

## It Could Be Worse

by Michael Eselun

I imagine that the very last person to survive the end of the world as we now know it, will at some point turn around and say to no one there at all—"Damn! But I guess it could be worse!" It's a pretty darn universal coping strategy I find. And an effective one. It demands that we step back from our current circumstances and get a larger perspective. And it sort of insists that we muster some kind of gratitude for whatever we do have, slapping us into an "attitude of gratitude." In my work as a cancer chaplain, at the Simms/Mann-UCLA Center for Integrative Oncology, I would say that upwards of 90% of the folks I've seen over the years would make some form of this claim and take comfort in it-- "It could be worse." "I'm just so glad they caught the cancer early." "I'm just glad it hasn't metastasized." "At least I don't have to have radiation." "At least I'm 55 years old and have had a life... look at these kids who get cancer." "I'm glad it's me and not my children." Like I say, it's an effective tool.

I had a breast cancer patient, Margie. She's an energetic, feisty gal in her 70's with this bubbly spirit and a dry, slightly devilish sense of humor... someone my mom would call "a kick in the pants." Margie's also a bit of a busybody, flitting around the clinic with her IV stand in tow, chatting up the other patients. She's designated herself as my agent. "Michael, see that woman in the third chair over there? I think she really needs to talk to you." One day Margie opened with, "Michael, I'm a terrible person. I am! I USE all these people. Isn't that awful? I do. I look at all of them and what they're going through and think, 'I haven't got it so bad,' and it makes me grateful." Her tongue was firmly in her cheek in a way, but she was making a deadly serious point. There's a real truth in what she says.

It speaks to that part of us that is so aggravated to find ourselves the last person in an impossibly long line at the bank, supermarket or post office. And as soon as someone steps behind us in line, we feel better! We're no closer to getting our business done, but, "at least I'm not where YOU are!" Every time I turn around and look behind me, I feel better. Like it's some kind of Spiritual Ponzi Scheme! The thing about Ponzi schemes though is that someone has to lose. Someone has to be left holding the empty bag. And where does that leave us in our pursuit of a life lived with compassion at its core?

The other thing about the Spiritual Ponzi Scheme is that there is a prerequisite to buying in. And that is a firm belief in a hierarchy of suffering. A belief that, "I know who's

suffering the most here,” and so I will dole out my compassion accordingly. Here’s another place that can trip us up in our attempt to walk a compassionate path. Because while I might be filled with gratitude that I’m no longer the last in line, or at the bottom of the pyramid, I’ve also just created a barrier to experiencing an authentic compassion for others and for myself. I’m way too busy judging the line-up in the Suffering Sweepstakes and figuring out where I fit in.

And I do want to say a few words about compassion itself. Compassion, the word, at its Latin root, “com-pati” literally means WITH suffering. Not fix suffering, correct suffering, relieve suffering, judge suffering, or feel bad about the suffering... but to be with... to walk beside the one who is suffering. Not an easy thing. Virtually every religious tradition in the world places a very high value on the virtue of compassion. Why is it that compassion for others is seen as a virtue and yet compassion for self is somehow seen as a vice or moral weakness? We tend to harshly judge compassion for self and characterize it as “self pity.” Oh we don’t want that! (And I think we know the difference between one who may seem very attached or even addicted to a sense victimhood and uses that as a pathway to navigate life, and one who can honor the truth of, “Hey, I’m going through a rough time here!”.) I would ask, can we truly walk beside others in their suffering in an authentic way if we don’t know how to carry and walk beside our own?

I had been referred to Valerie by one of the infusion nurses on her first day of chemo. She’s in her mid 30’s, a working mom with a 4-year-old daughter, newly diagnosed with breast cancer. Valerie’s deepest grief, worse than the diagnosis, was hearing the news that she won’t be able to give birth to a second child—she and her husband had been trying to get pregnant again when she was diagnosed. She also grew weary of trying to keep spiritual scorecards... “I know, I should be grateful! I do have one healthy daughter and a wonderful husband and family, and I have good insurance— Look at all the people starving in Africa!” (Why is it that Africa always seems to be in the default position at the bottom of the Spiritual Ponzi Scheme Pyramid?) Valerie was even less patient as others tried to keep that scorecard for her. “Valerie, at least you have one child! Think how many people can’t have even one!” No one in her world was simply allowing her to have her grief and disappointment-- just be a witness to her loss. With Compassion.

