The Crisis of Empathy

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"It isn't enough for your heart to break because everybody's heart is broken now."

- Allen Ginsberg

Perhaps it is a sign of my own youthful naivete, or maybe it is the sign of something else, but I find it quite difficult to shake the feeling that the problems that continue to plague us—homelessness, hunger, war—persist for reasons that are not so complex. The problem is not, of course, that there are not enough houses, or clothes, and the problem is not that war and hunger are laws of nature. The problem is neither that we do not understand the "backwardness"
of the world we are born into. Indeed, the word "crisis" harbors at the edge of our thoughts, and pollutes the serenity of our day-to-day pleasures. So we know that something is wrong. We know that there is a crisis of some sort—debt, or education, or healthcare. The heap of crises suggests more than just structural tinkering is necessary. It reveals that a fundamental change in our system is overdue. These matters are urgent, the current administration's efforts still permit such deeply felt loss, and the prolonging of such pain has pushed the citizen's whispers to cries of agony. Now, more than ever, the necessity for societal change must be pursued. A president whose message has been, "The world can change," must surely agree.

Not so, however. Our anger is misplaced, the administration has said, and we must have not looked for answers in the right places. The right answer has already been provided by the administration, and we should look there, and suspend our skeptical, misdirected attitude. We are told that the administration is working hard for our betterment, apparently, and a bi-partisan effort should be applauded in the face of such grim prospects. (We must remember this, no matter how grim those prospects may be.) There was a lot of hard work in 2010. (We should be asking, "hard work for what?")

Erkstine Bowles, one of the co-chairs for the President's National Committee for Fiscal Responsibility and Reform was one such humble individual. It is good to hear someone say: "I believe in working for the common good." It is also a statement that no decent person would disagree with. The President's "Moment of Truth," project declared, then, with boldness and courage, an end to one crisis: "The era of deficit denial is over." Certainly, this would mean a serious push for Single-Payer Healthcare, nationally? Evidence would reveal this to be the rational course. According to the research compiled by the advocacy group "Physicians for a National Health Program," a Single Payer Healthcare System would "save more than $400 billion dollars per year, enough to provide comprehensive, high-quality coverage for all Americans." In the light of this fact, sense should tell us that anyone truly working for "the common good," and fighting to end the deficit would immediately join with the voices of those who have been advocating for such a solution for more than 20 years.

We don't have to go into too many details to see that this is not the reality. The reality is, instead perfectly articulated—the goal openly stated in the Committee's convenient report summaries. Not a thing about confronting the political corruption that has poisoned the American politic, and certainly nothing about changing society. So the Moment of Truth? From The Fiscal Commission Report heading: "The problem is real. The solution will be painful" and "Washington must lead." Concerning the cloaking of the facts, coupled with the marginalization of a real solution—and the decorative effect—the bold proclamations of "truth"—it is hard to describe it as anything other than Orwellian.

I should re-state that I think the complexity of the problem we face is also an illusion. The things that are called crises are merely symptoms of the real problem. That is, the crisis in the heart. The deficit of our empathy. Rather than ridicule of the mediocrity of our leaders, we have congratulated them on their weakness. Instead of heeding the cries of our friends and neighbors, we deafen ourselves with the soothing tissue of an insufficient charity. We allow ourselves to see the world as numbers and not as cherished memories. The crisis of empathy has reached every class, every race, every gender. It has impoverished us to the point of mistrust and paranoid anger toward every other person. It has decayed our morale. It has exhausted our energy to change and re-create society. It has stripped us of our human feature and warmth and turned us into a
calculation, a number on a sheet of paper. We have reached a bleak point in society, no one would argue that, but is it the point of no return?

The problem is in the human heart. But ultimately, even the heart that is made of stone can break. That personal tipping point—and the power shelled within it was recognized by a very young Howard Zinn, during segregation. In his book, The Southern Mystique, he emphasized that changes in law were only one part of the fight against racism. He argued that those day-to-day natural interactions would be the thing to shatter the barrier, and build trust.

...if one turns from a desire to establish intellectual certainty to a simpler, yet more important objective—changing a particular facet of the social order—then another possibility asserts itself. ... For race prejudice, the operable cause can, I believe, be stated: it is separation on the basis of inequality. Or the universal detergent for race prejudice is contact—massive, prolonged, equal, and intimate contact.

In the context of an overtly segregated society, Professor Zinn was able to locate a tangible solution—touch, and closeness and intimacy. It broke down the "artificial suspicion which separation helped foster," it ended racism for him and countless others. Our problem is still, today, separation. It is not a law that we are segregated from the homeless, or the sick, or the struggling. And yet, this psychological segregation survives. That has fostered apathy. It has fertilized prejudice and stigma. It has made us afraid. To realize the importance of the unheeded cry of the oppressed, we must listen, not as politically interested advocates, but as we are, as people. We must reach out to it, and let it reach in to us. When we disassociate ourselves from others, we disassociate ourselves from the fullness of our humane passion.

The crisis of empathy is a great danger to the individual. It separates us from the pain that is felt universally. It stunts our ability to conceive of anything better in how we could live our lives. It is when we can tear down the fences that we build within ourselves, and undergo that transformation—from hostility to warmth, from suspicion to a welcoming embrace, from bitterness to tenderness—we find a power that cannot be taken from us.

That task is not so complex—but it is never over, completely. When we do this, though—when we allow empathy to flourish within, it pours into the communities of which we are a part. It is only then we can begin the task of changing society.

Bibliography:


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