

Don't Pity Me! Thinking Differently about Vulnerability and Suffering

Several years ago, I was teaching a child who was going through a very difficult time. He had been blamed for his mum's suicide and had also been moved from his foster carers. I needed to talk about his level of vulnerability and relate his behaviours to the nature of the adversities he was suffering. It was in his interest to make my case as strongly as possible by going into his experiences in detail, but how could I ask his permission or even inform him of my plans? Talking to him about his life at that point was likely to make him very anxious. Rather than approach him directly, I asked an older young person who was care experienced but in a much more stable place in life: "When you were younger and things were difficult and you needed support, would you have wanted me to go into detail about the things that were happening to you?"

This older teenager paused and answered with just one word: "No."

His answer was hardly surprising, and yet in Scotland it has taken a nationwide review of care to highlight, among many other things, the importance of how we communicate. *The Promise*, published in 2020, states:

Care experienced children and adults have said language needs to change to normalise their lives and shift away from professional speak. The language of care is stigmatising for children. Scotland must not use terms like 'placement' and 'contact' to talk about a child's home and spending time with their family. Professionalised language for some members of the workforce helps them to detach in order to deal with what can be emotionally difficult work.¹

We may feel compelled to talk about a young person by referring to their level of need. We share intimate details about a child's life in order to *fight in their corner* and access precious resources. We struggle to find words to describe the shocking impact of abuse and use labels to place a young person on an imaginary scale of need. But the use of words like *vulnerability* and *suffering* raise important questions. Who wants to be defined by their neediness or victimhood? Suffering can stand out as a mark of weakness: a person who is subject, against their will, to pain or emotion and the things that cause them. We respond by substituting vulnerability for being at risk. But simply substituting one word for another cannot bring about social justice or change our tendency to stereotype others whom we perceive as different.

The first step in finding a path through this minefield might be considering exactly what we mean when we use some of these terms. If we limit our discussion of vulnerability to relationships, it might be helpful to identify some aspects that are developmental and others that are experiential, also recognising that development and experience interact. At every stage in life, but especially in childhood, we are dependent on our experience of another person's sensitive care and loving interest in us. At the same time, if I am deprived of that significant and loving relationship at one of those critical times, it may be

hard to recover my capacity to believe that the world is benevolent and others can be trusted.

The suffering that comes from being maltreated arises from that same loss of meaning and coherence. It drops a *why* question into life: Why would someone not take care of me, when I was dependent on them? Why would someone harm me? The harm that is undeserved causes us to question a person's intention rather than live in the security of a trusted relationship. However, suffering can also be a sign of a healthy relationship. Suffering can be the result of what is done to us against our will, but suffering can also be the result of the vulnerability that comes when we love. It is the nature of love to suffer when the object of love suffers.² This other kind of suffering is voluntary, expresses solidarity, and may even help restore meaning.

When trust, implicit in a healthy relationship, has been abused, it makes sense that the empathy of another might be experienced as a threat. I imagine that for some children opening up their world to another person may feel like they are being overpowered and losing control of the one thing that is theirs to give. Is it possible that some of the discomfort associated with using words like vulnerability and suffering comes from this fear of being understood and known by another?

In addition, for many there is a zeitgeist, a belief that unless you have experiences exactly like mine, you cannot understand me or speak on my behalf. Some victims claim to speak with unique authority based purely on their experience of being wronged.³ But if my inner life is only accessible to me, the role of empathy in relationships seems limited. I may feel invulnerable and self-sufficient in my seclusive subjectivity, but I will cut myself off from those who love me.

Empathy can be defined as an affective response that stems from the apprehension of another's emotional state and is similar to what the other person is feeling.⁴ The only way to lessen the stigma that is real for so many young people who are care experienced is to show that our need for relationship and our tendency to lose meaning in adversity are part of our shared human condition. It is the expression of empathy that allows that connection between two humans who may have vastly different life experiences. Empathy should leave room for mystery and wonder in a relationship, like the knowing of a mother who marvels and delights in her newborn. There is always more to discover and share; it should never be about power or control.

