

COLLABORATIVE LIFE COACHING  
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"We are the hero of our own story"  
-- Mary McCarthy

I hiked earlier this month in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. As I looked over the vistas from 12,000 feet altitude, I was reminded of the seemingly opposite continuums from small daily pains to human suffering, and from laughter and happiness to a sense of joy and peace. I also read new information recently about suffering and joy that I would like to share.

It occurs to me that during our normal daily life there are many conditions that give rise to discomfort and pain, but fewer that give rise to joy and happiness. We can all think of friends and family who have had physical pain with medical illness, or who have a chronic sense of failure or unmet need and seem to be suffering. But some people go through tough problems with happiness, humor, and peace. What is suffering? Is there a way to have more joy?

In looking at a wide variety of sources, Western faiths teach that we suffer when we are blocked from connection with God.

Buddhism offers an additional and different perspective on suffering. It teaches that true suffering comes not from experiencing pain, nor from seeing and solving hard problems, but from our own decision to allow craving, ignorance, and hatred. What does that mean?

"Craving" refers to the sense of deprivation we feel when we imagine that material things, idealized relationships, status, wealth, etc. can insulate us from pain. Christianity refers to this concept as "coveting". We want things and status as kind of "suffering insurance". We feel panicked and competitive when we don't have whatever quantity will be "enough" of this imaginary insurance. We have the troubling reality, however, that riches, material things, and status can all come crashing down in an instant. The news media hounding of the formerly well-connected and rich facing ruin, and coverage of hurricanes remind us of this daily. Is it any wonder our cravings make us insecure?

"Ignorance" as used in Buddhism doesn't mean not knowing facts, but rather it is a misperception of the true nature of the self as unable to handle pain. If we acknowledge that suffering is normal and just a part of the human condition, it can be embraced as a learning time in the flow of our life span and not

struggled against. Other religions teach that not knowing God or Allah is also a form of ignorance that adds to our suffering.

A simple definition of "hatred" is a negative focus on an outside object or person. It begins with failing to forgive as taught by most religions. It drains our psychic energy and traps us in cycles of rage, jealousy, and fantasy as we imagine the other person is to blame for our continued suffering.

After 25 years of talking to people in therapy and mediation, these teachings do seem to have value. When we lessen our cravings, increase our tolerance for deprivation, and rid ourselves of hatred, we do have more energy to experience happiness and contentment.

But how about feelings of joy? This is the "thriving" part of living. Research may help us here. A psychologist at Harvard University studied the relationship between compassion, physiological changes in the body, and health and joy. He showed students films of Mother Teresa doing her work; students reported their sense of compassion was increased, and their levels of immunoglobulin-A antibodies increased. These antibodies fight common viruses. Another researcher studied volunteers and found that over 90% of those who performed "compassion" work experienced euphoria, warmth and energy during the work, and calmness afterward. Even simple acts of compassion like opening a door, focused listening, complimenting a service worker, or treating animals and people kindly, increase the sense of joy. Another Harvard researcher did a longitudinal study over thirty years and found that adopting an "altruistic" lifestyle was critical in creating a sense of happiness and long-term emotional health.

If you would like a coaching challenge this month, my questions for you are these:

- \* Could you use the suffering in your life to become more tolerant and compassionate?
- \* How often do you find yourself "craving"? Instead, could you practice gratitude?
- \* What can you do today to be compassionate?

It is my hope for you that you are able to be your own hero this month, and rescue yourself from suffering. I wish for you the experience of a compassionate heart and more joy. And last, I wish for you to not just survive, but thrive!

To your wellness!

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