

Is Compassion a limited resource?

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg

“Is there something wrong with me? “, asked our friend, “I just don’t feel anything about the Tsunami. I feel more alarm about AIDS in Africa; it kills more people each day than died in the Tsunami. Why aren’t we sending all of this money there? Am I just a grump, or is everybody around me hypocritical? Why are Canadians so generous in one situation, and so oblivious in another? Have I gone numb? What am I missing?”

It’s easy to see why our friend feels out of step. The responses of people in the valley to the Tsunami victims have been both heartfelt and astounding. At North Island College, where Serena teaches, cash-strapped students gave pocket change of more than \$1500.00 in just four days. Why? “Because we have so much more than those people who lost everything”, said a student living on loans. Others speak of feeling stunned, shocked, and moved toward greater appreciation of what they have; their families, their communities, their homes. Some children and teenagers tell of their first awareness that a very different world exists outside of their experience, and they feel the sadness of other children’s losses.

These responses, and many more, are not cynical or shallow. Some might accuse them of not being rational, but that is true only if we define rationality in terms of numerical logic. The response of compassion follows a rationality of the opened heart. As humans, we are better at responding to a single lost child in front of us, than to a million people somewhere else that we can’t see. The valley’s response to the Tsunami has been like that to a lost child; it was immediate, strong, emotionally based, and also genuinely helpful.

We have wondered what it was that opened Canadian’s hearts to this disaster in particular. Monika thinks it was the immediacy of the pictures, and Christmas. Serena thinks that it was because many Canadians have traveled to Thailand and to Southern India. Others have

suggested that the accounts of Canadian families affected have moved us. Maybe it’s all of these things, or maybe it’s something else. We do know that people are generally more moved to help when they feel personally connected to the ones in need. This doesn’t mean that we can only care about our own kind; in the right circumstances, we are able to care about people who are quite different than ourselves. But we will find our most generous selves when we can create or imagine that personal link.

There are many good reasons to look with hope and pride at the valley’s Tsunami response. One thing that makes us proud is the way that this has made us care about such a wide and diverse circle of people, in such different circumstances. We may have first thought of Thailand or other places where we, or someone we knew, had been. We may first have thought of someone like ourselves. But the eleven countries hit included an astounding diversity of peoples: rich and poor, Europeans, Asians and Africans, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Animists, children and adults, fishers, restaurant owners, sex trade workers, farmers, soldiers and guerilla fighters. Yet no one that we know has said, “I only want my aid dollars to go to the people who are like me.” Faces like our own may have opened our hearts’ doors, but once opened, we have found room for an astounding variety of humans. For many valley folk the world got a little smaller in January, and the meaning of “neighbor” expanded.

In recent days, we have heard and read more about the everyday lives of these people who were affected by the Tsunami. For many, it appears that the earthquake and waves were just the latest of disasters, following on the heels of (or coming in the midst of) civil wars, poverty, immense national debts, land mines, and other hardships. To the average person trying to make a go of life, these hardships are as uncontrollable, and as powerful, as the



weather and the sea. There is reason to believe that our newfound connection to people on the other side of the world will make these realities, as well as the Tsunami, more real to us. And if they become real to us, perhaps our ability to understand, and to respond compassionately in the future, will further grow.

What about compassion fatigue? Once this crisis has passed, will our compassion be used up, and less available to areas where Canadians don't travel? Does a heart, once opened, close again to save its energy, or is compassion for others a response that gets stronger with practice? Certainly one cannot run on the energy of a crisis or emergency for long; if fatigue sets in we will be sorely tempted to turn away from suffering and close down.

Our friend whose remarks we began with worried that she had lost her compassion; her lack of a sense of urgency in responding to the Tsunami looked to her like a heart closed down. But she supports many projects for social justice around the world, and has learned to respond thoughtfully to the needs of many people; she's no scrooge. And we remember her genuine despair on the eve of the Iraq war, when, anticipating the suffering that would come to pass, she wept in frustration that she could not stop the tanks and planes. Different images, different times opened her heart. Now, in it for the long haul, she resists going into crisis over new disasters, but plugs away where she can at giving. Once she thought about it, she decided that the Tsunami zone was being taken care of for now, and that her determination not to forget other causes was fine, too. It takes many kinds of giving to make the world better.

Clearly, living with this kind of open heart is not without risk. It takes practice to hold on to compassion without becoming overwhelmed, and without burning out into a numb state. The heart may have its own form of reason, but

the head eventually does have to come to and work out a long-term plan and budget of resources. We need to practice when to pay attention to what is at home, and when to reach out beyond our doors and our borders. We need to learn how to let tragedy teach us appreciation and gratitude, how to grasp beautiful moments, and how to be more fed than drained by our love of the world.

Last week, we heard on the news that the Canadian Red Cross, with enough money now to fund its immediate goals in Asia, was turning its attention once again to the long-term health of its overall programs. The emergency phase may not be over, but this is going to be a long haul. We understand the example of the Red Cross as saying, "don't burn out. Take care of your long-term plan, your long-term resources. Don't stop caring; do look after the whole balance of things."

Meanwhile, if it is true that hearts were opened, that the world got smaller, and that many of us have gained in our capacity to imagine, and to feel for, the lives of others half a world away, then something very good has happened. This is the gift in the midst of tragedy, the reason why suffering is not in vain. An open heart brings us pain, joy, love, and beauty along with compassion. It is a treasure to nourish, to treasure and to keep.

Monika Grünberg is a Registered Clinical Counsellor. Dr. Serena Patterson is a Registered Psychologist and an Educator. Both are committed to contributing to the well-being of the communities they live and work in. They can be reached at their Comox Practice at 339-3269, or toll free at (877) 339-3269.

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