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Communion without competition

by John Shea

Soul Seeing

During a workshop on suffering, I was the scribe at the whiteboard. The leader asked the group to name situations of suffering they had experienced. I was capturing the experiences with succinct phrases: "sickness, disability, death of a loved one, job loss, divorce, etc." Then someone said, "Death of a son." I turned away from my task of scribbling and looked at the group. I had a sudden realization that as diverse as we were, we were all one in the common human destiny of suffering. I have no idea why this phrase, as distinct from all the others, triggered this affective-cognitive response and rang me like a bell.

But it is this moment of soul seeing, this sudden realization, I want to explore.

Sudden realizations, times when universal truths "hit home," are qualitatively different from my standard way of knowing. I usually know by observation, by standing back and judging. My rational mind piles up evidence and comes to conclusions. This is the way I knew about the common condition of suffering shared by the whole human race.

But that is not what happened at this moment. I was "in" the realization, swimming in the sea of suffering, not only rationally understanding but effectively feeling the communion of myself and others. Our unity seemed a given, not a conclusion my mind had arrived at. Unlike other kinds of knowing that are open to refutation, the truth of this realization seemed undeniable. Perhaps that is why some scholars characterize this type of knowing as "self-authenticating." It is also why realizations stick in memory and beg for further attention. There is a promise of gold in their "givenness."

The gold is in the experience from the beginning, but often it only comes into awareness through reflection. Experiences come and go. But when their impact is significant, they leave us with a greater sense of life and the invitation to nurture that life. When we reflect on what happened, we name the gift

that has been given and develop ways it can continually guide us.

So at this moment of my reflecting, and it is by no means over, I am aware of one thing that didn't happen and one thing that did happen.

My conditioned mind is very competitive. I am always judging things as better or worse and hoping, of course, that I am on the better side. Until I am convinced otherwise, I do not think I am the only one who is constantly contrasting. Comparison is a mental frame most of us cannot discipline. It impresses its categories on almost everything.

In particular, it prioritizes negative experiences. We find ourselves putting our sufferings on a better-to-worse scale. As the saying goes, "I was saddened by the fact I had no shoes until I saw a man who had no feet." If we find someone with a worse suffering than ours, we take consolation from the fact we are not that bad off. Most minds are addicted to this form of competitive well-being.

As I turned from the whiteboard and saw the group, I didn't put the suffering on a better-to-worse scale. Although the words "death of a son" triggered my realization, I didn't feel that combination of pity for him and relief for me. My comparison tape did not kick in. That is what didn't happen.

What did happen is the flip side of what didn't happen. I just felt communion without comparison. We were all together, all beset by the storms of life and all worthy despite whatever we were undergoing. A rush of peace accompanied this realization. It was like some inner defensiveness relaxed; the drawbridge over the moat was let down. I was restored to wholeness, to a wider belonging that seemed right and true. This sense of an unbreakable connection with all people was a lightning flash. It always amazes me how so much can happen in consciousness in a split second of time.

One of the secrets suffering can reveal is that our fundamental communion with one another is the necessary counterweight to our highly praised separate uniqueness. If our sufferings bring us to this awareness, it is because this awareness reveals part of what is really happening. When this part is included, we are invited into a healing whole, a proper alignment of the many and the one. It is no longer "my" suffering and "your" suffering. It is "the" suffering, in which all participate at different times and to different degrees. This communion consciousness has the power to bring a measure of peace to the inner distress each of us undergoes. But it also has the power to inspire us to reach out to one another in compassion and help.

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