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The Quality Of Personal Presence: The Alternative To Simply “Being There”

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Introduction

It is often said, in both advocacy and service contexts, that “just being there” for someone, will serve to benefit people, particularly those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged, and thus apt to be mistreated. There is certainly some measure of truth to this, as the mere presence of a friend or ally may persuade some potential predators and exploiters to have some second thoughts, particularly if they perceive this associate of the potential “prey” to be someone they should fear. It is also the case that people in services may do their jobs better than otherwise, simply due to the fact that an independent party is witnessing their conduct, and may act if they are displeased. Further, it is also possible that simply having someone with you in trying circumstances may reduce one’s possible sense of isolation, helplessness and despair.

In the preceding instances, the benign presumption would likely be that the person was an ally of the vulnerable person, and would act accordingly. This may not necessarily be the case, as it is all too common that people in a position to help may fail to do so, even when there are no apparent adverse consequences for them in doing so. People may not rise to the defense of the other, they may offer little consolation to traumatized persons, and they may actually facilitate the mistreatment of their supposed “friend”, albeit often with good intentions. There might be many reasons why this is so, but most certainly one of them will be bound up with the question of their view of the relationship, and the obligations to the other that it may entail.

The Poverty Of Mere Physical Presence

Mere physical presence to another person, be they vulnerable or otherwise, should not be assumed to be evidence that such a person possesses particular desirable qualities, as the character of that person remains to be seen. For instance, most people would have had some experience with “fair weather friends”, where they originally might have assumed a greater loyalty to them from that person than was eventually demonstrated when events tested the relationship. In some ways the wound that this causes may be worse simply due to the fact that the “friend” had in their “being there”, up to the point of disappointment, created the impression of a deeper commitment than actual events revealed. A betrayal by a distant acquaintance would be, in emotional terms, a much more minor setback than when one might have considered the person “a friend”.

Quality And Personal Presence

Given the preceding, it is then logical to go well beyond physical presence, and the appearance of solidarity, as being the basis of a worthy

relationship, to something that could provide qualitative distinctions in regards to the precise meaning of personal presence. If such qualitative dimensions of relationship were immaterial, then this task would be pointless. However, as we have seen, such qualities in people may be hugely existentially consequential. This may be an even graver consideration when the person who may be let down is already very wounded and damaged by their life experiences, such as may be the case with socially devalued persons. It is precisely because they are so hurt already, that a good, worthy and loving relationship could be such a healing antidote to what may have been very damaging relationships in the past.

People may bring with them, bound up in their character, any number of virtues that may contribute to the quality of the relationships they form, and the precise manner that these are played out as the relationship is tested. Several of these are repeatedly mentioned by people who wish to praise their friends, as they tend to represent qualities that enrich the lives of the people they touch. These include loyalty, trustworthiness, standing by the person in the face of adversity, generousness, commitment to and deep concern with the well being of their friend. This would be in contrast with acquaintances who prove to be disloyal, untrustworthy, unreliable or faithless at critical times, fickle, selfish and indifferent to their supposed friend's most important concerns.

Quality And Personal Presence In Helping Roles

In the case of people such as personal advocates, service workers and others who take on roles, where they claim to have the person's best interests at heart, it would not be too much of a stretch to assume that one should be able to count on them when a vital personal interest is at stake. However, this may not always be the case, as their view of matters may differ considerably from others, and thus their behavior may surprise. For instance, many staff will routinely confuse good intentions with good conduct, and they would be offended by the suggestion that their behavior was unhelpful or even damaging, given their premise that they are immunized against harmful actions by their view of themselves as well meaning.

Similarly, many personal advocates might be shocked to learn that others have evaluated their advocacy as lacking because they stood by and did nothing while the person they were supposed to uphold and defend was mistreated. Yet, in the mind of the hapless advocate, they were doing "all that was possible". In both this instance, and in that of the well meaning staff person, the error is found in their lack of recognition of their potential to be flawed in their relationships and duties to others. Further, by their assumption of a kind of infallibility, they have rendered themselves unable to learn and grow from their failings.

The Value Of Seeing Oneself As Human And Flawed (And Acting Accordingly)

Though it may seem strange at first glance, it may be surprisingly helpful in building goodness in relationships, to recognize that one is not always so. This helps illuminate the areas of conduct where improvement may be needed, and is remindful of the importance of confronting one's shortcomings and failings. A person, who in their own mind, believes themselves to be beyond criticism, cannot help but be indifferent to the effect of their actions on others, and unable to admit to their portion of the responsibility in setting matters right. As we have seen in the examples of those who are purportedly not flawed, there can be no redemption and reconciliation in relationships with them, yet both processes are needed in a mature relationship. Being able to apologize is an amazingly potent form of relationship strengthening, whereas an absence of it will undermine the potentials of a relationship.

The Ethic And Duty That The Other Comes First

Western culture, at least in its present period, is often criticized for being a culture of "me first". Whether this is unfair or not can only be evaluated by examining contrasting ethics to that of "self before others". If one looks, for instance, at the Buddhist ethic taught to children in Tibetan Children Village schools, of "others before self", we see that concern for others can be a clear choice towards committed relationship to others, much as the Judeo Christian tradition of seeing others as being essentially one's brothers and sisters, will also bring with it a duty to treat the other honorably, even in the case of strangers.

The Meaning Of The Fact That People Do Fulfill Special Promises And Commitments To Others

When one examines the nature of friendship, or the unique responsibilities and duties that come with committed roles of service or advocacy, we can see that many people can and do make commitments to others that are personally very committing, and may even incur considerable risk and suffering for the person making a promise to "be there" for another. This recognition underlines that, while it is not the case that all people will take on and honor their commitments and duties to others, many will do so in ways that are impressive and even inspiring. This fact alone gives emphasis to why it is important to see that the idea of "being there" for others, by simply being physically present, cheapens and devalues what is really possible in committed relationships, by setting the bar so low that true virtue, and even nobility in people, does not get the esteem it deserves.

Relationships Can Be A Committed Alliance For The Good Of The Other

It is most certainly not assured that “just any relationship” will be good for people, as we have seen that relationships can be a pathway for harm as much as for benefit, and that much of this will be determined not by the person “being there”, but rather why they are in the relationship in the first place. If there exists a commitment to the good and well being of the other, then an alliance will exist in which the other is considerably safer in the hands of the committed person than they might be with someone who is “simply there”. This safety comes not from physical presence, or comparative superficialities like congeniality and good companionship, but rather from a resolve in the person to be a certain kind of person. In essence, a personal decision to be something good so that the other might prosper. This decision links the two people metaphysically in a bond based on a promise that is earnest, and accompanied by a sense of duty.

Conclusion

Clearly, most people who are in committed relationships will fail on occasion to live up to their promises, and some will do so rather spectacularly. Nonetheless, this in no way harms the idea that there are profoundly different ways in which people can be in relationship, and that all of these can be consequential for good or bad. Where individual persons can shape whether the consequences will uphold others and enoble themselves, is in the choices they make as to what kind of relationship they commit to making. Set before all people, at any given moment, are quite different pathways for how we can “be there” with each other. How we each decide to settle this matter will, in its way, help define what kind of world and experiences we make for ourselves.