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A hospice social work supervisee recently shared with me the story of a young man in his mid-twenties who was dying of cancer. He had been battling the illness for several years. At first he met his fate with great courage, leaving unexplored no possible treatment option. His days were filled with reading about the illness and visiting different doctors and healers. But with the passing months, the cancer ravaged more and more of his body, and he could no longer leave his home. The increasing isolation he suffered was almost as painful to him as the physical symptoms he was experiencing. Soon he could not leave his room or his bed. His parents and siblings were having great difficulty coming to terms with the loss of their son and brother. Whenever the social worker entered their home his parents and siblings clamored for her attention, sometimes leaving the young man alone in his room.

When she finally made her way to his room, the dying man blurted out in anger: "Can't my parents and sisters see that my pain is greater than theirs? I am dying. I am the one who is hurting. I am the one who deserves attention!"

I found this story to be heart breaking. My first reaction to it was actually visual. I saw in my mind a mother bird feeding its young in the nest, with all the young birds craning their necks in order to be fed first, all worried that there will not be enough food to spread around. The clinical intervention in this case was of course to find a way to have both the patient and his family hear each other's pain, to understand that they were in this emotional pit together. When they were able to acknowledge the other's pain and need for contact, some of the deep isolation and despair lessened. The truism "a grief shared is halved" actually played out in this instance.

Pain has a way of limiting our vision and curtailing our purview. When we hurt we often become highly focused on our own "insides," checking and rechecking into the state of our wounded selves. We close down when we feel deprivation. This internal focus on pain can lead us to lose sight of those around us.

We humans all too often engage in "comparative suffering shopping," with the unspoken implication that suffering and pain can be measured and quantified. Recently the mother of the 17 year boy who killed eight people at a shopping mall in Omaha, Nebraska made the following astounding statement in which she claimed to be hurting more than the victim's families, since she was grieving for so many people – the victims, their friends, and the community at large. "My pain is a billion times greater than any of them."

Albert Einstein spoke to this dilemma in the following statement:

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe... He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest -- a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us... Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

I love Einstein's phrase "optical delusion of consciousness," and his likening it to a prison. While it is natural and fully human to at first focus on our own dilemmas, wounds and painful realities, the work of renewal is to use our pain to connect to others and "widen our circles of compassion." Grief hurts, and it often hurts for a long time – often longer than we might expect or certainly want. But ultimately the way out of pain and despair is by looking outside of ourselves –in the direction of other people, causes and beliefs. It is there where meaning resides and is recaptured.

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