

Finding Compassion: The Key to Survival

By: Matt Smith

What is it like to be a survivor of a loved one who has committed suicide? How does one endure the unendurable? The sense of loss and morbid regrets buckle the knees, giving way to vertigo, nausea, and unstoppable tears. The allusions of the great writers become more than mere words, grist for after dinner table talk. The abstract existential question posed by Camus “is life worth living”, becomes a daily internal monologue.

At first, it feels like being in a dark hole, a crevice, an abyss with only a fragile tether to lift you from the darkness into the light of life. The isolation that follows the darkness becomes an unwelcome companion. Only later, do you begin to feel you are in the dark river, the myth of Styx pulling you inexorably towards death and Hades. The ancient Greek story becomes a living reality.

The raging waters push and pull you, you are constantly bobbing through its waters of despair, and only occasionally can you breathe with assurance. The river has no rhyme or reason; it pushes you from bank to bank. You can try to hold on to the shore reeds of alcohol, drugs, sex, work, but you know that it is a matter of hours, maybe minutes before the frenzy of the river pulls you inexorably towards its destination, you are dying while living.

There are sandbars that allow you to “stand” and live, but it is the life of horror as Poe and others have revealed. A life of anger, resentment and violence, a life based on the “sensate” pleasures which offer a real alternative to make one feel alive. Those behaviors once known as the Cardinal sins, lust, sloth, wrath, gluttony, can fill your day. But their repercussions create the ravenous hunger for the unattainable, the sense of love and beauty that vanished when your beloved left this earth. In spiritual terms you have become a “lost soul”.

How then, can one live before the inevitable happens. The virtues promoted by all the great religions, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism of faith hope and charity become more than greeting card banalities. What can save you is always available on the river if you look and have the faith to let go and pull yourself on the “boat of compassion”. The waters of suffering are now placid and you can dip your cup and drink while also offering to others on the shore, giving life.

Compassion now is seen not a sentiment, but a set of practices. St. Francis' meditation becomes a way of life, not wishful thinking.

“Where there is hatred, let me bring love,
That where there is wrong, I may bring harmony.
Where there is error, I may bring truth.
Where there is doubt, I may bring faith.

Where there is despair, I may bring hope.
That where there are shadows, I may bring light.
That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.
Lord, grant that I may seek to comfort,
Than to be comforted.
To understand, than to be understood.
To love than to be loved.
For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.”
You realize you only have to start with any one of these and a new journey
begins.