There is a price we pay, individually and collectively, to live out our own life’s journey without sharing the pain of that journey as much as we would want to share our joys and pleasures. For one thing, we deny life around us from really knowing us, what it’s like to be us, keeping true intimacy at arm’s length. If only the last person in line at the post office, or the cancer patient, or the starving person in Africa is entitled to complain or to our compassion, what on earth would the rest of us talk about? Like Jane Wagner says, “I personally think we developed language because of our deep inner need to complain.” Of course I’m not advocating that we now all complain 24/7... all complaining, all the time (as if some of us don’t do that already!) But I am inviting us to reflect upon our capacity to honor each other’s journey, each other’s reality, including our own without judgment, or the need to place each circumstance on our Hierarchy of Suffering scale. And can we honor each reality in all its layers of complexity and contradiction?

A number of years ago I had a patient Lorne. Lorne was from Bakersfield, in and out of the hospital a dozen times over the course of a year. His wife Mary by his side each step of the way. These are older working class people away from home. There were several times Lorne came close to death's door, and I was summoned to his bedside. Then he would bounce back. But as it became clear Lorne hadn't much time left, Mary confided in me: "Michael I love my husband and I'm grateful to have him for another day, but every day he lingers in the hospital costs me more than \$100 for the motel, and I know I'm not supposed to care about that, but I have to. How am I going to pay for it? Does that make me a bad person to be worried about that?"

Like Mary, we all live in multiple realities at once. The image that comes to my mind is going into a Best Buy or some such place and you see this endless wall of TV screens for sale—each one tuned to a different show. I think our individual and communal lives are like that wall of TV screens. Each TV show has its reality, its context, its goals... whether it's a game show, a situation comedy, a drama, the news, a sports program or a National Geographic special. None is more legitimate or innately valid or valuable than another—they simply are the reality that they are, and yet no one show captures the entire reality of our lives in all their complexity. Perhaps the entire wall is the best image of that.

Yet through our participation in the Spiritual Ponzi Scheme and the Hierarchy of Suffering, we think we know which is most legitimate, most important, most worthy of our time, energy and compassion. The very part of us that might silently chastise Mary, if only for a moment, for worrying about money at a time like this. That is until we're slapped awake into another reality and find ourselves in another show!

I have a colleague Amanda, with whom I've worked on a few workshops. When I first worked with her, she had shared with me this revelation she had had with respect to her marriage of 30-some years. "Michael, we have a great marriage, but I have to say I've been so irritated for over 30 years about our carport. My husband has had it packed to the rafters with crap. I was so sick of looking at it, but always trying to tell myself, 'It just isn't important. Let it go.' So he surprised and had the carport covered with siding and turned into a garage, so I don't have to look at all the crap. You cannot believe the difference it has made in our marriage! It's just amazing!" Six months later, I worked with Amanda on another conference. I found out her home and garage had been swallowed up by a brush fire. Gone. Where's the irritant now? Different TV show.

I spoke earlier about Africa, at the bottom of the pyramid. A number of years ago, my husband Scott and I made a trip to South Africa and Zambia. We went to a small village in Zambia of about 3000 people situated on a gentle hillside. Everyone lived in mud huts, no electricity or running water. There was a pump at the bottom of the hill, to which all the villagers trudged many times a day with buckets in hand. And yet there were geraniums planted in bleach bottles cut in half to frame the doorways of the huts. There

were dogs and cats nurtured as pets. In the midst of what we would consider impoverishment, there was a generosity of spirit that could create room for extraneous beauty and the love of animals. And a humbling hospitality for this wealthy American who was so busy taking video that he didn't notice the bucket of water at his feet before he kicked it over. "Oh please, can I go down the hill and pump some more water for you." Our host wouldn't hear of it. He only smiled and laughed. "You are our guest!" I certainly don't mean to assert that there's no suffering there, so we don't need to concern ourselves. As if we're off the moral hook for our comparative wealth and consumption of the earth's resources.

