

The Duty to Respond: On the Moral Imperative of Empathy

Forfeit the right to call yourself human if you ignore another's grief



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By Terry Murray

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Human beings are members of a whole,
In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.
If you have no sympathy for human pain,
The name of human you cannot retain.

This poem – “Bani Adam” or “Children of Adam,” written by 13th century Iranian poet Sa’adi – is woven into a carpet at the entrance to the Hall of Nations at the United Nations Building in New York.

The poem, in this English translation (although there are [many](#)), appears there because it speaks to the necessity of global interdependence for world peace.

But it has also been invoked on a more personal scale as a declaration of the need for empathy. For example, in a 2015 [editorial](#) in the journal *Child’s Nervous System*, a group of Iranian physicians and surgeons noted that, “Sa’adi considers empathy as an essential quality in humans’ behavior.”

I first heard this poem a little over a month ago, during a [rebroadcast](#) of the 2017 Massey Lectures on CBC Radio. Payam Akhavan, professor of international law at McGill University in Montreal, and a former UN prosecutor at The Hague, cited it in the global context. But it spoke to me because I had been experiencing a very personal lack of empathy at that time.

I had been in Ottawa, away from home, for seven months, first as sole caregiver for my sister Roxe after we were brutally told that chemotherapy had failed and she was terminally ill.

After she died nearly five months later, heartsick and homesick, I remained in Ottawa to deal with her estate as solitary executor. In addition to the legal, financial, and bureaucratic responsibilities, I made courtesy calls to notify some of the people who'd been involved in her care when she's been undergoing active treatment. Many, including the chemotherapy nurses and Roxe's long-time family doctor, offered heartfelt condolences.



Credit: Stepan Crani

I left phone messages for her surgeon, who had seemed troubled by the unexpected and rapid spread of Roxe's cancer, and my own family physician back in Toronto. When I didn't hear back from either of them after several weeks, I assumed the phone messages hadn't reached them, and snail-mailed each a note with a clipping of the newspaper death notice.

That was two months ago. I still haven't had a reply from either of them.

I was hurt and a little angry when Roxe's next-door neighbours – mere mortals – failed to say anything to me after she died. But these doctors? Experienced professionals, both at mid-career, and both acquainted with death as measured by the number of families who acknowledge their efforts in the obits they write for their loved ones?

All they needed to do was acknowledge my loss with a statement as simple as, “I’m sorry.” Being informed of a death doesn’t require platitudes, clichés, false comfort, or fixing – because grief can’t be fixed. A brief, warm acknowledgement does not commit you to becoming the bereaved person’s best friend and eternal emotional support.

Not doing it – not saying anything, especially when a surviving family member alerts you to the death – has been called “moral deafness.”

Perhaps we must be taught – by parents, friends, or plain bad luck – what it means to be human. – Diane Cole

“To respond is a responsibility,” wrote [Diane Cole](#) after encountering moral deafness following a number of tragedies in her own family.

“Perhaps,” Cole said in a 1986 article in *Ms.* magazine, “we must be taught – by parents, friends, or plain bad luck – what it means to be human.”

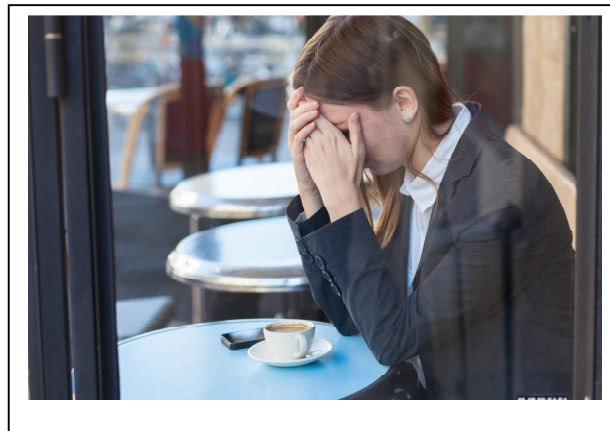


Photo credit: anyaberkut

Rev. Patrick O’Neill, a Unitarian minister in New York, built a sermon on that article, in which he said, “To respond to one another is a basic human responsibility. This is the basic ethical contract we have among and between us all in this life.”

This goes for strangers too. Several years ago at my local Starbucks, I saw an older woman sitting alone at a large table near the door. The place was packed, and the only available seat was at her practically empty table. A young woman came in, saw no unoccupied tables, and turned to go. The older woman pointed to the expanse of empty real estate beyond her coffee cup and book, and the younger woman sat down.

Soon, the younger woman's phone rang. The call was almost certainly bad news because she immediately started crying. When she put down her phone, her table-mate said, "I feel stupid saying this, but are you all right?"

"My best friend's mother just died," she said, apparently unable to stop crying.

"I'm so sorry," said the other woman.

The rest of their brief exchange was drowned out by coffee grinders, blenders, and other customers' conversations – until I heard the young woman say, "I should go."

As she opened the door to leave, she stopped, turned back toward the table, and said, "Thank you."

People are obligated to one another. I believe that if there is any kind of divinity at work in the world, it is in this obligation that it resides. – Rev. Patrick O'Neill

My sister's surgeon's and my own family doctor's moral deafness made me angry. With them in mind, I rewrote the last lines of the translation of Sa'adi's poem, without the rhyme, so it became the harsh, "If you express no sympathy for human pain, you have no right to call yourself human."

Rev. O'Neill put it more gently: "People are obligated to one another. I believe that if there is any kind of divinity at work in the world, it is in this obligation that it resides."

The surgeon, my GP and all the morally deaf miss out on a glimpse of that divinity, and deprive their bereaved patients, friends, and fellow human beings a degree of comfort that would be far greater than the effort required to provide it.~**TM**