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Commentary on ‘Why Compassion Counts!’: Compassion as a Generative Force

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Abstract

[Excerpt] Twelve years ago, Peter Frost called upon us to consider why compassion counts. More than a decade later, we can see, feel, and understand why compassion counts both in the field of organizational studies and in our lives as scholars. As he was so many times during his career, Peter was prophetic in identifying and animating a core idea that is central to our field and to our lives.

We approach this essay with three goals in mind, all focused on elaborating how compassion is a generative force. By generative, we mean that compassion as an idea opens up new vistas, expands resources, and creates new insights (Carlsen & Dutton, 2011). It is a force in the sense that it propels and motivates action. Given these definitions, we hope this essay achieves three goals. First, we aspire to celebrate the generative capacity of compassion by illustrating the wisdom and insight contained in compassion stories, and in particular in one of Peter’s compassion stories. Second, we invite reflection on the meaning of being a compassionate scholar through immersion in stories about Peter left by his colleagues after he died. Third, we discuss how compassion alters our focus, our work, and our imagination in organizational studies. Together, we hope all three angles on how compassion counts celebrate the contribution that Peter’s article is continuing to make in our field and in our lives.

Keywords

leadership, deviance, self, uncertainty, competence

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Comments

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Commentary on ‘Why Compassion Counts!’ Compassion as a Generative Force

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Twelve years ago, Peter Frost called upon us to consider why compassion counts. More than a decade later, we can see, feel, and understand why compassion counts both in the field of organizational studies and in our lives as scholars. As he was so many times during his career, Peter was prophetic in identifying and animating a core idea that is central to our field and to our lives.

We approach this essay with three goals in mind, all focused on elaborating how compassion is a generative force. By generative, we mean that compassion as an idea opens up new vistas, expands resources, and creates new insights (Carlsen & Dutton, 2011). It is a force in the sense that it propels and motivates action. Given these definitions, we hope this essay achieves three goals. First, we aspire to celebrate the generative capacity of compassion by illustrating the wisdom and insight contained in compassion stories, and in particular in one of Peter’s compassion stories. Second, we invite reflection on the meaning of being a compassionate scholar through immersion in stories about Peter left by his colleagues after he died. Third, we discuss how compassion alters our focus, our work, and our imagination in organizational studies. Together, we hope all three angles on how compassion counts celebrate the contribution that Peter’s article is continuing to make in our field and in our lives.

The Wisdom in Compassion Stories

In writing “Compassion Counts,” Peter’s goal was to arouse “a sense and feeling about the importance compassion may have for our understanding of organizational life” (Frost, 1999, pp. 131-132). To engage and inspire his readers both emotionally and intellectually, he opened his ode to compassion by sharing a story about a compassion encounter from his own life. The story opens up a window into Peter’s life as well as to life inside organizations (Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000). While recovering from surgery in a cancer ward, Peter describes witnessing a nurse comfort and encourage another patient who was “humiliated, depressed, [and] defeated” (Frost, 1999, p. 127). Peter’s thoughtful observations about the way this event and its effects unfolded reveal several insights about the nature of compassion in organizations, as well as spark questions yet unanswered.

In working with his story, Peter debunks the common assumption that organizational efficiency and performance are at odds with humanity. He narrates the nurse’s work in ways that show how a person can provide a patient with care and dignity that transforms his attitude and changes his trajectory for recovery. The story weaves together the mutual benefits of the nurse’s actions for both the patient and the organization. At the same time, the story illuminates how the nurse accomplished this vital compassion work. He describes the deftness with which she went about her tasks and uses it to illustrate how compassion is a competency involving “a creativity, a spontaneity, and a very special attunement” (Frost, 1999, p. 129) that has a fundamental impact on the “thinking and doing of professional work” (Frost, 1999, p. 128). He

reminds us that when compassion is lacking, outcomes are flawed. However, when the competency is skillfully practiced, he warns us that compassion is often “disappeared,” and as a result, we often fail to notice it.

Peter acknowledges that a brief compassion encounter like the one he witnessed lying in a bed across the room has ripple effects across people and time. Initially an observer of the interaction between nurse and patient, Peter was drawn toward the suffering of the man. He describes the nurse’s compassion calling him to extend his own compassion toward the patient despite his own pain. Weeks later, he wrote a letter commending the nurse to the hospital administrators. He remained so moved that he encouraged others to join him in advancing the study of compassion.

The brief review of the lessons Peter drew from the compassion encounter he witnessed, and became a part of, demonstrates that much is to be learned from compassion stories. They prompt us to rethink what we “know” and stimulate new avenues for compassion research. For instance, the deep and lasting impact of Peter’s mere witnessing a compassionate act makes us question boundary conditions of the well-documented findings that bad is stronger than good (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Certain types of positive experiences, like giving, receiving, or witnessing compassion, may activate positive spirals, increasing positive effects.

