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mp 65 Activism, Helping Professions and Burnout 12.29.13

Joan Halifax (Zen priest and medical anthropologist) was interviewed by Christa Tippet today on On Being. Joan questioned the truth of the concept compassion fatigue. She agrees that burnout is an issue, but it is not due to feeling too much compassion. Those that burnout are not acting from a place of compassion enough. They are empathetically overloaded because they do not see clearly the situation they are in. They do not understand where to root their personal efficacy within the larger context of social change or social care. Many place their happiness in whether or not their causes or service is successful. Instead, Halifax urges us to invest our resources in activity guaranteed to renew our spirits, bodies and minds. In the direct human activity of helping and healing.

Joan reminded the listeners that a character of seasoned meditation adepts (10k+ hours meditating) is not only do they feel compassion more deeply than non-adepts, but that they also let go of that attachment to that pain more quickly. These adepts are not zoning out but reaching deep and connecting more profoundly with others pain. Halifax argues that it is not compassion that depletes, on the contrary it actually enlivens and empowers people who connect with each other on a profound level. She argues what deplete us is attachments to the pain of the other. Our inability to let go of pain that we cannot directly control, is what depletes us. We carry around pain that we should let down and leave behind. The serenity prayer of R. Niebuhr captures this distinction well. We do what we can (connect and be with someone who is hurting) we let go of what we cannot control (we act to change the situation and leave the effects of our actions for reality to carry forward) and use wisdom to distinguish the difference between what we can control and what we can't. Care givers and activists that burnout are not doing what they can with what they control and let go of what they cannot control.

A listener said she was an activist and volunteer in a battered woman's shelter. She saw people all around her that were saying 'No' to the pain and suffering around them, but not any saying 'Yes' to what should be. She felt like her husband had to leave that life to say 'Yes' in their own homes and neighborhoods. While I agree with the sentiment that we need to find our yes to what we desire, I felt sorry that she felt she had to leave a place in need. We need to be able to stay on the front lines of pain and suffering without being burned out. In much the same way that personally we need to learn how to handle the storms of our emotions without escaping into addictions and numbness. We as a society need to create communities of care which allows us to hold the socialized pain and suffering in our collective hearts without depleting those who hold the hands of those who are hurting.

When we learn to act from a place of compassion that connects us to others, but at the same time sees the limits of our actions. We cause ourselves pain not by feeling connected to others pain, but by confusing what brings wholeness to our life. It is the action of standing with someone in pain that infuses our life with meaning and contentment.

By rooting my behavior in what is constant, I can withstand the ever changing reality of suffering in the world. We can keep on day after day seeking change and offering a shoulder empowered by our solidarity with other people. We burn out because we do not rest in the life enhancing spring in our hearts, but instead lean on the short term efficacy of the plans and agendas of the organizations we staff and volunteer. By focusing more on keeping our volunteers and staff mentally healthy and nourished our organizations can maintain the people needed to achieve our long term social goals.

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