over the past few years, and I noticed that he was overestimating the influence of dispositional factors and underestimating the power of situational factors. For example, he blamed himself for the death of his son in a car accident many years ago instead of blaming the drunk driver who had run a red light. He was helplessly drowning in his depression, and I told him that the car accident was not his fault, that some things outside our control just happen, and that he needed to have strength and motivation to continue moving forward.

I used certain social psychology principles of persuasion to help him see that life could be beautiful and that there was still hope for him. I urged him to think of his beautiful family that he had excluded from his life and the wonderful future he could have if he gave a little bit of himself (applying the "even a penny will help" technique to make it difficult for him to say no). Employing what I learned about the power of norms, I also pointed out that my parents and his other friends were working hard and doing well and that he should take them as an example. Afterward, I accompanied Juan back home and left feeling insecure, not knowing whether my efforts to help him had actually worked.

What I did not realize then was that when I went to pick him up at his house, Juan was about to commit suicide. He was lost in his head, feeling depressed, sad, and lonely, and he had concluded that there was no way out of his situation.

He called me the next day to say that my words had reached him, that I was his angel, and that without knowing it, I had prevented him from taking his life. Simply by inviting him for a bite to eat and listening to him—a very small act of compassion—I ended up saving his life!

Since then, I keep wondering what would have happened if things hadn't fallen into place exactly as they did. I was so glad that I had learned social psychology techniques that I could use in a difficult situation like this, and I was amazed to see the results.

Now I feel that even though I'm just a little person in the world, I can make a difference, and I hope to share this example with other people to demonstrate that it doesn't take millions of dollars or an extreme sacrifice to help someone; it just takes compassion and an understanding of human behavior. As Wangari Maathai has said, "I will be a hummingbird. I will do the best I can."