

The Boy in the Magic Shop

by Immanuel Joseph

I recently had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. James Doty who is the founder and the director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE) at the Stanford University School of Medicine of which the Dalai Lama is the founding benefactor. He also happens to be a professor in the Department of Neurosurgery at Stanford and the New York Times bestselling author of "Into the Magic Shop: A Neurosurgeon's Quest to Discover the Mysteries of the Brain and the Secrets of the Heart" that has been translated into 22 languages. Dr. Doty also is an inventor with multiple patents and is a well-known entrepreneur who at one-time was the CEO of Accuray, a company that went public in 2007 with a valuation of \$1.3B. Amazingly, having lost essentially every penny he had in the dot com bust, he gave all the stock he had in Accuray away to live up to charitable commitments. He ultimately gave over \$30M to charity when he was effectively bankrupt. He remains on the advisory board or the board of directors of a number of non-profits and until recently was the chairman of the Dalai Lama Foundation. Dr. Doty's work has been highlighted in newspapers and magazine throughout the world. -- Immanuel Joseph

The Interview

IJ: I wanted to start with something that is on top of everyone's mind here in America, and that is that how divisive this election cycle has been and how much of emotion has gone around the election of our current president elect. From the compassion perspective, it is difficult to come to terms with the divisiveness. What is your take on that?

Dr. JD: I think the challenge is to understand the mindset of the people who elected Donald Trump. You have to feel compassion for those people who have, I believe, been misled by the fact that they have these fears, by the fact that they have had the American dream taken from them, not only by Republicans but also by the Democrats. And then of course you have a Republican Party that has been hijacked by the tea party and evangelical Christians who somehow think that there is no place for compromise in political narrative, but that's the only democracy works. It is not that I take everything, but that is how they react, and that has in part created this divisiveness, and look there's plenty of blame on part of the Democrats too. So I think we are just in a particular time. But I feel for those who carry fear in their hearts, fear toward others, their own insecurities. I maintain love for those people in a sense that I hope whatever has caused that suffering, is alleviated and if I can help do that I will try to do so. It certainly doesn't help me or anyone, and it hasn't in the history of human society, to fight hate with hate. It just doesn't work. All you can do is embrace everyone with love and be non-judgmental, because when you can be non-judgmental that allows for debate, for conversation. If you turn everyone off who opposes your viewpoint, then basically you cannot talk to anyone except people who

agree with you. So I always keep the door open. I am happy to talk to anyone. If we can sit down, and I have experienced this in my own life, with someone who you may completely disagree with, invariably you find common ground. David DeSteno at Northwestern University has done a lot of work on showing how you can breakdown barriers between people with differences. As an example, everyone has children, everyone wants their children to succeed in life. And once you say, I see this person has the same goals for their children, they want to see their kids happy, they may then look at what is happening and find that ultimately we all want the same thing. In fact, the reality is most people in America are in the middle. These two extremes probably make up 10% on each side and those individuals are the ones that create much of the havoc in the world.

IJ: I want to congratulate you on your book, Into the Magic Shop. It's amazing that it is being translated into so many languages. There is also a great deal of discussion about your 'Alphabet of the Heart' that you mention in the book. This is another way you have found to provoke conversations around compassion. What is the feedback you are getting from people? How has your book impacted them and their sense of compassion?

Dr. JD: The Alphabet of the Heart was created as a mnemonic for students who were about to begin medical school as part of a lecture for what is called the "White Coat Ceremony". It was meant to give them a tool to keep them centered both as physicians and as human beings. It was created after a period of my own self-reflection on my own journey to that point and those critical aspects of my journey that allowed me to be present today and summarized all that I had learned. Something that also could be used very easily by somebody to potentially keep them centered and present by this type of self-reflection. So what I came up with was this alphabet of the heart that begins with the letter C and ends with L. The talk received a standing ovation. I was quite overwhelmed as this was my alma mater.

