

## The Magic of Compassion Science

by Janis Daddona

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□Have you ever sat down with your doctor and talked about your brain—heart to heart? Neither have I. But that’s exactly what happened in our Forest Call with Dr. James Doty.

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□Apparently he is capable of living several lives simultaneously. Among other things

□He is a neurosurgeon with top ratings from the Consumer Research Council of America.

□He is the founder and Clinical Director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE) at Stanford University.

□He is an inventor of surgical instruments and an entrepreneur.

□He is a philanthropist whose gifts support global health and peace initiatives as well as major universities.

□He also serves on numerous boards and as an advisor to nonprofit organizations as diverse as the Association of Medical Ethics and the Council for a Parliament of the Worlds Religions.

□But he is no stranger to struggle. He served as a caregiver in a family whose mother was an invalid and father suffered from alcoholism. They were on public assistance all that time. As he said, “At that age you feel like a leaf being blown by an ill wind.” He witnessed the indifference of those with money and influence, but also the compassion and generosity of those with nothing, and it made an impact. At age 13 he wandered into a magic store and had a serendipitous conversation with the mother of the owner who was there. She took a tender interest in him and said, “If you come back every day for six weeks, I’ll teach you something.” He did. And what he learned was the practice of mindfulness, envisioning, positive thinking, and making his choices his own and no one else’s. The lessons were transformational. Magic indeed! It put him on an amazing path that defied the odds and led him to medical school, neurosurgery, and a persistent curiosity about the power of compassion and neuroplasticity. What he learned is that the brain has an amazing capacity to grow in compassion. That in turn plays a huge role in our physical and psychological health. We benefit ourselves and others when we practice it.

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□The establishment of CCARE came about with some bit of magic as well. Dr. Doty kept urging his colleagues to bring this research into their department until one colleague gave in and agreed to do so. As reinforcement of the idea, they thought it might be helpful to

ask the Dalai Lama to come and speak at Stanford on the subject of compassion. His Holiness was pleased to accept the invitation. Upon their first meeting, Dr. Doty explained his vision for the research to him. The Dalai Lama became so enthused that, on the spot, he directed the first significant personal donation to a non-Tibetan enterprise. Two other large donations followed, and with that—and some advocating with the dean of the medical school—the Center was established.

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□Dr. Doty captivated all of us with his wisdom and insights, based on research as well as personal experience. This posting could go on for miles, so let me see if I can condense this down to the deeply heartfelt gems he expressed during our conversation and urge you to make time to listen to the 70 minute audio. Trust me, you have to experience it first hand.

□“While science and technology offer great hope to cure various ills, the cures I have seen are equally associated with the art of medicine. There is no science or technology that will hold or comfort a child in pain or comfort the dying. It is human touch and connection that is equally if not more powerful than all the science and technology in the world.”

□The US suffers an epidemic of depression and loneliness. This is due to our money-conscious, do-it-yourself nature which creates a fear of vulnerability. We wear a mask of invincibility which cuts us off from our feelings, and authentic human connection dissolves. We get little nurturing, and so we isolate. Loneliness sets in. This creates more stress, depression, and less productivity. We become self-absorbed and mindless of what benefits we do enjoy. Ultimately this makes us less compassionate. However, in Third World countries, survival depends on every individual in the group. This in turn makes everyone, regardless of talents or idiosyncrasies, immensely valuable. They have a sense of worth and connectedness, and so they are far less vulnerable to our psychological deficits.

□Transformation is an inward journey, and meditation and mindfulness help in that process. It should then take us to the next level, transcendence. Transcendence takes us out of ourselves and compels us to connect with others for a higher good. If used improperly, transformation practices can lead to more isolation and barriers. But when married with wisdom and compassion they accomplish what they were originally intended to do. When we reach out to another, one plus one no longer equals 2; it equals infinity. Now there’s some mathematical magic.

□Compassion fatigue is really empathy in overdrive. With all the suffering in the world, we sometimes get caught up in it and feel overwhelmed. In some cases we burnout; in others we shield ourselves so thoroughly from it as to lose our compassion entirely. But this observation reminded me of something I learned in my sangha: being non-attached and being indifferent are not the same thing. So the healthy middle road, Dr. Doty said, is to assess the situation, know what we can reasonably do in the moment, do it, and be at peace with the effort and result. He reminded us of other compassion leaders who have to use this approach, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. They have the ability to do two things very well that we should learn: they maintain perspective and a healthy sense of humor! It is also vital to practice self-compassion; we are no less worthy of it than another. If we don’t take care of ourselves, we cannot take care of others.

□His own practice of mindfulness comes from a mnemonic device he recites daily: C=Compassion, D=Dignity, E=Equanimity, F=Forgiveness, G=Gratitude, H=Humility, I=Integrity, J=Justice, K=Kindness, and L=Love.

□He noted that there are other leaders in this field. They include Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin- Madison, Tania Singer of the Max Planck Institute in Germany, and Stephanie Brown at Stonybrook University.

□When asked what his vision was for his work, he excitedly told us of an upcoming event. He is mounting a World Compassion Festival in 2015—the year of the Dali Lama’s 80th birthday, and he has already agreed to attend. Its purpose is to bring youth together in service, because when we do that, they step up to the plate and incorporate it into their lives. That’s when real, global change can happen. He is working with Karen Armstrong to hold it in 100 of the Compassionate Cities she is developing around the world. It will include music and speakers. I’d suggest checking back at the CCARE website for more information as the date approaches.

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□Finally one shout out of my own. Dr. Doty is on the advisory board of Super Better Labs. You have to check this out! It is wonderful.

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□I followed up with him after our call to ask the question that time did not allow, “What can we do to support you and your work?” He kindly responded with this:

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□“My greatest wish is that by each of our actions, we create a "meme" of compassion that permeates our world and by doing so decreases suffering. That instead of reacting to negative behavior by, for example, spending billions on weapons to destroy lives, we are proactive and spend billions to improve lives.

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□Each of us has the ability regardless of our wealth or stature in this world to do an act every day that will relieve another’s suffering and tell them they are valued and you recognize their dignity.

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□Those actions above are what will offer the greatest support of my work.”

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□So it turns out there really is a magic pill for all our problems. Being compassionate improves not only the health and wellbeing of others, but our own as well. And it’s just what the doctor ordered.