With this in mind, it is generative to consider the untold parts of Peter’s story. Starting with the immediate beneficiary of the compassion, the patient, one wonders how the nurse’s compassion was perceived. Did the man recognize or feel it in the same way as Peter, or did the nurse’s kindness go unnoticed either due to her interpersonal skill or due to the extent of his suffering? How did he respond to the nurse? Other than the benefits to his immediate state of mind, one might wonder whether the man was changed in other ways. In future interactions with others, would his expectations be raised about how he would be treated, and would he show more compassion to others?

Research on compassion providers tends to focus on negative repercussions, such as compassion fatigue or burnout (Figley, 1995; Jacobson, 2006). Considering the nurse in the story, we could ponder whether seeing or hearing about the patient’s subsequent improvement was energizing and reinforced her compassionate behavior. Gratitude from the patient or Peter’s letter of praise and acknowledgement might have helped buffer the nurse from compassion fatigue. Furthermore, his formal acknowledgement of her kindness and caring acts may have strengthened her prosocial identity, and raised her own aspirations for the differences she could make in patients’ lives.

The story prompts curiosity about the organizational ripples from this episode. How did the hospital administrators react to Peter’s letter, and what did they do with it? Researchers might consider how organizations can institutionalize practices that encourage feedback about how successfully they and their members are developing and exercising their compassion competencies. With such information, organizations may gain a better appreciation for the role of compassion in their overall success, seek to improve where compassion is lacking, and recognize and reward those members whose compassion has made a difference.

Noting the importance of being aware of, and engaged with, compassion in our own lives for being scholars of compassion, Peter made “a plea [to researchers] to tap our personal experiences of compassion in life to enrich our lives as theorists, as practitioners, as teachers” (Frost, 1999, p. 132). He led by example, not only in his use of the story of the

nurse but more importantly also in his everyday interactions. Beyond seeing the wisdom embedded in a single episode of compassion, Peter's example extends to reflections about what it means to be a compassionate scholar.

Meaning of Being a Compassionate Scholar

The generative force of compassion is on display when a person lives his or her life in ways that model the values and actions we associate with compassion. When compassion counts in our lives as scholars (i.e., as teachers and researchers), we approach our work in a more open-hearted way and feel and respond to the suffering, and more broadly to the humanity of others. By all accounts, Peter was a compassionate scholar. We use excerpts from the stories deposited on a community website upon his untimely death in October 2004 as one testimony to the impact of being a compassionate scholar. These stories invite us to consider the meaningfulness of defining our scholarly impact in ways that honor the significance of being a compassionate scholar.

To be a compassionate scholar means to act and to encourage others to act in ways that are heartfelt. Acting from the heart, in a world like academe where the mind reigns supreme, was often seen as courageous. As one of Peter's former students put it when called upon to make a speech at the end of a leadership training session,

I had prepared two written speeches but threw them out, and in the end spoke without prepared notes. Peter was extremely supportive of this, and mentioned several times how brave he thought I was. What I learned from him: speak from the heart, have confidence in one's ideas, take risks. It changed my life.

In this account, and in many that follow, one person acting from the heart toward another's vulnerability opens the possibility of significant and lasting change.

To act from the heart as a compassionate scholar shines through in the smallest acts and gestures. In the previous story, it was in a compliment offered at the end of a scary speech. In the entry below, it is the power of a warm handshake offered toward Nick Turner who saw himself as a more distant colleague: "My enduring memory of Peter is one of literal connection, and it reinforced itself every time I saw him. He had the warmest handshake of anyone I had ever met. I didn't know Peter well, but this spoke volumes."

In small acts and through his presence, Peter showed up in ways that strengthened others. A member of the "Compassionlab," a research group that Peter worked with for many years, describes a quintessential Peter action where he gently but firmly displayed his support:

I remember a time in a scholarly gathering when I spoke up about something—how impertinent for a doctoral student. And, while I was literally surrounded by challengers, Peter just came and stood behind my chair. That action is so symbolic of how he protected people's voices . . . and encouraged people to move outside of the limitations and boundaries that the university sometimes imposes on us. Peter believed in me— sometimes even more than I believed in myself—and I always knew it.

For many colleagues, the heartfelt actions were experienced as forms of active listening, which drew out strengths and gifts from others. Karl Weick, who was a close friend of Peter's, described his experience this way:

Peter had a profound ability to bring us together, to draw the best from us. His spirit infused everything he wrote, everything he gathered, pretty much everything he touched. Peter thought the most powerful idea he had ever

encountered was “active listening.” No wonder. He lived it. And we grew because he practiced it in our presence. To honor Peter is to listen attentively to one another.

In all four of these cases, the warmth of heartfelt actions from a compassionate scholar creates a connection that fosters others’ growth and sense of belongingness. The power in heartfelt actions reminds us that as academics we actively participate in a human community of practice, where small acts from the heart can cultivate a community where growth and replenishment are the norm as opposed to the exception.

