

UNCONDITIONAL COMPASSION: A STRUGGLE TO APPLY THE LESSON

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On May 25 Molly read a newspaper account of a police officer, Justin V, who had pled guilty to a charge of ramming the broken-off handle of a toilet plunger into the rectum of a suspect, Abner L. Mr. L was a Haitian immigrant who, ironically, had fled his country to avoid the violent persecution regularly meted out there by uniformed armed officers of the government.

The circumstances in brief, according to the media, were that Officer V had subjected Mr. L to this torture one night in the precinct station house, after arresting Mr. L for allegedly punching him. Sometime later, newspapers reported that Mr. L was not the man who had punched Officer V. During the two years that elapsed between the incident and Officer V's guilty plea, he and later his lawyer had steadfastly denied that the officer had participated in the station house torture. Furthermore, according to press reports, prior to the officer's admission of guilt his lawyer had speculated that Mr. L's multiple and severe internal injuries had, in fact, resulted from consensual homosexual sex. This, the lawyer alleged, had occurred sometime before Mr. L's arrest by Officer V.

After she read the story, Molly found herself confronting a dilemma, a dilemma related to a lesson she'd recently learned. About three months earlier Molly had had a disappointing experience at the end of which she unexpectedly received a rationale for having compassion for all. This lesson had seemed so important to her mission to become a compassionate being that, because of the outcome, she came to refer to the experience as her "accidental journey" (Hunter, 2000). As a consequence of the lesson, and of her sense of mission, Molly was aware of a need to feel compassion for Officer V.

Her dilemma was that she was not feeling compassion for him. In spite of that need, Molly found that she had, in reality, an equally strong contradictory feeling. Her natural response was repugnance -- combined with an attitude of absolute condemnation and moral superiority toward the officer. Molly was aware that she had at times felt rage, that she had made wounding comments, but rageful behavior had never been so much as a shadow of a thought in her mind. In this way she justified her response.

Though Molly's need to feel compassion was strong, it did not have as powerful a pull as her more familiar, horrified disapproval of the police officer. "He is, after all, reprehensible beyond words, isn't he?" she reasoned. Yet even as she entertained this thought, Molly felt the subtle but unmistakable tendrils of self-reproach insert themselves into chinks in the armor of her righteous indignation. Her horrified disapproval of Officer V took off in a new direction: it turned into equally intense disappointment in herself, in the absence of compassion she found herself confronting. "And so soon after that beautiful insight that was to enable me to feel compassion for all, even the meanest," Molly berated herself. She was dismayed. "Here is a specific, admitted perpetrator of a brutal act, a chance for me actually to reflect the unconditional compassion to which I believed I gained access through my recent lesson."

The internal conflict was painful; how could she resolve it? Whatever emotional struggle the conflict presented Molly, her cognitive preference was unequivocal. It was not only clear that that preference was for compassion rather than disapproval; it was equally clear that the compassion she sought did exist within her. She knew she was simply unable to find the path by which to access it. As she searched her mind, struggling to find that path, the next step occurred to her almost like a suggestion: "Feel empathy for Officer V." Certain that that was possible but less certain about how to accomplish it, Molly once again found herself seeking a path and once again the answer presented itself, almost as if by magic.

She had been aware of feeling sadness throughout all of the foregoing reflections, and she began to cry. Molly knew that, although her crying was partly for Mr. L and his experience of brutalization, it was also partly because she identified with the terror, excruciating pain, and powerlessness that she was attributing to his experience. Having lived with terror and powerlessness through years of having been the sole object of her parents' verbal rages, Molly was familiar with both. Mr. L's pain resonated deeply within her.

That resonance, in turn, seemed to nudge Molly slowly, almost imperceptibly toward empathy with Officer V. She mused, "How readily I can cry for Mr. L and for myself but not for Officer V..." and immediately realized that probably this would be true for most people. "Probably they feel Mr. L's and maybe their own resonating pain, but with no awareness of (let alone identifying with) Officer V's pain." For, in part from newspaper glimpses into the officer's childhood, Molly had become certain that Officer V had intense pain -- emotional pain. But, partly from those same newspaper glimpses, she was equally certain that unlike Mr. L's pain, glaringly apparent, or her own, expressed whenever she chose, Officer V's pain had never even been acknowledged by him, let alone been expressed so others might know of it.

She knew that to have no one else know of, nor therefore understand, one's excruciating pain was likely to exacerbate the pain almost beyond enduring. Recalling having lived in that unbearable, lonely place that Molly was now ascribing to Officer V, she found she could now cry for him as well as Mr. L and herself. She was aware how readily emotional pain, if never acknowledged - so never expressed and never comforted, could mutate into unfathomable rage. The rage, in turn, would remove its

bearer even further from the likelihood of comforting or compassion from caring others.

That, in turn, would exacerbate the loneliness, exacerbate the rage and turn normal human emotion into intolerable but unseen torment - a kind of hidden torture. "Of course I can now cry for Officer V, for all three of us," Molly reflected. "Looked at in a certain sense, in three different (or maybe not-so-different) ways, we have all been tortured.

With that thought she came to empathize with the unseen pain of Officer V, as she had done earlier with the highly public pain of Mr. L. Compassion for the officer, which Molly had sought with such difficulty shortly before, suddenly coursed through her. While she unequivocally condemned his heinous, brutal behavior, she found she could nonetheless sense the spirit within him: however damaged, it was still one that her own now could recognize. She realized that she had become able to empathize and, through empathy, to feel compassion for Officer V. Molly realized, too, that she had managed to apply, if somewhat shakily, the rationale for compassion for all that had unexpectedly become the ultimate destination of her earlier "accidental journey."

Reference

Hunter, B. (2000). An accidental journey, the spiritual plane and a very late breakfast. *The Person-Centered Journal*, 7(1), 22-27.

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