

When Bad Things Happen to Other People

Readings: 'French Chocolates' by Ellen Bass
'Bad News Good News' by Marjorie Saiser
'What I Learned from My Mother' by Julia Kasdorf

"There was so much bad news this winter that many of us were left feeling pummeled and disturbed," writes Anne Lamott in one of her many autobiographical essays. She continues, "Parents and relatives died, kids got into much more serious trouble, and way too many friends got a bad diagnosis. What can you say when people call with a scary or heartbreaking prognosis? You say that we don't have to live alone with our worries and losses, that all the people in their tide pool will be there for them. You say that it totally sucks, and that grace abounds. You can't say things will be fine down the road, because that holds the spiritual authority of someone chirping "No worries!" at Starbucks, or my favorite, "It's all good!" at the market. It's so not all good. And I'm worried sick.

Lamott continues, "It's fine to know, but not to say, that in some inadequate and surprising ways, things will be semi-okay, the way wild flowers spring up at the rocky dirt-line where the open-space meadow meets the road, where the ground is so mean.¹"

We've all been there. We've all played many of the roles that Lamott describes. We've been the ones pummeled and disturbed by bad news. We've been the ones whose parents and relatives die. We've been the kids who got into much more serious trouble. We've been the ones whose friends get a bad diagnosis – or been the ones with the diagnosis ourselves. We've been the ones living alone with our worries and losses. We've been the ones who try and sometimes fail to bring words of comfort.

We've been the ones who discover that things can be semi-okay even after devastation. We've seen the wildflowers bloom in the mean ground.

Today, I am going to focus on the times that we are not the ones at the middle of the storm, but doing our best to support others whose lives are touched by illness, loss, grief, trouble, violence, financial ruin – and all of the other bad things that happen in this life. How do we support those we love? How do we show up and have our presence be a source of comfort in difficult times?

This is hard, spiritual work. Being present to someone else's pain is hard, spiritual work. Part of the challenge is recognizing the limits of our own power to fix it. I often long for some sort of magic wand that would allow me to take away pain, but I don't have that, none of us do, but we use what tools we have – presence, listening, compassion, and small acts of service.

This week, I asked on the church Facebook page 'when bad things have happened in your life, what have others done that has been helpful?' There were so many good responses. Here are a few.

Jen Rice wrote, 'After our middle child was stillborn, people just showed up. They cleaned, cooked, took [our son] on adventures, took me for walks, dropped off toilet paper, sat and talked with us about normal stuff. They just showed up and lovingly provided comfort and support.'

Chris Semelbauer wrote, When I was sick from chemo, friends that brought food over but also stayed to talk and visit were a great help and distraction from feeling nauseous.

1 ¹ Lamott, Anne. *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. page 25-26

Leeanne Seaver wrote, 'When we found out my son is deaf, a family member loaded her little kids in the car and drove 400 miles to be with us.'

Dan Bair wrote, 'After my dad died, someone organized a meal calendar, and people brought us meals, which was incredibly helpful.'

A number of people mentioned religious communities that showed up and offered support. We know that much so much care and support is offered here, both through the arms around program and when informal groups step up to help their church friends in times of need. Today we're offering a chance for folks to connect to our arms around program. If you would be interested in bringing someone a meal, offering a ride, visiting, or helping with a memorial service reception, please complete the insert in your order of service. We'll collect them on your way out of the service today. If you find yourself in need of meals or visits or rides, please do not hesitate to contact me or Dana in the church office.

That is what you could do when bad things happen to other people. Sometimes we learn best by thinking about what not to do. Here are three pitfalls to avoid when offering support to someone in the midst of a hard time.

Pitfall #1: lying.

Many of us don't know quite what to say when the hard times come, so we turn to clichés. Often, these clichés are lies. Lies often cause pain and distrust, even when well-intentioned. We might say, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." We know that's a lie. Some people something terrible and are not made stronger. Their bodies and minds and hearts are deeply pummeled and disturbed. We've all known those people or heard stories of those people of been those people ourselves. Sometimes, people can turn their hardships into sources of meaning, and are filled with a new purpose. Sometimes, things turn out semi-okay, but it is not helpful to hear about that in the midst of the storm. Hearing 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' when you're in the midst of something that feels like it might kill you can make survivors feel like failures if they emerge weak and bruised and tired, instead of strong and triumphant.

Don't say, "I know it will work out for the best." It might sound encouraging, but it's a lie. None of us know how things will work out. None of us can see the future. Saying anything about the future with certainty is dishonesty.

Another cliché that we sometimes turn to is, "everything happens for a reason." Again, a lie. We live in a world filled with so much randomness. Good people die too young and in horrible pain. I have not heard any compelling, theologically-sound reason for that beyond randomness. If there is some master plan behind the way the world is, it is a cruel and capricious plan. I could keep listing clichés that are lies, but you get the idea.

Pitfall #2: comparing. We are each the ultimate authority on our own experience. It is not our place to categorize others' pain or to help them place themselves in some great ranking of suffering. If the person in the middle of the storm finds comfort in comparing themselves to situations worse than theirs, great! Join them in that, but it is not outsiders' role to impose that perspective, even if that is what you think they need. Forcing comparisons is rarely comforting.