To be a compassionate scholar is to also be a generous scholar—one who gives but asks nothing in return. For such people, generosity is interwoven with heartfelt connections to others, and such people often build bridges between points of view that others can stand on. This quality of a compassionate scholar shines through in Marta B. Calas’ tribute to Peter, describing how she tried to explain Peter’s way of being to her doctoral class who had never had the chance to meet him in person:

I told them Peter’s generosity knew no boundaries. A bridge between different scholarly orientations, teaching, and research, he was also a bridge between time and space, places and generations. His bridging was made out of love for each of us as friends and colleagues, no matter where we came from, no matter which way we thought. His friendship made us better people and better scholars. He gave his time, advice, and encouragement, and never asked for anything in return.

This general characterization of Peter the scholar was substantiated by an account of University of British Columbia (UBC) colleague Sandra Robinson who bore testimony to the generosity of Peter in the everyday:

Peter just never stopped giving of himself, as if he just couldn’t resist helping. As most who knew Peter can say, he was always there for me. I was looking through my email stash this evening, looking for Peter emails. Over and over again, I came across short notes— unsolicited emails expressing encouragement, reassurance, or pats on the back when he sensed I needed them the most. Peter sensed a lot. More than any person I have ever known. In the last email from him he says, “Once I get into the groove of this chemo, we can get together. I’d love to see you and be a listening post if you want that.”

If one reads through the numerous stories of Peter, the man who made compassion count in organizational studies, one can easily see that compassion was more than an idea to be studied. Rather, compassion was an ideal to be imagined and enacted as researchers, teachers, mentors, and people, which, if realized, could uplift possibilities for each individual as well as the life of the community as a whole. Twelve years after the initial publication of “Compassion Counts,” we see and feel the force, the opening, and, increasingly, the possibilities from heeding Peter’s call.

Celebrating the Generative Capacity of Compassion

When Peter opened the door to seeing how compassion counts in organizations and in life more generally, he altered our focus and attention on what is important inside organizations and inside individuals’ lives. A focus on compassion or “the heart’s response to sorrow” (Kornfield, 1993, p. 326) changes organizational researchers’ attention and focus in at least three ways. First, a focus on compassion beckons researchers to look toward, as opposed to away from, human pain and grief, which is an everyday and pervasive experience for people inside organizations. The forms of suffering in, and of, work organizations are varied and significant (Driver, 2007; Hazen, 2008). Where there is suffering, there is the human

capacity for compassion (Dalai Lama, 1995; Nussbaum, 1996). Thus, a focus on compassion in organizations lights up suffering that is often hidden and also reveals the healing force of human-to-human compassion. (Lilius, Kanov, Dutton, Worline, & Maitlis, 2011) This point leads to a second way a compassion focus redirects attention in organizations.

A compassion lens opens up new ways to consider individuals', groups', and collective capabilities that are rarely acknowledged and valued in organizational studies. A compassion lens opens up consideration of emotional and relational capabilities (like caring, empathy, and sympathy) at the individual (e.g., Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius & Kanov, 2002; O'Donohoe & Turley, 2006) and collective levels (e.g., Huy, 1999; Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011) that foster individual and collective healing (Powley & Cameron, 2008), adaptability (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006), resilience (Powley, 2009), and sometimes greater effectiveness (Cameron, 2003). Finally, a focus on compassion directs attention toward everyday, ordinary human conduct and the power of small actions (e.g., a hug, a card, being present) in leaving big marks on individuals (e.g., Frost et al., 2000; Lilius et al., 2008) as well as on institutions (e.g., Frost, 2003; Frost, Dutton, Maitlis, Lilius, Kanov, & Worline, 2006) and their members (Grant, Dutton, & Rosso, 2008) in terms of what it means to be compassionate or part of a compassionate organization.

The generative capacity of compassion as a lens is revealed through how it alters our work as researchers and teachers in organizational studies. Since Peter's call for making compassion count, new lines of research have opened up and old research domains have been rekindled, enlivening conversations and inquiry about organizational studies and compassion. For example, the 2011 Academy of Management (professional association for management researchers and practitioners) Theme of Daring to Care: Passion and Compassion in Management Practice and Research attracted more than 7,000 submissions and spawned a special issue of the *Academy of Management Review*. Both efforts are sure to bring compassion as a research subject from the sidelines to center stage. On the teaching front, a compassion focus has opened up new ways to engage managerial and leadership development (e.g., Boyatzis & McKee, 2005) and coaching preparation (Boyatzis, Smith, & Blaize, 2006), which puts the deliberate cultivation of empathy, perspective-taking, self compassion, and resiliency as learning and development goals.

Finally, we see the generative capacity of compassion through how it enlists our imagination about what could be in and of organizations. Compassion calls forth a positive image of organizations (Cooperrider, 2000) as sites of human comfort and healing in the wake of inevitable pain. It beckons us to consider compassion and care as signs of the aliveness of organizations as human communities (Dutton, 2003; Sandelands, 2003). Compassion as a construct and as an ideal helps to unlock wonder, that two-in-oneness of beautiful mystery and rational inquiry (Sandelands & Carlsen, 2011) that is an innate capacity of the human mind and heart.

Twelve years after publishing "Compassion Counts," Peter Frost's legacy—his writing and his life—lives on. We imagine compassion will continue to count forever.

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