A few months later, I received an email from a woman and she said. "I am the spiritual director of the largest homeless shelter in the United States. A person of faith and I was burned out from the job. As a result, I resigned from the job I loved. On my last day of work, someone shared with me your talk, and the Alphabet that you spoke of had such a profound effect on me that it gave me the strength to return to work". It was very moving". Again another few months passed and I got another email from her, and she said, "I started using this Alphabet with some of our clients and its really had a powerful effect. We are now doing among our clients regularly." Again another few months passed and she sent me another email. She says, "My friend has a daughter who makes beads. I was telling her and her mother about the Alphabet of the Heart and on her own this 9 year old girl created a set of what she called Compassion Beads based on the 10 letters in the Alphabet of the Heart with each letter represented by a wooden bead . As you know beads are present in every religion, for prayer, to decrease anxiety and worry. The little girl added an extra gold bead to represent the Golden Rule. In her email she asked me if they could sell the "Compassion Beads" to raise funds for the shelter. Of course, I said, yes. And it just started from there. I ended up going to shelter which was located in San Antonio and touring the homeless shelter and giving what was basically a sermon on compassion in the nearby church even though I am an atheist. From there she created a wonderful video in which she discusses the power of the Alphabet to inspire compassion but more importantly how one's intention through repetition creates compassion super neural highways.

Recently, a surgical colleague who was on a medical mission in Nicaragua sent me a

photograph of a piece of paper taped above the sink where you wash your hands before surgery and, amazingly, handwritten on it was the Alphabet of the Heart. It shows you that you never know how one action you've taken will manifest.

IJ: One of the most powerful moments for me in 'Into the Magic Shop', is where you face the option to retain your financial wealth instead of giving it away as you had originally committed to. You chose to stick to your commitment to give away the bulk of your wealth. If only more of us could practice that kind of sharing, focusing on needs rather than wants, the world could be a vastly better place. How can a common man practice that kind of generosity and compassion as you have demonstrated?

Dr. JD: Well, I have to say retrospectively I am not sure if it was completely the best decision, because I probably overall would have had the same impact if I had given less or more thoughtfully had given. If I had given less, I would not have to be practicing as a neurosurgeon, which pays my bills, and that might have given me an opportunity to spend more time focused on my compassion work. Don't get me wrong, being a neurosurgeon is an incredibly gratifying job and fundamentally it is also practicing compassion. But as a neurosurgeon I treat one person at a time. The work I do related to compassion can have an impact on potentially on thousands of people.

Now a counter argument to that is, 'Dr. Doty, you live in Silicon Valley, you live in a really nice house. Why don't you just sell your house and you could live completely downsized?' But I choose not to do that. I don't think you have to live as a pauper to be good or do good. That somehow living on the street makes you magically better or the work you do more important or effective. I do respect that argument. Personally, I spend large percentage spreading the message of the power of compassion. While it doesn't compensate me monetarily, it compensates me in some many more ways. That said, I do need to pay a mortgage, send children to college, so I must still practice my profession. In theory all of us can give massive amounts and live in poverty, but I don't believe that that is the best solution either. In addition to the time I spend in volunteering my time, I allocate a significant portion of my income as well to charitable causes.

IJ: Looking at the numbers, the average American, especially the wealthiest Americans, give a very small amount of their income for charity. What can change? How can people practice giving more more compassionately?

Dr. JD: I am not sure if it can change. Certainly we would all like it to change. It's hard to imagine somebody needs a billion or several dollars- what it is they need a billion dollars for? Unfortunately, many of these individuals see the accumulation of wealth and "things" as a scorecard which they can compare themselves to others, sadly. There are two issues. One is that it requires a certain type of personality to acquire a billion dollars, where you have your own interest above everyone else's. These are very interested in money and they are often highly competitive and at times ruthless people. It is horribly unfortunate. The second thing is people who have money, hold on to it and wish to acquire more instead of saying I have enough now every action I do it to give it to others to improve their lives. As an example, I know a multi-billionaire, who has 15 homes around the world, and spent 17 million dollars to install TVs on his ceiling for his house in Beverly hills. There's only 3 or 4 people in his family and he has an entourage of thirty or forty people to do all these things for them. What do you need that for? Why would you even complicate your life that way? Sadly, I believe it is showing everyone how powerful you are and what you can do out of a feeling of emptiness. Unfortunately, these