Empathy doesn't come without risks, not least the risk that it might be confused with pity. If I am too certain of my own thinking and fail to recognise my limitations to know you completely, I may think of your difference as something inferior and contemptible; you become an object of pity. At the same time, empathy is a wonderful gift that can restore and strengthen relationships. I recently met with a young person who was becoming increasingly involved in criminality; although I had known him for many years, I was disappointed and frustrated. The young person wanted me to listen to his music, and as he talked about his playlists, he began to share something of his outlook on life.

As I listened, I could imagine what it is like to be a teenager struggling to get motivated in the morning or wanting to escape from the pressures of school life. Instead of feeling threatened or disappointed, listening to him and understanding where he was coming from moved me to compassion. My attitude toward him softened; it felt like we had re-connected.

Young people long for authenticity in their relationships; they want to know that our altruism is truly part of who we are to the extent that it costs us something.⁶ I wonder if you have been asked, like me: “How much do you get paid for doing this?” Can we truly act compassionately without it also being personal? Studies of young people who stand out as moral exemplars are not those who can rationalise what they do, but rather young people who talk about their lives as if their identity is fused to their moral actions. One study found that adolescents involved in charitable work integrated concern for others into their life narratives. Their awareness of the suffering of others affected how they talked about their future goals.⁷ Perhaps we can learn from the example of these young people.

It takes an unusual commitment to be compassionate toward others, especially when they appear resistant to our efforts to build a relationship. When a young person’s life history and behaviours make us aware of our own vulnerability, we almost certainly will become detached, protecting ourselves rather than empathising and being there for a young person.

Here are the words of one therapist:

The stance I strive to take with children and young people of open and engaged, non-defensive makes me vulnerable to rejection and I know this, and I choose this. In personal relationships (and some professional relationships) I can also choose to be vulnerable with people I trust, feel safe with, and want or need to share my feelings of sadness or hurt or anxiety. I am unlikely to do this with adults who are not prepared to likewise share.

It wasn’t always like this for me. There was a lot of control and conditionality in my experience of being parented. Also, fortunately, a lot of joy. In order to become a therapist (and I think a more connected partner and mum) my head and heart had to learn to be vulnerable, to ask for help, not to have to be always in control. That was a roller coaster of a journey of what felt like disintegration—who am I? And reintegration—I know who I am!

Labelling a person as vulnerable can make it harder for us to allow them some agency in their recovery. I am convinced that one reason so many interventions fail is that we rush in to do work with a young person; we fact find and try to fix the problem. We give them little time to consider what is being offered. We assume that our agenda and our purposes give us the right to expect something back. I was recently in a meeting and one professional commented, “He is not making use of the supports we are offering him.”

My next comment didn’t seem to help: “He told me that he doesn’t trust us. He doesn’t believe we care.”

But no one seemed interested in understanding why this was hard for the young person. Not being trusted made us feel vulnerable.

The result is that we painted a picture of a young person who could not be helped and who would be better served somewhere else. It is sad when our failure to accept our own disappointments and vulnerability, becomes a pathway for excluding young people when they most need to know they belong.

I remember being asked to work with a young person who was extremely anxious and fearful. Rachel rarely initiated any conversation and would never venture out of the support base in school. My attitude in approaching her was: “I need to give her a choice, because I haven’t earned the right to come into her world and expect her to trust me or accept my help.” I spent many visits just sitting in the support base talking to other young people. Rachel didn’t acknowledge my presence in the room until one day, with just the hint of a smile on her face, she asked, “So who are you here for anyway?”

“Now you are asking, is it okay if I do some work with you?” (I am so glad she finally asked, because I think some of the other teachers were beginning to wonder what I was doing there.) I have no doubt Rachel was watching me in those weeks; eventually her curiosity overcame her fear. Accepting that I had no control over her choice and that she could easily have rejected my offer of help, wasn’t easy. Giving her some agency, even a minute amount, was more important than my agenda.

A note of caution: Recognising a young person’s agency doesn’t mean that we treat them as adults. Inviting a young person to sit in a meeting of professionals might look like a good idea, but it rarely seems to be reassuring or empowering. How we encourage young people to believe that they can bring about change in their lives needs a more developmental approach. Agency is nurtured in sensitive and well-attuned relationships, not by questions like: “So David, what do you think would help your anger?” Expecting children to be able to think about their lives and make adult-like decisions must be exasperating. I wonder if we don’t expect children to grow up too quickly by offering them so many adult-like choices and decisions. The world as we present it to them must seem full of uncertainty and jeopardy.

