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## **Bearing Witness**

So much of our mass media is about intense emotion—creating it, triggering it, sensationalizing it, and exploiting it. Reality shows. Live war coverage. But what do we do in our daily lives? Run away from it. Avoid it. Deny it. Luckily, the psychotherapist profession is here to make sure that some of us face it.

I came across four emotionally intense stories from acquaintances and friends alike over the course of two days.

- I heard the tale of reality breaking loose for a long-time emotionally dysfunctional family. The abused spouse finally stands up and leaves without a word. Their grown daughter confronts the father with her own truth of their relationship, both the good and the bad.
- I read the school note, soliciting donations for a tree to honor a dead baby, strangled by his own umbilical cord in the womb, just weeks before his planned birth.
- I saw the truth in a friend's face, distraught that she had caused so much anguish to herself and her husband in a marriage that badly needed to be revitalized.
- I read the email from a friend, describing the loss of two fathers in less than 6 months—one by birth and one by marriage.

Through the retelling of each tale, emotion welled up inside of me—feeling the pain, sadness and grief of the characters in each story.

### **What did it all mean?**

Like the proverbial dead moose in the middle of the room, I wondered what the universe had plopped down in front of me to learn from. What *do* we do with intense emotions? After some reflection, here's what I came up with:

**What we don't acknowledge, doesn't heal.** In her book, Turning to One Another, Margaret Wheatley talks about bearing witness. She states that we have two choices when faced with emotionally-charged situations, ones with intense grief, sadness, anger, or even joy. We can either turn toward or turn away. It's that simple. By turning toward, we bear witness to the emotion. Honoring it. Validating that it exists, that it's real. Feeling the depth of it. And in the process, healing. Healing others. And maybe ourselves. Bearing witness to whatever emotion comes along is the gift that we all need to give and receive.

**Emotion is the gateway to a new understanding.** In the personal coaching profession, there's a phrase called "taking the client where they are". This is a technique that enables the client to explore the depth of their emotions, both the "positive" emotions (e.g., joy) as well as the "negative" emotions (e.g., sadness). In training to be a personal coach, having such an opportunity to explore my emotions was a gift—one that we don't often allow ourselves in daily life. ("You'll be fine." "Keep a stiff upper lip." "Boys don't cry.") Not to wallow in emotion, but to explore it. And with that exploration, I might understand something new about myself or the situation.

## **What are the implications for the workplace?**

We live much of our lives in workplaces, and if emotion is part of life, then what does this say about emotion in the workplace? Here's what I've learned:

1. **Emotions are always there but hardly acknowledged.** Most corporate cultures have an unwritten rule about emotions similar to the military policy of "don't ask and don't tell". If you don't acknowledge it, maybe it will go away. Yeah, right. When I gave a coaching client the assignment of noticing emotions in the workplace, he was amazed how much was there and the intensity of it. Day after day, he had been unaware of this, like fish in water.
2. **When emotions are acknowledged, they are often dismissed as being inappropriate or irrelevant.** This leads us to hide our emotions for fear of being embarrassed. When this same coaching client acknowledged a colleague's emotion, his colleague was embarrassed that it had somehow "slipped out." But the result was a deeper trust between my client and his colleague and a clearing of the air in order to focus on business issues. The act of acknowledging emotions changed the dynamics of the relationship.
3. **People hunger for a place to see and express emotion, even in the workplace.** When emotion finds a place in the work setting, through a "slip" or by design, it is extremely powerful. I once saw a department head at his staff meeting become emotional in talking about long-time friends leaving the company with an early retirement package. The authenticity of that moment came to be my memory of this person's leadership in the workplace. When I designed a monthly forum for people to talk about their careers in a small group setting, it was not just the content that brought people back, month after month. It was the emotional connection that was created with real life stories, full of frustration, joy, curiosity, anger, pain, and delight.
4. **To bear witness to another's emotion is to love unconditionally.** In the moment of witnessing, the person feels fully seen and heard. My friend was telling me in the lobby of her company facility the story of her broken marriage and she cried. I cried with her. She later thanked me for crying with her. It initially struck me as an odd thing to say. But then I realized that with my tears, I was seeing and hearing her in a new way.

This is hard work, no doubt about it. But if we are to create better workplaces, not just for others but for ourselves, it can start with this small step of bearing witness to emotion. It takes not only courage but faith that there is a better way to work and be with one another.

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