

Pink Sunday!

A day each year to be mindful of and celebrate and consider breast cancer survivors and women's overall health. That's what this is all about.

When Sue asked me to give this particular reflection I didn't have to remind her I was not a surgeon, gynecologist or an oncologist. But she asked me to maybe hone in on compassion ..wow! What an important component of medicine ..but not just medicine...why, any and every field for that matter! Well, she just asked me to talk about it. You know...we've had several presentations on this subject recently.

Just several months ago Katherine gave an excellent summary of the neuro pathways of emotions such as sympathy and empathy. And then Andy did just as superb job with his presentation. Actually, I considered asking Sue if we could simply give handouts of both talks and go home early tonight...but knew exactly what the answer to that would be! So I thought maybe we should expand this a little and dwell maybe on the scientific aspects of compassion. Scientific because ...well, as an internist caring for the critically ill, my entire professional life has more or less been heavily involved with science as you might imagine. But here we are in a church at a spiritual group gathering talking about compassion and its relationship to science! From day one I've never had a problem with there being any conflict between science and religion and since my sophomore year at Wofford when I took the med school required course, comparative anatomy, that presented and clarified Darwin's Theory Of Evolution, there has never been any doubt. After all, science is nothing but the facts collected by scientists of the laws of our universe...created by our creator! No surprise, then, that we can talk about science and compassion in the same breath!

The question is often asked is compassion a learned or innate trait? Well, as I'm sure you know...it can be both. My family members were compassionate people and I was very fortunate to grow up with that influence. That a physician and other caregivers should have and exhibit compassion was for me a forgone conclusion long ago having learned that along the way from doctors and other healthcare workers who did or didn't do it well. For the most part I have found most of them exhibited an ample supply of it....just some better than others!

Reviewing definitions here...is compassion the same as sympathy and empathy? Well, putting it simply sympathy is feeling sorrow for someone...empathy is feeling sorrow with someone..actually experiencing their feelings. The “empathic phenomenon” Katherine talked about or you've read about or you've most likely experienced yourself. Compassion goes a step further..is actually defined as the recognition of another's suffering and a desire to alleviate that suffering...and then...actually taking charge and doing something about it! So, compassion is utilizing empathy and sympathy and then acting on it. At one time it was brushed off as a “hippie dippy” religious term..irrelevant in modern society. Now, ...guess what! ...rigorous empirical data supports the same view that all of the major religions hold: that compassion is a good thing! And more!

So then...Is compassion simply something theologians and psychologists talk about? Something just out there without any scientific basis of fact? What happens in experiencing compassion?

Scientific studies have actually shown that compassion reduces risk of heart disease, increases resilience to stress, and strengthens immune response. It is known also to improve overall psychological well-being and social connection...and shown to wonderfully increase hopefulness in foster children!

I won't and really can't get into how all this scientific evidence has been discovered and studied except to say with the advent of all the advances in the biochemistry and the amazing imaging technology available we can now say that many things we observed anecdotally about the effects of compassion can be proven and defined scientifically! I can assure you that there is a vast amount of scientific data available to anyone interested. We now know which areas of the brain and some of the chemicals responsible for these things we call sympathy, empathy, compassion. For instance we know that people with compassion have been seen to exhibit a higher sensitivity to dopamine, the feel good chemical! Charles Darwin eluded to its instinctive presence long ago. He is frequently quoted as using the phrase, "survival of the fittest". But that's not really what he said....in fact, he never said that! .his works say and imply that he referred to something more..namely, survival of the kindest. Let me share something with you.. things I've heard all my life: if you want to succeed in life, you need to subscribe to the idea of "survival of the fittest". We're told that success has to be grabbed or else someone else will get it! Some others have said there is a power in compassion but that Darwinism made that argument weak: because Darwin proved survival of the fittest is the way to go!

But...if you study Darwin's work, especially the Descent Of Man it doesn't support this at all. But in fact Darwin's research shows that survival of the kindest is more correct in explaining which species has climbed the evolutionary ladder more efficiently and effectively! According to biologist EO Wilson, cooperation rather than competition has been more important in humanities' evolutionary success and compassion is the reason for both the human race's survival and its ability to thrive as a species.