The other part of comparison is sharing stories of others in similar situations. Laura Bultman shared on facebook that once, when she told someone about the chronic medical condition she lived with, they responded, "'my aunt had that. She died.'" ' Again, not helpful. These attempts to compare, relativize, rank, and minimize pain do not serve people in the midst of hardship.

Pitfall #3: Making the person in crisis to care for you. I don't think anyone does this on purpose, but it happens all the time. Here's an example of that, from Michelle Obama's memoir.

In the run-up to the 2008 election, there was much commentary and criticism of our former first lady as an angry black woman, including rumors that there was a video of her using a derogatory terms for white people. She writes, 'I was getting worn out, not physically but emotionally... Painfully, too, my friends would sometimes call and unload their worries on me, heaping me with advice that they thought I should pass along to Barack's campaign manager or wanting me to reassure them after they'd heard a negative news report about me, or Barack, or the state of the campaign. When rumors about the so-called whitey tape surfaced, a friend who knows me well called up, clearly worried that the lie was true. I had to spend a good thirty minutes convincing her that I hadn't turned into a racist, and when the conversation ended, I hung up, thoroughly demoralized.'

This often happens as well when someone gets sick. Friends and family sometimes tell the sick person about how their illness makes them feel, how scared they are, how they might be coming to a new understanding of their own mortality. I've known people to say they are more burdened by the people in their life who want to talk about the disease than by the disease itself. Asking the person who is in the middle of the storm to help us through our emotional response to their hardship is an easy pitfall to fall into—our emotions are present when we're with her and we want to share—but it is one we should avoid.

A theory for how to understand and manage this common impulse was developed by a woman named Susan Silk who had breast cancer. It's called the ring theory. Susan struggled with people saying things that were not helpful or comforting. The theory is based on an image of concentric rings, like what is on the cover of your order of service or projected now.

In the center ring is the person directly experiencing the bad thing. In the next circle is the person next closest to the bad thing. In each ring there is the next closest person. Repeat until you run out of people. 'Parents and children before more distant relatives. Intimate friends in smaller rings, less intimate friends in larger ones...'

The article she wrote describes the theory, 'Here are the rules. The person in the center ring can say anything she wants to anyone, anywhere. She can kvetch and complain and whine and moan and curse the heavens and say, "Life is unfair" and "Why me?" That's the one payoff for being in the center ring. Everyone else can say those things too, but only to people in larger rings.

'When you are talking to a person in a ring smaller than yours, someone closer to the center of the crisis, the goal is to help. Listening is often more helpful than talking. But if you're going to open your mouth, ask yourself if what you are about to say is likely to provide comfort and support. If it isn't, don't say it... So say, "I'm sorry" or "This must really be hard for you" or "Can I bring you a pot roast?" Don't say, "You should hear what happened to me" or "Here's what I would do if I were you." And don't say, "This is really bringing me down."'²

2 ² Silk, Susan and Barry Goldman. 'How Not to Say the Wrong Thing.' *Los Angeles Times*. April 7, 2013. retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/07/opinion/la-oe-0407-silk-ring-theory-20130407>

This ring theory is helpful, but too simplistic. The relationships in our lives are not as straightforward as this image would suggest. Often, the circles overlap and it's hard to tell who is really closest to the center. Is this someone I should be comforting or can I complain to them? We don't always know. Sometimes, the person at the center is genuinely interested in how their trauma is affecting the people in their lives. If they invite it, that sort of conversation is not breaking the rules. If they specifically ask for advice, offering it is not breaking the rules. Still, this ring theory can be a helpful guide to us as we comfort others.

If you are struggling with the bad thing happening to someone you love, your pain and concern is real too. It is important to let yourself feel it and to have someone to talk to. Who? A friend or relative in a larger ring. A therapist or counselor. Your minister. Feeling pain when someone you love is in pain shows that you are a compassionate person. Sitting with, sharing, and processing that pain in appropriate ways shows that you can act with compassion as well.

That's a lot of don'ts. Don't lie. Don't compare. Don't ask the person at the center of the crisis to help you through your emotional response to their crisis.

So, we have a sense of what we shouldn't do. What should we do?

Show up and reach out. Be present. Let the person know that they are in your thoughts and your heart.

Offer comfort – that can be food, conversation, or toilet paper. Try to give joy or one less thing to worry about. If your offer is refused, let it go. It's not about you.

And remember – so many of us go through hard times that never really end. Our grief when someone we love dies subsides so it's not at the forefront of our minds, but it never fully vanishes. Remember widows and widowers on their wedding anniversaries. When a good memory of someone who has died comes to you, reach out to someone in a more center ring. "I was just thinking fondly of so-and-so. He made an impact on my life." Check-in with the people you know who live with chronic conditions or other ongoing pain, "I realize I haven't asked you about your health in a while. Do you want to talk about it?" Often, we worry about reaching out in these ways, worry that our actions will bring someone down. That is almost never the case. It is usually a relief and comfort to give people an invitation to speak about hardship – even if they don't take us up on this offer.

As Chris and I read together earlier, we need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

All our lives we are in need and others are in need of us.

May we act with love and care to bring comfort to a bruised and hurting world.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.