



Anger? Hope?

I was thinking about fear, empathy and compassion, and trying to sort out the differences and the characteristics of those common states of mind. I suppose I could've thrown in anger as well, because in my mind each one of us has gone through a period of anger that we may not have identified as such. But, I would argue that it is hard to go from a busy life to isolation and not have that abrupt change produce frustration and anger.

Anger, in my mind, is tied to hope in kind of a weird way. In our present circumstance, we have anger because we want a better narrative. We don't like the one we have. What actually matters? Human connection, touch, dinner together, hair appointments, hugs, kisses, protest marches, work, and down a long, long list of 'normal' activities, now out of reach, and our sense of hope is paused for a time.

I was listening to a podcast interview of Elizabeth Gilbert, author of [Eat Pray Love](#) and [Big Magic](#), and she was drawing the line between empathy and compassion, and making some interesting points. I wished I had taken notes. Let me see if I can draw similar lines.

I once wrote an essay describing what I had learned from Bob when he was campus pastor at Manchester College. We were at a funeral home, in line, and about to speak to our student, the mother who had witnessed the death of her seven-year-old son. Under those circumstances sympathy says "I'm sorry for your loss," while empathy says "what a blessing to have had your son in your life for those seven years." Compassion says "When you're ready, please come and see me, let's talk." Bob did all that perfectly, and I learned.

For us, world-wide, we are sharing a common condition, brought on by this isolation and the shared fear of the virus. We can empathize with others. "I see you are suffering like me." Too often, empathy can alter that next step, compassion. Compassion is often born out of

empathy because we can relate to the suffering of the other, we take next step in love, “how can I help, what can I do?”

On the subject of compassion, Gilbert says that “this is not a time to hoard. It’s time to store our grain in the belly of the hungry neighbor.” I find that a beautiful imagery of generosity born out of compassion.

So, what is my point? Honestly, I’m not sure. Maybe we will all find out when this is over. I am convinced, however, that a good part of the answer lies within each one of us, for, at its core, this isolation is personal. It is how we each will benefit from it.

What I do believe is this: Love is the source of all compassion, it is the opposite of fear. To me, there is a positive counter-transition that goes like this: Fear can breed anger. Anger, recognized, can encourage sympathy. Awareness of our sympathetic response can engender empathy. Empathy opens the door to compassion, and compassion is love.

Lucy, in the Peanuts cartoon, comments “Good, grief!” and you may wonder what is good about grief. Well, stick that word grief into the sentence above: Grief can, and does, breed anger, etc.

Because of another writing project I’m working on, I couldn’t help but think of the Good Samaritan. While others paused, on their travels on this very dangerous Jericho Road, they looked (with sympathy, even empathy?) at the victim of the robbery lying there, then passed on helping. The Samaritan, overcame his fear of the road and its dangers, to follow compassionate (love) action.

May the power of God’s love within us, move us to acts of compassion, sometimes beyond our human willingness to act. Example: The medical nurse who works through exhaustion and risk of contracting the virus, and shows up one 12-hour shift after another.

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This essay was the Meditation in Stan Escott's [Watchword](#) for April 27, 2020. These regular words of encouragement, reflection, scripture and devotional prayer, born from the Covid-induced isolation of a small Bible study group, are now available online. To explore Watchwords or sign up for the mailings, visit bosworth30.com/watchwords/.