actions do not translate into kindness or of being of service to others. These people live in a bubble with a distorted view of the world. Because you see they are not living in the world where you and I live, and look, we are in a very privileged position. They have no clue what it is like for the average family of four in the United States, who live on \$45,000 or so per year. For the billionaires it could easily be a night out drinking, or they could go to Vegas and drop a million or two. Look at how the average person lives. For them to take their family out for a movie and a nice restaurant for dinner, that could only happen once a week or may be once a month. They are not driving new cars. This is how the majority of Americans live. They don't even have any significant amount of money in their retirement plan or enough to support themselves if they couldn't work for even a brief period of time. And yet those who are rich have this immense amount of wealth, that is so immense that this subset of people will go and throw it around and waste it. And these people are not even thinking about others. It is a completely a different world. They are making statements. I don't hold it against them, if they earn their money honorably. But it saddens me, because these are statements of emptiness. As I say in my own book, I was living in a penthouse, driving a Ferrari, had multiple expensive cars, I was dating beautiful women, but every day I would wake up empty and unhappy because when there is no barrier to having everything, everything means nothing. The only thing that can give you worth is to be of service to another and work to make their lives better. It is this fundamental truth that I have found on my own journey. Ultimately that is what made me give everything away. I don't want to give the impression that I am a saint or that I am somebody particularly special. It's just that my own life experiences have been such that when I am of service to others it makes me happier and I don't wake up with an emptiness inside, and a fundamental deep unhappiness. These people run around so much trying to buy the next experience or the next car, the next house, thinking that it's somehow going to fill them and each time they find that it doesn't. When you have everything, you have nothing.

IJ: Personally, one of the most poignant parts of the book for me, was on where with the loss of physical wealth, your 'friends' and 'extra-privileges' disappear overnight. Yet, when I read your book, I see no anger or hate- just plain acceptance. In fact, acceptance seems to be a recurring theme in the book. Could you share more about acceptance and we can practice acceptance in everyday living?

Dr. JD: If you look at the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn and others, we know all of us have thoughts going along in our head and many of them are hypercritical of ourselves. Also when bad events happen to us, we often times focus on them and have anger or regret. But none of it ever helps us. As the Dalai Lama says, if you can't change the past there is no reason to dwell on that, and if you can't change the future there is no reason to dwell on that either. It is a statement to live in the present. It is this understanding that allowed me to appreciate the opportunity I had. Very few people have had the opportunities that I have had, whether to become a neurosurgeon and serve in that capacity, to be very wealthy, to have the access to buy essentially anything I wanted. And honestly, while living that experience there were many aspects that I enjoyed. It was wonderful. And believe me it is nice to drive your car up to the tarmac and have a private jet waiting. You don't have to go through TSA. You end up saving hours of time. And it's also great to walk into a restaurant and have the owner or the chef walk up to you and say, 'Here's your seat Jim. It's wonderful to see you again.' Or to go into a store and them say, 'Ah Dr. Doty. I will bring the tailor down and we can measure you for a custom suit'. I mean, that's great. But the key is not to get lost in that, to deeply appreciate how fortunate you are to have that experience, but not to have the desire or attachment to the experience. You see, life has its ups and downs, and people are miserable when they have attachment to an outcome. If one can practice

equanimity, where you have this consistency of mental state, where you appreciate the moment, and the highs are wonderful and it's great to be there, if you attain those experiences honorably and honestly, there is no problem enjoying those deeply. It is when those experiences are not there and you get lost somehow or have anger about the fact that they are not there anymore, or I feel that they should be there for you... this is this clinging, this is attachment. You can tell a person is not emotionally or spiritually evolved when they cling to things like this and the expense of living in and appreciating the moment. When you are down it's always only temporary. And yet suffering or being down are incredible opportunities. Cause you learn about yourself. You learn about other people. Its an incredible gift to garner wisdom from. And so even though I have experiences where I am down, where things have not worked out well, I also sit down as ask, 'What has happened here? What can I learn from this? Can it be done a different way? Is there something I have done that I should look into and try to understand about myself why this happened?' Those times actually, in terms of wisdom, I have learned much more frankly than everything flying around in a private jet.

IJ: CCARE at Stanford, which you founded, is at the cutting edge of research on the science behind compassion. What current updates can you share with us on science behind compassion?

