

“It Could Be Worse”

A sermon by **Michael Eselun** (Michael@michaeseelun.com)

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I imagine that the very last person to survive the end of the world 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 forces us to step back and assess the situation from a larger perspective, getting out of our own narrow point-of-view for a moment. And it sorts of insists that we muster some kind of gratitude for what we do have. In my work as an oncology chaplain, 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.” “I’m glad it’s me and not my children.” Like I say, it’s an effective tool.

I had a patient recently, Margie. She’s in her seventies, breast cancer. She has an energetic, bubbly spirit and a dry, slightly devilish sense of humor... someone my mom would call “a kick in the pants.” Margie’s also 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 or post office that is simply not moving. And yet as the line grows longer behind us we feel increasingly gratified. 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. As if 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 an inclusive spirituality... in which we uphold “the inherent dignity and worth of every human being,” and “the interdependent web of all existence?”

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.” And since I know who’s suffering the most, I will dole out my compassion accordingly. Here’s another place that can trip up the inclusive kind of spirituality to which we aspire.

Because while I might be filled with gratitude that I’m not the last in line, or at the bottom of the pyramid, I’ve also 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 of 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?

Time for a little pop quiz. Who's suffering the most? Who's most deserving of our compassion? When I began as an intern, I was first assigned to Neurosurgery and Trauma. I had two patients right next door to each other.

In one room was Eva. Eva, was a very sweet, pretty, young Latina of about 30, who had undergone brain surgery, quite successfully, but the recovery was complicated and taking longer than she had expected. She was told she would be in the hospital for 7-10 days, and it was now well over a month. I'd been visiting daily for weeks, and intense suffering it was... physical pain, disappointment, unanswered questions, frustration with doctors' head scratching, impatience--feeling unable to stand the hospital one more day, judgement from self and her husband Juan for not being positive enough, hopeful enough, prayerful enough, and lonesomeness for her young children at home.

And then there's Dieter right next door... a man in his mid-50's, paralyzed from the waist down, with only limited use of his hands and arms. That had been true for the last 18 years and would be true for the rest of his life. He needed to spend up to two months every year in and out of hospitals to drain the excess fluid from his spine.

OK. Who's suffering the most? Who's most entitled to our compassion? What do you say?

Obviously Dieter is mired in the more enduring and greater physical debility, yet Eva is also ensnared in a deep spiritual crisis as well-- painful questions of the soul and of her relationship to God. "Michael I prayed so hard before my surgery, and I felt God's presence every step of the way. He was with me. I am sure that's why the surgery went so well. But now, God does not answer my prayers. Day after day I beg him to let me go home, and nothing! WHY?" Her despair was overwhelming, testing my desires to alleviate her suffering by *correcting* her point of view, rather than first drawing nearer to her loneliness in her deep sense of helplessness. One could easily dismiss or discount her

view that God had abandoned her; after all, she's in one of the world's finest hospitals, receiving the best care, has a promising prognosis of complete recovery, a loving spouse and healthy family, etc. "Eva, look at it THIS way! Be patient! And get over it!" Is that what compassion looks like?

Dieter, on the other hand, had these dancing blue eyes and warm smile reflecting this remarkable attitude that seemed utterly devoid of victimhood, self-pity, frustration, or despair. Dieter was unencumbered by such existential doubts and questions. He seemed to have a very present kind of acceptance of what is and a "let's go from there" attitude, as if to say, "What else can you do?" Dieter's an atheist. "I believe we only get one life Michael. This is it. You make the best of it. It's all random, the things that happen to you, the things that don't. What's the point in seeing it any other way?"

In some ways these two illustrate an intersection of theology and suffering. So are we to conclude from their illustration that atheism is correct, because atheists don't suffer while theists, people of faith do? Certainly not. I could provide examples where just the opposite appears to be true. Is the difference simply between each one's perception of what is and the ability to accept it? Yes, in a way, but also no, and the danger, I believe, lies in judging either way. One thing is abundantly clear-- each of them is on an intensely human journey. The moving closer into the humanness of those journeys, in my mind, is where the possibility exists for a deeper experience of communion, of healing or even of transcendence.

The underbelly of relying on the "It could be worse" point-of-view, is that you or I are not entitled to compassion, because so many have it worse—those at the end-of-the-line. The earthquake in Haiti was a classic example of our collective buy-in to the Ponzi scheme. Wasn't it astounding how quickly this community, this nation, this planet mobilized in a relief effort for Haiti? Resources amassed in an instant! Can you imagine what could be done if we could get it together like that for any number of the horrible ills that plague our society now? I don't mean to be callous or cynical, but is it possible that like Margie, did we kind of use the catastrophe in Haiti to restore some perspective and gratitude in our hearts for our own lives? Because what do you hear about Haiti lately? Is it all better there? Has the suffering ceased? Or Africa. It's like Africa is in the default position at the bottom of the Spiritual Ponzi Scheme pyramid... between the wars, the starvation, the drought, the disease, the crushing poverty, the genocide, the abuse of women... it's endless. We only have to pick up a paper and read something about Africa to restore us to gratitude for our own realities.

When I began as an intern, I had a fellow chaplain intern, Sister Rose, who was a Vietnamese Catholic nun who had narrowly escaped Vietnam after the fall of the South in 1975. She told such horrific tales of her escape that after I listened, I could only respond with a silent inner chant... "I'll never complain about anything again; I'll never complain about anything again." Is that really the answer? Now I've compounded my own suffering in my own world with a layer of guilt, judgment and condemnation. And whom does that serve? There is a price we pay, individually and collectively, to live out our own life's journey and drama without sharing the pain of our journey as much as we

would 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 one at the bottom of the pyramid is entitled to complaint 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 judgement, 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 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 few years ago 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.

But as with Sister Rose's narrow escape from her homeland and family, could it be that in some ways, the "Escape-From-Vietnam" show or 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 may become crystal clear when the goal of the show is get through the day without dying. I will say that when I left that Zambian village, I was profoundly humbled and I ached for some of what the villagers had. What? Acceptance of what is? Unencumbered hospitality? Freely given joy and smiles? A clear life path?

Perhaps it's best not to judge the TV show. The Buddhists have 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 as 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, the oven broke today, so why don’t you go make a run for some Carl’s Jr.?” 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 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: the “My-Husband’s-Dying” show, and 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