Could it be, that in some ways, the "Zambian Village" show may be simpler or more comprehensible-- offer more clarity perhaps than "The-Carport-Is-Driving-Me-Crazy" show? Is it possible that in some ways the suffering may be less? Priorities and action plans must become crystal clear when the goal of the show is: get through the day without dying. I will say that when I left that village, I left not with such gratitude for what I have, but longing for some of what they have. For what? Acceptance of what is? Unencumbered hospitality? Freely given joy and smiles? A clear sense of place in one's community?

Perhaps it's best not to judge the TV show. The Buddhists offer the concept of "beginner's mind"—to come to each situation, each encounter, empty... "I know nothing." As a pathway to being more fully present, available to discovery. Perhaps it's best to come to each TV show we watch, and each one in which we find ourselves, with beginner's mind. Particularly if I'm committed to an inclusive kind of spirituality that holds compassion at its center. What if suffering is suffering, the flavor of that suffering just depends on the show?

I would suggest that when a 2-year-old drops her ice cream cone and cries over the loss, that that suffering is a real as for us receiving a cancer diagnosis. We can admonish her with judgement and say, "Don't cry! It's just an ice cream. I'll get you another one." But to her, "I wanted THAT ice cream! And I feel ashamed and foolish for being reckless with something so precious. And I don't have the words for all that so I'll just wail."

A few years back, before Scott retired, he was travelling a lot for his work. In order to save money on taxis and airport parking, I would make many runs to and from LAX. I need to tell you that Scott loves to wrap presents—if he could've made a decent living wrapping presents he would have done that. When we go on our travels and I look for some artifact or souvenir to take home, Scott looks for wrapping paper. It is truly an event to open a gift from Scott. It's part of how he expresses his creativity and love.

So late one Sunday night in December I headed down to LAX to pick up Scott—a flight from Chicago that was already many hours late. Tomorrow, Monday was to be the holiday party at work at which he would present the gifts he'd carefully chosen for his staff.

When in Chicago, he went to one of his favorite stores to buy some exquisite wrapping paper for the gifts. He was sitting for hours on end at O'Hare, and when his flight was finally called, he got up to discover that the shopping bag full of wrapping paper that he'd set down next to him was gone. Stolen. Frantic, he asked the woman sitting across from him if she'd seen anyone take the bag. "Well yes I did, but I didn't think a MAN would be travelling with wrapping paper!" she sniffed. So to compound the loss, he got a sexist/homophobic slur in the bargain.

So I picked him up about midnight. Needless to say he was a wreck. (He had one good nerve left, and I had two.) Out of a loving (but not truly compassionate) desire to fix the situation, I suggested, "Well Honey, maybe we could go to the 24 hour Rite-Aid and find some paper." Oh the look he gave me! To suggest such a thing would be like... "Well, the Queen of England is coming to dinner, but the oven broke today, so why don't you go make a run to McDonalds and pick something up?" It just would NOT do. And there is a part of me that wants to play the chaplain card, without remotely being a chaplain. "SCOTT! It's wrapping paper! It's not cancer! Can I tell you about the case I had on Friday? Let's get a grip!"

But the truth is, he was suffering. His suffering was very real. And he was experiencing genuine loss. The once-a-year opportunity for him to show his staff in his own inimitably creative way, how much he appreciated them, was stolen from him. And I could judge it... any of us could, easily. Or in that moment we could choose to come sit beside the suffering. Not judge the TV show. You can't compare the cancer show to the Scott show in that moment. We do have a choice to make.

So can I be fully present in my own TV show of this moment, whatever it is... maybe it's the "Damn-I-Spilled-Bleach-On-My-Favorite-Pants" show or maybe it's the "My-Mom-Has-Lung-Cancer" show? But without judgement? Without the need to compare for validity or worthiness of compassion? All the while still nurturing gratitude for what I have and knowing... conscious that there are other shows going on at the same time... And I'm in some of them-- simultaneously... like Mary: lost in the "My-Husband's-Dying" show, and in the "How-Will-I-Pay-My-VISA-Bill" show. And in some shows, I don't make an appearance-- ever... foreign territory. Maybe part of my spiritual journey is to watch as many shows as possible with beginner's mind. Maybe then I can inch closer to truer kind of compassion, a more inclusive kind of spirituality.

And if not... well, it could be worse