

## **How Could They!? Revenge and Compassion**

*"Judge not, that ye be not judged."* St. Matthew, King James Version

In October 2006, a lone gunman entered a one-room Amish school in rural Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and killed 10 girls (five others were hospitalized). It turns out the killer had allegedly molested two young girls some years earlier; what is also known factually is that he had a young daughter who had died a premature death a death for which he never forgave God. He wanted revenge, and he exacted it in that schoolhouse.

Even though this incident happened over six years, what followed still remains both awe-inspiring to some and mind-numbing to others.

Mired in grief over their loss, the Amish community responded with forgiveness. Folks didn't blame, seek revenge, run to the nearest law firm to "lawyer up," rally for gun control or otherwise "act out." Rather, in their humble and quiet manner, they extended their hand with compassion and grace to the killer's family to offer comfort for their own pain and suffering. They donated money to the killer's wife and children. The killer's family was invited to one of the Amish girl's funeral; and Amish mourners counted more than the non-Amish at the killer's funeral.

My sense is that a majority of rational, decent and well-minded human beings would view the Amish response as what? Stupid, Outrageous, Soft, Foolish, Spiritually inept, Ridiculous, Unbelievable, or?

Tragedy, upset and compassion

So, how do you deal with the upsets, tragedies and life's vicissitudes large and small - that rock, and have rocked, your life? How do you deal with those at work, at home, and in everyday life who you feel "wrong(ed)" you, treated you unfairly, or damaged your spirit? Do you seek revenge? Do you lash out? Are you an "eye for an eye" type, looking to gain your "pound of flesh?" Or are you forgiving, compassionate and understanding?

We know the Amish are not "over it." We know that pain and suffering can remain in their hearts. But, do we need to balance hurt with hate, with revenge, with "getting even?"

As for the Amish, we ask, "How could such folks forgive a terrible, unprovoked act of violence against the innocent?"

The role of compassion

We know the Amish culture teaches forgiveness and placing the needs of others before themselves and that there is good in any situation. Vengeance and revenge is not a daily theme or way to deal with life.

They know that hatred is nothing more or less than a poison or a cancer that eats one alive.

Forgiveness is what allows one to cope and move forward. Letting go of grudges is what allows them to focus on the work of their own healing.

The Buddhists speak often of compassion. Not a compassion that is airy-fairy, soft, syrupy, but a compassion that allows one to bear the pain of another to let go of the "me vs. you" struggle we so often allow to justify our need for getting even or to exact our pound of flesh, and to legitimize revenge.

The Dalai Lama wrote, "According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration. It's a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. It's not passive, but rather an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering. Genuine compassion must have both wisdom and loving kindness. That is to say, one must understand the nature of the suffering from which we wish to free others (wisdom), and one must experience a deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (loving kindness)."

*I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with (their own) pain. - James Baldwin*

The Buddhist Monk, Pema Chodrin, says, "In order for us to have compassion for another, we have to have compassion for ourselves." The way we have compassion for ourselves is not to avoid suffering and seek pleasure, but to directly connect to our own pain and suffering, not avoid it, not deny it, not cover it up, not medicate it, not to blame others for it; and then embrace the suffering of others. When we get in touch with our own pain and suffering and work with it, embrace it, learn from it and heal from it, we can then love ourselves, truly love ourselves, and in the process love others.

In working with our pain and suffering we gain a larger and wider perspective on life, we become self-less, and open the door to understanding ourselves and others from a more spiritual, interconnected perspective. We have a larger view of reality, a view that is not emotional, reactive, muddled, or defensive, but a view that sees the oneness of all human beings regardless of their faults and foibles, regardless of the harshness of the words or actions."

Getting to this place of compassion and forgiveness is one of the reasons we're on the planet to transmute our hate into love. Simple, not always easy.

**So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- Do you allow the actions of individuals and groups to make you angry, resentful, or hateful. Why?
- What are your greatest fears and why?
- Do you blame others for your state in life?
- Do you have a need not only to get mad when you feel wronged, but get even? Why?
- Do you hold any grudges?
- Do you have a list of folks who have wronged you in life?
- Do you live by an "eye for an eye" mantra?

- If you "forgive, but do not forget" you're really not forgiving. How do you feel about that approach to forgiveness? What emotions come up for you? Why?

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