Charles Darwin not only did not coin the phrase "survival of the fittest " (that was actually an anthropologist, Herbert Spencer) but actually argued against it. Studies have shown this: that groups of altruistic individuals eventually defeat groups of selfish people.

Selfish people and bullies may win a couple of rounds but rarely win the match or game! It's the compassionate people who ultimately win! It should not be surprising either to discover that being compassionate makes us happy. Scientifically, on the cellular/chemical level, what happens is the release of oxytocin from the brain..ultimately producing dopamine which then ultimately form serotonin....all of this having the effect of lighting up the reward center of the brain on imaging and causing good things to happen such as reducing anxiety! No wonder many researchers believe compassion has the ability to change the world. Other folks have long felt the same way!

In 2012 in London, during a conversation between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Adriana Huffington the Dalai Lama said, "If we say, oh, the practice of compassion is something holy, nobody will listen. If we say warm- heartedness really reduces your blood pressure, your anxiety, your stress and improves your health, then people will pay attention!" Can't the same can be said about things like sharing and listening.? One thing I came across: one study showed that 25% of Americans have no one that they feel close enough to to share a problem. I think that's a little sad.

Some other interesting findings: There is also considerable information suggesting that some people exhibit, so to speak, an absence of these emotions, ...sympathy, empathy, compassion. Since the advent of the ability to explore and map the DNA molecule, a number of genes have been identified...such as the gene for cystic fibrosis. In Europe, a family has been found to have a gene called the monster gene. Most, if not all those who have it are extremely violent. So...more connections between science, religion, learned and innate emotions. I'm convinced we have much more to find out...and we will. The mapping of the DNA molecule has really just begun.

When I served in the army during the Vietnam war I had finished part of my Internal Medicine residency and worked as a medical

officer, classified as an internist, in the Third Army Headquarters hospital in Atlanta. Serving with me was another physician, Sheldon Kantor, from Detroit, Michigan, who was my age and had had the identical training. He was Jewish and he and other Jewish physicians became my very good friends and taught me some marvelous things. He enjoyed sharing some Jewish philosophy and I thoroughly enjoyed learning. He often invoked some of his "Jewish" humor along with his kindness. One of the things he frequently said: for example, if we were debating whether or not some thing involved our treatment plan might or might not help...he would say a " Jewish thing " .. " well, would it help? Well, it wouldn't hurt"! We not infrequently gathered and discussed the awesome similarities between Christianity and Judaism. I finally figured out something...Jesus was a Jew. I've remembered all that because Shel was a very kind and compassionate man who listened. I recently learned he had died and his obituary pointed out what a remarkably kind person he was!

You know, we..all of us..are constantly called upon for so many things every day of our lives. Some things we can do..others we simply cannot. But one thing we can do if we will, is simply show compassion...not just for those lives affected by cancer..but simply if someone just needs an ear...just to get something off their chest...just to talk. Sounds simple ...but not an unimportant thing for whom it's shown, now is it?! Just consider the mutual benefit of that simple act of kindness! I can tell you that for physicians and patients alike to relate by talking and listening is extremely important in solving medical problems. Dr. William Osler, the grandfather of Internal Medicine from Louisiana, made a remarkable statement long ago....a lesson and " pearl " to young medical students ...worth a fortune to diagnosticians . He said that if you let your patient talk long enough, they will eventually tell you what's wrong with them...they'll tell you what the diagnosis is In other words ...so, in essence, do yourself and them a favor...just listen!

In the same vein...I read that it was a Monk that said..."The first act of love is listening"! Isn't that really compassion? Showing compassion is showing love isn't it? Isn't this what religious leaders like Yeshua, the Dalai Lama, Mohammed and others said thousands of years ago? Seems to me we now have scientific evidence to pretty much back it up.

Well...look. Here's the bottom line. There are undoubtedly multiple factors involved in emotions, compassion included. Innate or in the DNA, genetic , learned, even possibly absent in some folks. Sooner or later everyone is affected in one way or another by or is called upon to exhibit a bit this thing called compassion. Most of us are able to figure out ...to detect..when someone needs a little compassion...For those of us who can, In the long run, it's really up to us to give it or not.

Will it really help? Much scientific evidence says it will. And...you know what? It wouldn't hurt... now would it!