



Wellbeing Insights

Genuine Empathy

Kelly McGonigal in her book, *The Upside of Stress* writes of genuine empathy: “You must be willing to feel their distress and imagine yourself in their experience. You also must be able to see their strength alongside their suffering.” In recent times opportunities arose to practice genuine empathy – as opposed to pity – in the way McGonigal suggests.

The first opportunity involved a family member who has had the unspeakable grief of experiencing the sudden death of a life-long marital partner. Our experience growing up of dealing with grief was it would have been done privately in solitude. When we were recovered, we would be welcome to re-emerge in public. Our current thinking, guided through such reading as McGonigal’s book, took a different approach.

We imagined ourselves in the situation, and felt overwhelmed, awash with grief. Rather than retreat though, we sought out the family member. We talked, we embraced, we cried – together. They gifted us with their words, which expanded us. Within the stages of grief, we have had many occasions to witness strength on display. We have constructed meaning of what – at one level – will never be completely fathomable. Little by little they move towards a way they can continue to live the life with which they have been granted.

The second opportunity also concerned a family member. This time it was a shattered relationship, not caused by a physical death but an emotional one. This time, it was only too easy to imagine ourselves in this situation. One of us had survived divorce, the death of a dream and a chasm yawning ahead. We talked, embraced, and cried together. They got back up, put one foot in front of the other, and continued to work purposefully. Their strength derived from a ‘bigger-than-self goal’: as an educator, other young lives depended upon them being there and they could not abandon their trust.

The third opportunity arose when we viewed the documentary film, *How to Thrive*. We witnessed and shared the lives of seven people who were enduring significant life events, such as burnout, trauma, and grief. Each of them displayed extraordinary vulnerability and courage as they allowed positive psychotherapist Marie McLeod to take them on a transformative journey in search of happiness. In the film, we are given unprecedented access into their lives, and as we opened our hearts to their suffering, we fought back our tears. We recognised ourselves; ‘there but the grace of God, go I’, was our refrain. We were not witnessing a miracle perhaps, but each of the seven found a way forward according to their lights. If that is not miraculous, it is hopeful, which we believe is the antidote to despair.