In the television version of *Station Eleven* by Emily St John Mandel, there is a hold-your-breath scene. A kind stranger, Jeevan, has been helping a young girl, Kirsten, find her parents. Jeevan knows that their world is about to change; a deadly flu pandemic is poised to devastate their city and beyond. Kirsten senses something is wrong but is unable to contact her parents. Although concerned for her safety, Jeevan also struggles to come to terms with a new reality. He asks Kirsten to make a choice knowing she can’t possibly understand the risks or what is about to happen.

Jeevan: “We can’t reach anyone who even knows you exist. If you want to go back to your house, we’ll call a cab. Or we can spend the night at my brother’s apartment. I’m

not allowed to say you have to, because that's kidnapping. People should choose what they want."

Kirsten: "I'm eight."

However, we need to recognise that for some young people, attendance at a meeting about their life and future is really important. As one adult who is care experienced reflected: "It was terribly, terribly important to me that I personally attend every court hearing and every case meeting because this was MY LIFE."

The solution must involve listening to young people as individuals and not holding to procedures as if there is only one rule for all. It is about recognising who children know and trust and keeping the child connected and supported to understand those important decisions through those same adults.

In this world where often it seems compassion costs so little, it might be helpful to think of empathy in terms what US journalist Isabel Wilkerson calls *the practice of radical empathy*: "...putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens up your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it."⁸

I like the emphasis this definition places on the work we need to do in order to listen with humility, but when it comes to trying to imagine how I would feel if I were in someone else's shoes, I think there is a role for "cognitive sympathy."⁹ It is helpful to imagine what life feels like for someone else, even if I have to reach back a few years to remember how important music is to a teenager. As I look back, I consider it a privilege that this young person was willing to share something so meaningful to him.

If empathy is the bridge that allows us to show compassion, then it is important we recognise it is also our role to understand how a young person might perceive our effort to reach out to them. Again, in the words of a therapist:

Safe to be sad is something that children who have experienced relational harm are often understandably unable or unwilling to do due to lack of empathy in the past. Indeed being met with empathy for their feelings can be experienced as weird, scary, manipulative, patronising, ingenuine. I am often met with: "Don't patronise me," "You're weird," "I hate you," "It's just a job." Some kids, particularly teenagers, are extremely resistant to empathy. I have to *measure* how much empathy a particular child can accept/tolerate. If I get it wrong then I have to accept resistance, take responsibility for my mistake (usually trying to go too fast!) apologise and work to repair the relationship.

When we speak of vulnerability and suffering, we need to respect the complexity that defines us as human beings. Dependency is not necessarily a sign of weakness, and we should be careful that descriptors don't become totalising or exhaustive labels.³ As one care-experienced person told me: "Being vulnerable now is not a death sentence to be vulnerable forever." Neither should we abandon empathy as a way of connecting with others whose experiences are very different. Our efforts to understand others may feel intrusive and overpowering, but our goal should be to share meaning, express solidarity, and gently lead a young person toward their own agency. Coming to accept our tendency to feel vulnerable may also be the key to being able to empathise even while a young person is learning to trust us.

Keeping it Real: Questions for reflection

How do I protect the dignity of a child when I talk about them? Does it help to think about my own son or daughter, niece or nephew? How would I want others to hear about them?

When I speak about a child's level of need, vulnerability, or risk, what exactly am I trying to convince others of?

Why do I feel the need to share with others the intimate details of a young person's life? Is it partly about my own shock or discomfort with their behaviour and the harm done to them?

Have I become insensitive to how a young person would feel about these details being shared with others, sometimes strangers? Am I still able to see the person in the midst of the complexity of their situation?

If I need to communicate to others how a relationship, for example, meeting with a family member, may be causing distress, can I do this without making it sound like the young person has a deficit or weakness, and without making the young person feel blamed?

Can I normalise what I am saying about a young person without being dismissive of the trauma they have experienced? For example, preface discussion about a specific child's need with: "All children need this kind of love and security and not least..."

When I describe a young person as vulnerable or at risk, what exactly do I mean? It may be more helpful to highlight the cause and effect nature of what I am seeing, rather than labelling a child.

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