Dr. JD: One of the things we are finding is that compassion has a significant genetic component. It appears, like happiness, probably 50% of our feeling of compassion is a manifestation of our genes and the other is a reflection of our environment. Also, when you engage in compassion with intention or mental practices or meditations to evoke compassion, these can result in an epigenetic phenomenon where there is a either a stimulation or repressive effective on the expression of certain genes. As an example, we know as a result of the works of Steve Cole and Barbara Fredrickson that these types of practices can decrease the expression of proteins associated with inflammation. And even short periods of meditation can have these similar effects. We are learning more about heart rate variability and how utilizing the same types of breathing or mental training practices can increase heart rate variability by and by doing so decrease one's risk of sudden cardiac death. We are learning more about the effect of these practices on the autonomic nervous system. As you know, subtitle of my book is 'A neurosurgeon's quest to discover the mysteries of the brain and the secrets of the heart'. The reason the heart is such a critical component is because there is actually a connection between the brain and the heart through the Vagus nerve, which is part of the autonomic nervous system. The vagus nerve has nerve fibers not only going to the heart muscle, but all the organs of the body. The communication between the two is bidirectional and these nervous impulses coming from the heart and other organs can have a huge impact on one's mental state. Meditation and reflection do have a huge positive physiologic effect on many people. A positive attitude affects one's heart and vital organs as does a negative attitude. We also know now that what we eat in the context of the microbiome in the gut has an effect on the mental state. Actually, I went on a long fast one time, cutting down and eating very limited amounts for three months, about 1000 calories a day, and I lost 70 pounds. I did that as a mental exercise, but the interesting thing about it was that it had a profound effect on my mental attitude and it was quite visible to my wife and children. What I realized was that eating processed foods and sugars really plays havoc on one's physiology and secondarily on our mental state. All of these are discoveries are tools to help us to improve ourselves and hopefully improve our relationships to others.

IJ: What other message would you like to share for readers of DailyGood?

Dr. JD: As I share in my book, following the time I spent with Ruth, my fundamental

circumstances did not change. My father was still an alcoholic, my mother was still chronically depressed, we were still in poverty. What did change was how I viewed the world and other people. I was no longer angry at my parents or my situation. I accepted it simply as the reality. When you change how you view the world and other people, the world changes how it views you. This is the fundamental issue of acceptance. So I had all of this anger and hostility because I was unhappy with my personal circumstance. I was unhappy with my father. I was unhappy with my mother. I was unhappy with the fact that we did not live in a nice house, that we did not have food to eat, that we did not drive a nice car. After that experience with Ruth, one of the things I learned was that it wasn't the world that was against me. It was simply a circumstance. Also my parents did the best they could at the time. I no longer blamed them. They had their own difficulties. They did not hate me, my father wasn't trying to hurt me by getting drunk or my mother attempting suicide. They had their own deep pain, and they did not have the tools that would allow them to overcome their own pain and suffering. So they used what was available to them. And sadly it was drugs and alcohol in this case with my father. He didn't have the tools to make him feel okay with himself nor did my mother. Their actions were about their inability to overcome their suffering not about me at all. This is where some many people get lost. They assume another's actions are about them or their inadequacies. After Ruth, I felt this immense pain and deep sorrow for my parents. As a result, I could embrace them with love instead of always having anger and hostility and blaming them for my ruined life. Because my life wasn't ruined. I thought it was ruined, but it wasn't. As Viktor Frankl mentions in 'Man's Search for Meaning'; in some ways this is all about the pause. Between the stimulus and the response is immense power to decide our own future. You see with my parent's behavior, my response, instead of thinking it through with knowledge and wisdom inside, I immediately got angry and upset. I wasn't using the pause to my best benefit. I was angry, holding a grudge, not practicing forgiveness. When you sit with that all the time, there's not one iota for that other person. You are not getting back at them, you are not doing anything. All you are doing is hurting yourself. When you can practice forgiveness, when you can have gratitude for your circumstance, you no longer cling or have attachment. All these things allow you to see the true nature of reality. When you have the true nature of reality, one, you are present and two, you cannot do anything but love. At the end, it is our capacity to love that is most important.