

Oceans of Sadness
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To help you understand the context that led me to want to address this subject, I'll share with you a couple of excerpts from articles that I encountered recently. This first one is from *Harper's Magazine*, from an article called "A Run on Terror" by Luke Mitchell.

In 2001, terrorists killed 2,978 people in the United States, including the five killed by anthrax. In that same year, according to the Center for Disease Control, heart disease killed 700,142 Americans and cancer 553,768; various accidents claimed 101,537 lives, suicide 30,622, and homicide, another 17,330. Fatal workplace injuries caused 5,431 deaths, drowning, 3,247. To recognize this is not to dishonor the loss to the families of those people killed by terrorists, but neither should their anguish eclipse that of the families of all the children who died in their infancy in 2001, numbering 27,801. Every death has its horrors.

And this second excerpt is from the January 17th issue of *The New Yorker*,

Nearly four million men, women, and children have died as a consequence of the Congo civil war. Seventy thousand have perished in the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan...

[As an aside, the current figures indicate that 215,000 have died from violence and another 200,000 from disease and malnutrition.]

In the year just ended, scores of thousands died in wars and massacres elsewhere in Africa, in Asia, in the archipelagoes of the Pacific, and, of course, in Iraq.

Less dramatically, but just as lethally, two million people died of malaria around the world, and another million and a half of diarrhea. Five million children died of hunger. Three million people died of AIDS, mostly in Africa. The suffering of these untimely and terrible deaths—whether the result of human agency or human neglect—is multiplied by heartbroken parents and spouses, numbed and

abandoned children, and, often, ruined survivors vulnerable to disease and predation and dependent, if they are lucky, on the spotty kindness of strangers.

I begin with these statistics expecting that these numbers might do the same thing to you that they did to me as I read them while eating my breakfast. I felt a small, very subtle sense of shock, an almost imperceptible shudder of alarm, one that might have even caused me to stop chewing.

Perhaps a more accurate way to say it was that I felt vaguely disturbed, and also, “Wow! That’s really remarkable when you put 9/11 in perspective like that!” Or “Wow, the tsunami was just one wave, but there are these other, slower waves of death, going on all the time. Wow,” I thought. “That’s really awful,” I thought.

But I could hardly *feel* it. How can you *feel* “five million children died of hunger”? Especially while you are stuffing your face?!

It is easy to come to believe that the world is in a downward spiral. That the state of the world and human life is more desperate, more oppressive, more violent, more unhealthy.

Of course, it’s impossible to measure such a thing. And it is actually unlikely that human life, on the whole, is more brutal now than it was 2,000 years ago. Or that human beings are suffering more now than they have in the past, or that we are more evil or morally adrift than we have ever been, or that Nature is now any more callous in its destruction. Droughts and floods, plagues and mudslides, earthquakes and tidal waves have been with us since the beginning.

Tragedy is part of the earth, whether caused by human agency, human indifference, or the utterly impersonal forces of nature.

When I saw, in my mind’s eye, that small gray planet, covered with an uninterrupted ocean of tears, this was the implicit message of that vision. The suffering and sorrow of humanity is bottomless, universal, and timeless. It is a constant of our life on earth.

But some things *have* changed for our generation:

There are so many more of us. It's estimated that 2,000 years ago, the world population was a mere 200 million people. It took 1,800 years from that point to pass the 1 billion mark. In the good old days of the 1950's we were just 2.55 billion. Fifty years later, we are now 6.5 billion strong. There are just so many of us. We are so on top of each other. We are so mobile and interconnected. When disaster hits, whether in the form of a tidal wave of water or the slower tidal wave of AIDS or hunger, so many more human lives are swept away in its path.

The other thing that is different for this generation is that we are plugged in. We are wired. Or, having evolved beyond wires, we are nonetheless wirelessly connected. The point is that we are inundated with information. We are daily informed of new tragedies—the news flowing in from L.A. and Sri Lanka, from Darfur and down the road in Dorchester, from Baghdad and Bangladesh. We read it or hear it or watch it on the TV while eating our toast and eggs. We know within hours, if not within minutes, when something terrible has happened. The pictures flow into our homes and offices.

At the same time, many of us are dealing with very immediate, very personal sorrows and stresses. And in our necessary efforts to cope with what is right in front of us, we must push the larger context of suffering to the margins of our consciousness.

