

# Learning the Value of Empathy

Angela Poulter

The most influential advice I've received in life, I credit to my father. I was visiting him in Puerto Rico for a summer when I was around eight years old, and for the first time in memory I saw people begging in the streets for money. They would come up to our car and start washing the windows and shove bottles of water into the open ones. Someone pointed out a small enclave of trees to me at the corner of an intersection, where he claimed these aggressive beggars "shot up" drugs when people gave them money. Having grown up in a small farming town in Pennsylvania, this was something beyond my realm of experience. I grew wary of these men and women and made it a point to always avert eye contact in passing. On one such occasion, I was in a video store parking lot with my father when we were approached by someone begging for money. I remember rolling my eyes at my dad and shrugging off the man's words. As we neared the video store my dad turned to me, a concerned look on his face, and asked me why I rolled my eyes at the man. I replied simply, "Oh, he just wants money for drugs. I know I'm better than him."

My dad's expression shifted from concern to anger, "My daughter, you are no better than anyone, and I never want you to think that you are. That man on the street knows things that you don't. He has a different experience and a different life, and you don't know what he's been through. He could have the ability to save your life, and you should never disrespect another person's life or worth."

I was ashamed and transformed by his words. I had never considered life from this angle of pure and just equality, regardless of societal status. I had never thought of how we are all altered by life's experiences, trials, triumphs, tragedy—and how we all contain the ability to change our lives and do "good" and "bad" things simultaneously.

From then on, I looked at people differently. All people. And I continue to try to recognize the life behind everyone's eyes and the unique and dynamic qualities each set could encompass. With this concept in mind, it's vital to recognize how a person's priorities can be affected by change and circumstance. As an aspiring health care professional, I realize that it's important to empathize with my patients and to understand that their lives may be prioritized differently from my own. We cannot expect to always know what's going on in all aspects of a person's life, and we should not pass judgment on an individual's decisions. Our job is not to criticize or discriminate but purely to help our patients, educate them, and promote health in a way that is respectful and beneficial to their needs.

I had my own experience with flux in my life last fall, following treatment of pancreatic cancer. I had to withdraw from the Dental Hygiene program at City Tech to have an abdominal surgery called a Whipple procedure. After the surgery, I could not have any food, drink, or medication by mouth for almost two weeks. Everything was administered intravenously. Even though I wasn't having any food, I could still feel a biofilm layer forming over my teeth and I was a bit paranoid about not being able to brush (or do anything) at first. Then, I forgot my teeth altogether. There was so much else going on:

*Alarms go off because I've stopped breathing in my sleep. Again. And I'm pleading with a nurse to stay with me all night because it keeps stopping and I'm afraid. Also my Foley (catheter) keeps getting backed up, causing sudden extreme pain. Nurses come in at all hours with injections and to turn off alarms. I'm pressing a button connected to a PICC line in my neck every ten minutes, for an injection of Dilaudid— just to keep the pain at a 7. No sleep. Can't move. Trying hard to stay alive. Praying I will.*

I was able to see firsthand how life could become so difficult that a person could neglect something otherwise held in high regard. In times of crisis we re-prioritize our lives. Ideally, the crisis will be a temporary state, and the individual will eventually regain the ability to address all of his or her needs. However, this is not always the case. Some unfortunate people will remain in a constant struggle, juggling one crisis to the next.

One thing that I cannot adjust to or become unfazed by in New York City is seeing homeless people. I see them everywhere, at all times of day: sleeping, scavenging, and begging for food or money. And I never feel quite mollified giving my leftovers to someone who sleeps in a box, who does not have teeth, who smells like urine and infection. As every empathetic person probably does, I wish there was more I could do for my starving and suffering neighbors. I wish I could give them a shower, feed them something fresh and healthy and delicious, let them have a mattress to sleep on and walls and a roof to protect them. But there are too many to help, and I don't have money or space or resources to support even one extra person. I see so many homeless with rotting teeth, bandaged ankles, and swollen festering wounds— that sometimes I find myself trying to stop seeing them, as I did when I was first exposed as a child in Puerto Rico. Trying not to make eye contact and admit to us both that I cannot help them. Almost regressing and becoming less sensitive to those less fortunate and assumedly vastly different from me. One homeless man revitalized my lens on the world, however, late one evening on my way home from work.

I was tired and walking home past a liquor store, when a man in front of the store started to speak to me. I was ready to ignore him, assuming he would ask me for change that I didn't have. I didn't hear him the first time, so he repeated it louder from behind me, "Long day at work?" When I realized he was trying to make conversation, I turned around and spoke to him, apologizing,

“Sorry, yes, very long day.”

“You a doctor?” he asked, eyeing my scrubs.

“No, I work in a dental office.” I replied.

At this, he brightened. “I have all my teeth!” he exclaimed, smiling widely for me to see. He did indeed have a mouth full of beautiful white teeth.

I smiled back at him, “Oh that’s great! Good job! Do you floss?”

He told me he did floss and brushed many times per day. He pulled out his toothbrush to show me.

I wondered to myself where he brushes his teeth or why he chose to prioritize them when the rest of his relatively young body looked much worse for wear.

As if reading my mind he added, “I don’t take very good care of the rest of my body. I treat it like shit. I drink too much. I know that. My family left me... But at least I still have my teeth.”

I realized it is erroneous to categorize all homeless people into the same huge group of misfortune. They are people. They, obviously, each look and act differently. One might smell bad, or have no teeth, or perfect teeth, or mangled limbs, or wild hair, or frightening expressions.... But as my father imparted to me, all people have different experiences, subsets of knowledge, priorities, disabilities, and abilities. The drunken man who sleeps on the curb may have the ability to disarm you with his perfect smile, and warm you with unexpected kindness. All people deserve to be treated with a measure of respect and sensitivity. Although we are different, we are equal in our chemistry and biology— all made of the same stuff and all entitled to the same kindness and opportunity as the next. Sensitivity is enormously important in acceptance and understanding of others. In any profession, we need to embody the concept that all members of our society deserve to be treated humanely, regardless of physical appearance, social class, or individual principles.

Nominating faculty: Professor Maria-Elena Bilello, Dental Hygiene 1114,  
Department of Dental Hygiene, School of Professional Studies, New York City  
College of Technology, CUNY.

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