Spiritual Themes and Challenges in Global Health

World Vision International
Global Health, Nutrition and HIV Community of Practice

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My journey into global health

- Dan Fountain, MD
  - Boyhood hero
- General practice, migrant health
- MPH – Johns Hopkins University
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Global Health at CDC

Leogane, Haiti

China, 2004

Malawi, 1993

Abbottabad, Pakistan, 1988
At Disease Centers, a Shift In Mission and Metabolism

By LAWRENCE K. ALTMAN

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is going through an uncomfortable metamorphosis, from an agency that focused on controlling naturally transmitted diseases to one heavily involved with bioterrorism and its possible effects on national security.
So in 2006 I took a break...
Neuroscience of Compassion

• ‘Compassion training’ influences neural circuitry and emotional responses to suffering
Compassion in Medicine

Jesus taught and healed with compassion for all.
—Matthew 4:24

We reach out to people in need and
give comfort as Jesus did.

We nurture the spiritual, physical and emotional
well-being of one another and those we serve.

We embrace those who are suffering.

Providence Holy Cross Medical Center, Mission Hills, CA
Compassion in Nursing

Compassion in nursing 1: defining, identifying and measuring this essential quality

An outline of what compassion is, how it is an integral part of care and relates to dignity, and how it might be measured in both qualified and student nurses.

Compassion and professional care: exploring the domain

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Abstract
Compassion unites people during times of suffering and distress. Unfortunately, compassion cannot take away suffering. Why then, is compassion important for people who suffer? Nurses work in a domain where human suffering is evidently present. In order to give meaning to compassion in...
Compassion in Global Health
What motivates and sustains us in global health?
Compassion and Global Health

“Global health is rooted in the value of compassion. It is grounded in an awareness of our interconnectedness and a concern with the whole.”

– Conclusion of a Meeting on Compassion in Global Health, The Carter Center, Atlanta, September 2010
Global Health

• Notion
  – Health is global – we are all interconnected
  – Requires global cooperation

• Objective
  – Health of all people
  – Health equity

• Discipline
  – Academic and practice
  – Preventive and clinical care
  – Populations and individuals

He was trying, he told people, to foment a mass uprising of compassion.
Global Health as Spiritual Practice
Consensus Definition of Spirituality

“Spirituality is that aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred.”

2009 National Consensus Conference, Improving Quality Spiritual Care as a Domain of Palliative Care (Puchalski et al., J Palliat Med 2009:12:885–904)
Global Health as Spiritual Practice

• Sense of calling or vocation
  ...“seek and express meaning and purpose and experience their connectedness...”
Global Health as Spiritual Practice

• Sense of calling or vocation
  ...“seek and express meaning and purpose and experience their connectedness...”

• Shared values and virtues
  – Compassion
Compassion
Karen Armstrong

“The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures...”

http://charterforcompassion.org/
Global Health as Spiritual Practice

• Shared values and virtues
  – Compassion
  – Human dignity
  – Equity and social justice
  – Generosity of spirit
  – Fearlessness
  – Humility
  – Gratitude
  – Connectedness
  – Wonder and awe
Spiritual Themes and Challenges in Global Health

• Method
  – Informal conversations and interviews ‘in the corners’ of global health meetings

• Spiritual themes and challenges
  – “Compassion at a distance”
  – Dichotomous thinking
  – “Conspiracy of silence”
  – Compulsion to “save the world”
Elements of Compassion

- Awareness of suffering *(cognitive attunement)*
- Empathy *(emotional attunement)*
- Action *(to relieve and prevent suffering)*
A Social Psychology Model of Compassion

Awareness

Cognitive attunement (perspective-taking; stability of mind)

Empathy

Sympathy

Yes

Emotional Regulation

No

Personal Distress

Compassion
Desire to transform suffering

Action

Selfless pro-social behavior

“Selfish” pro-social behavior

Fight (moral outrage)
Flight (avoidance, abandonment)
Freeze (numbing)

Adapted from Eisenberg, Batson, Halifax, and others
Compassion and Global Health

**Challenges**

- Populations, not individuals
  - Geographic, cultural, economic distance
"Willing to see faces"

"If we are to maintain the reputation this institution now enjoys, it will be because in everything we do, behind everything we say, as the basis for every program decision we make—we will be willing to see faces."

Bill Foege, *Smallpox, Gandhi, and CDC* – *Fifth Annual Joseph Mountin Lecture*, Atlanta, October 26, 1984
Compassion and Global Health

Challenges

- Populations, not individuals
- Complex bureaucracies and partnerships
Compassion and Global Health

Challenges

- Populations, not individuals
- Complex bureaucracies and partnerships
- Competing values
  - Economic, political, military interests
Compassion and Global Health

Challenges

“I hope that our understandable fear of the unfamiliar does not trump our compassion when ill Americans return to the US for care.”

Tom Frieden, CDC Director
August 3, 2013
Spiritual Challenges in Global Health

*Dichotomous Thinking*

- “We do this so badly in global health... false dichotomies... prevention vs. cure”
  – Richard Horton, November 25, 2013

- “The greatest threat to global health is dichotomous thinking.” – Julio Frenk
Global Health is Non-Dual

• “Everything is local and everything is global. Global health is not ‘over there’ – it’s right here.” – Bill Foege, April 26, 2012

• “Successful public health leadership in the next millennium will require...the ability to see the whole and its parts simultaneously...to scan and to focus and to see relationships. And they need to do these all at the same time.”

  - Bill Foege and Mark Rosenberg, Public and Community Health. In: The 21st Century Health Care Leader [italics added]
Global Health is Non-Dual
Spiritual Challenges in Global Health

“Conspiracy of Silence”

Symposium on Compassion in Global Health and Tropical Medicine
ASTMH, December 7, 2011
Spiritual Challenges in Global Health

Compulsion to “Save the World”

• “Shadow side” of wanting to make a difference
• Response to overwhelming need
  – Ego over-identifies with work and outcomes
  – Compulsive overwork
  – Burnout
The cost of ‘compulsion to save the world’

“To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is itself to succumb to the violence of our times.”

Thomas Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander
HIV/AIDS Activist, Manhattan

“I don’t think I had verbalized to anyone before the disconnect I sometimes feel between the compassionate nature of my work, all with nonprofits doing extraordinary public health and social justice work, and my avoidance of dealing directly and compassionately with friends and family who are in psychological or physical distress...”
Compassion and Action

“[Compassion] is not just a wish to see sentient beings free from suffering, but an immediate need to intervene and actively engage, to try to help... A person who has attained stability in his or her compassion training ... should now be out, running around like a mad dog, actively engaged in acts of compassion.”

- The Dalai Lama

St. Seraphim of Sarov

"Acquire a peaceful spirit, and around you thousands will be saved."

b. 1754 - d. 1883
Global Health as Spiritual Practice

*Individual level*

- Travel to the field
- Photos
- Relationships
- Personal rituals
- Compassion training
- Religious practice
- Prayer
Global Health as Spiritual Practice

*Collective level*

- Sharing our stories
- Celebrating our joys and successes
- Collective expressions of sorrow and apology
- Religious fellowship
- Periodic retreats
Global Health as Spiritual Practice

Organizational

- Chaplains
- Deep dialogue
  - Global health, religious and spiritual leaders, theologians
  - Tubingen conferences were an essential precursor to the primary health care movement in the 1970s
- Organizational values and commitments
The Good Samaritan

Vincent Van Gogh, 1890
Thank you!

www.ccagh.org
Center for Compassion & Global Health

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