How can I respond? I have to go to work now and deal with its urgent demands. I have to do the shopping, the laundry, bring the son, the daughter to their lesson, to their doctor's appointment. I have to visit my mother, who is failing. Attending to her is all the sadness I can take. I cannot stay attuned to 100,000 dead or the 6,000 homeless and hungry families adrift in my own city.

But there, from the margins, the larger calamities continue to exert a continuous atmosphere of anxious distress and sorrow, a dull ache in the heart. There in the margins, they keep crying out to us, "Look at me! Please don't turn your face away."

So, we may have this peculiar dual experience, one of being overwhelmed, and the other of being numb. They are both instinctive responses to feeling helpless. They are both natural responses to feeling deeply sad and yet not knowing how, or not being able, to respond to the source of sadness.

Richard Alpert, also known as Ram Dass, is a spiritual teacher and author of the book, "How Can I Help?" He says that "denial and abstraction"—the tendency to distance ourselves from suffering by thinking about it abstractly—"are some of the ways in which the mind reacts to suffering by trying to restrict or cope with the natural compassion of the heart."

In other words, it is not a basic callousness that makes us unable to feel, but rather our instinct to "*feel with*," our instinct for compassionate response. When that natural compassion is thwarted, when we can't respond, or don't know how to respond, we will distance ourselves from both the suffering of others and from our own feelings, because it's too painful and confusing to be in touch with them.

I came across the story of Betty Williams, a 1976 Nobel Peace Laureate from Northern Ireland. This telling is by Linda Hogan:

Betty Williams once witnessed the bombing death of Irish children, and a little girl died in her arms. The girl's legs had been severed in the explosion and thrown across the street from where she lay as the woman lay holding the bleeding child. Williams went home, numb with shock and despair.

But late that night, the full impact of the experience jolted her awake. She stepped outside, screaming out in the middle of the night. She knocked on doors that might easily have opened with a weapon pointed at her face, but she cried, 'What kind of people have we become that we would allow children to be killed in our streets?' Within four hours, the city was awake and there sixteen thousand names on a petition for peace.

This is the story of one person who became a powerful motivator. But what struck me was also the city, paralyzed, until this one person started passing a petition around. Sixteen thousand people secretly longed for peace but were too numb to say it, perhaps incapable of even feeling it, until they were given the chance to make this small, constructive gesture of putting their signature on a list with other signatures. The capacity to respond in a meaningful way opened them to the truth of the tragedy that surrounded them.

And, so, feeling overwhelmed and numbness tend to compound each other in a negative cycle of paralysis. When confronted with suffering, if we cannot find an outlet for the flow of our natural compassion, we soon become unable to bear the sorrow. Similarly, constructive action and the awakening of feeling tend to compound each other in a positive cycle of responsiveness.

By taking some compassionate action in *any* part of life, especially in cooperation with others, we will be lifted and energized by a revived sense of efficacy. Lifted by a realization of our power to make difference, our hearts become stronger. From this strength, we become more capable of letting suffering touch us. We discover that we are strong enough to let the truth in. As we let the truth in, we know with even greater certainty that we want to be of service.

Priest and activist Daniel Berrigan writes:

Sometime in your life, I hope that you might see one starved man, the look on his face when the bread finally arrives. Hope that you might have bought it, or baked it, or even kneaded it yourself. For that look on his face, for your meeting his eyes across the piece of bread, you might be willing to lose something, you might be willing to suffer, or die a little, even.

It both matters and doesn't matter what channel we find for our compassion and our responsiveness. *It matters most that we do the things that enable us to remain capable of feeling.* The rest flows from there, because, as long as we are emotionally available, our conscience will be able to guide us.

- Whether we toss some sunflower seeds upon the snow so that the birds can feed...
- whether we write letters on behalf of Amnesty International...
- whether we gently touch and listen to the elderly who are facing the end of their lives alone...
- Whether we bake cookies to raise \$200 to send for tsunami relief, as did the children in our church school...
- Or whether we, like Sharon Stone, can raise a million dollars in a few minutes to help curb the spread of malaria...

Whatever it is, we are called to stay sensitive and alive to life, alive to its great oceans of sadness as well as to its endless skies of joy.

May it be so.