

Nurturing Empathy

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

The old bus in which we were riding was overheating for the second time on the mountain road between Port-au-Prince and Mirebalais. Rolling to a halt at the edge of a rural village, our driver opened the steaming engine compartment and went to look for water. A dozen small houses were scattered close to the road. Like most Haitian homes, they were built of unadorned concrete block. Several poorer looking ones were wattle and daub—wooden poles stuck into the ground with sticks woven between them and covered with mud. Two older men sat in plastic lawn chairs nearby, playing cards. An elderly woman, in a broad-brimmed hat and carrying a basket, watched us warily from the roadside, where she evidently was waiting for a ride. It didn't take long for a knot of curious children to gather around our smoke-wreathed vehicle. Just beyond this group of six or seven young boys, standing apart from both the children and adults, I saw a girl who looked to be about fourteen years old. She was probably eight months pregnant.

As I sat on the disabled bus, taking in the scene, I wondered what her story was. But it was not until I returned home and opened the February 16 edition of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* that I got a greater sense of what women and girls face in Haiti today. The headline just inside the front page read, "Rape flourishes in rubble of Haitian Earthquake." The article detailed "new shockwaves of sexual violence" that have come in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake

and subsequent dispersion of the survivors into squalid tent encampments. It is impossible to know whether or not the child I saw was such a victim, but it was sobering to read that little girls as young as five have been raped.

Rape is, of course, not a crime of passion but an act of violence. And humans become capable of violence when a natural sense of empathy with fellow creatures either is absent (sociopathic behavior) or has been repressed. Empathy suffers when people are thrown into a competitive struggle for survival, in places such as Haiti. It must be suppressed in warfare, where objectifying the enemy as a target makes it possible for people to overcome their revulsion to killing. Short of a mental or emotional deficit, however, it takes a lot to make a person insensate to the suffering or pain of another. Without empathy, we are less than fully human.

I returned from Haiti to my job with renewed gratitude for the accomplishments of our staff. For the past year, both in our Head Start and Smart Start programs, they have been partnering with parents in a program called "Conscious Discipline." Conscious Discipline integrates classroom management with social-emotional learning. It empowers teachers to respond consciously to conflicts and challenges in the classroom and to use them as opportunities for developing critical life skills. Among the many benefits of this approach with preschoolers is the nurturing of empathy. The payoff comes when we see young children tuned in to the emotional states of their classmates and responding to them with kindness and consideration. Although we cannot predict whether these little ones ever will become victims, we have confidence that, by nurturing their empathy, they will not become victimizers.

One of the greatest gifts we can offer our children is to nurture their sense of empathy. Henry James, whose plays and novels are remembered for their intellectual and psychological depth, left his nephew this advice: “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.” Where kindness and empathy are absent the world is a brutal and terrifying place. Every day I am grateful to be working with a group of people who make that outcome less likely.

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