

THE FORTITUDE OF OTHERS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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Some years ago, I received an email from a young woman named Mae Gibson, who had written an essay about an especially difficult time in her life, which she had mostly faced on her own. She wanted me to know about her struggles and how they had turned out. She also wanted me to know that she had submitted her essay to the Elie Wiesel Foundation for its Ethics Prize competition. Her email to me included the good news that her essay had won first place.

The essay begins with what a screenwriter would call the inciting incident. Gibson was a 13-year-old living with her family in the south, when, on her own, she decided to start going to church one Sunday. There she met another independent churchgoer her age named David. “Under earlier circumstances,” she says, “I probably would have reached out to David, who was a misfit of the same order to which I had once belonged. But the situation was different now — I had transformed from an ugly duckling into a slightly-more-attractive duckling. No longer an outcast, I was coveted, rather than rejected, by my peers. Did I dare risk this newly won position?... I did not.”

Although not deliberately cruel to David, she treated him with indifference. She says, “There were moments when David would speak and I would feel revulsion — mostly because I felt an empathetic understanding, and I hated the knowledge that I was somehow linked to this outcast. I also hated him for his foolishness. Didn’t he see that we didn’t want him? Even the adult leader of our youth group engaged in subtle mockery of him. One night, David stood up and told us how much he loved us. He said that the times he was happiest were when he was with us, and that was why he came to church on his own each week, even though his parents did not attend. I think we all laughed.”

As you might suspect, this part of the story ends badly. Gibson writes, “The next day, David died. He had been in church that morning, and I remember we were both left waiting for our rides after everyone else had gone. For some reason I can’t recall, David had a kitten with him. He asked me if I’d like to hold it. I pretended not to hear him. Three hours later, he was hit by a car and died.”

The remainder of Gibson’s essay details her quest to find an ethic to guide her life — a standard that would offer a frame of reference larger than her own desires and a guiding purpose more decisive than her own indifference. It was a quest that turned out to be long as well as lonely. Like many people today, Gibson found herself facing the most daunting challenges of her life alone.

The current generation of high school students — Generation Z, as some call it, or the iGeneration — grew up with smart phones and do not remember a time before the internet. They are intensive digital consumers and adroit multitaskers. They are more connected digitally than any previous generation, but they also tend to be more isolated personally. Rates of loneliness, depression and suicide among teens have skyrocketed since 2011, a trend some recent research has linked to the rise in use of smartphones and social media. The rise in unhappiness among teens tracks almost exactly the rise in screen time.

At the level of life's most daunting challenges, the smartphone turns out to be an instrument not of connection, but of isolation. If a smartphone is the principal means by which teens end up relating to other people, it ultimately leaves them on their own to find their way in the world.

Against this backdrop, the response of high school students in Parkland, Florida to the killing of 17 of their colleagues on Valentine's Day has been especially heartening. In the immediate aftermath of their shared tragedy, the students in Parkland gathered in one place to cry together, strategize together, protest together, and speak out together. After years of passively participating in active-shooter drills, they stood together and demanded change. In Isabel Fattal's article in the Atlantic titled, "The Power of Grief-Fueled Activism," she says, "The Parkland students have been moving from candlelight vigils and friends' funerals to CNN interviews and strategy sessions in each other's living rooms."

Fattal continues, "Part of what makes active coping so healthy is that it offers the person an opportunity to get some control back in a situation that's otherwise totally out of her hands. And activism has its own particular benefits: People experiencing grief can find it helpful to stay connected to other people, to help others, and to be engaged in activities and routines."

Put differently, sharing grief with other people doesn't lessen the grief, but it gives you someone to hang on to when you feel like you are in freefall. It gives you a sense that someone will help you up if you stumble and patch you up if you fall. When times are tough, it's helpful to be with other people.

The contemporary American poet Marge Piercy begins her poem titled "The Low Road" by suggesting that when we find ourselves in bad situations — she's thinking of abuse, oppression, and discrimination, though her insight applies elsewhere as well — we initially tend to think of ourselves as facing the situation alone. The problem is that there's often not much we can do on our own. When times are tough, it's hard to go it alone.

But if two people face a challenge together — that's a different story. Percy continues:

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.

Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can play bridge and start
an organisation. With six
you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.
A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.

When times are tough, it's helpful to be with other people — sometimes lots of people. Amanda Petrusich, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, reported on the recent Women's March in New York City, which took place on the first anniversary of the Women's March in Washington after Trump's inauguration. She noted that it wasn't all that difficult for the Washington march last year to harness the burst of acute outrage at Trump's election, since the anger was still brand new and white-hot. "Yet," she says, "anger, no matter how deep, tends to give way to exhaustion, which is far harder to focus or mobilize. Fresh rage is easy. Sustained rage tends to turn in on itself, change shape, hew closer to resignation."

Petrusich says that last year, she dealt with Trump's election by not speaking to another person for several days. "This year," she says, "I didn't want to be alone with my sadness. I needed a crowd."

Why did she need a crowd? For her, the goal of collective protest isn't merely to facilitate immediate change, which often doesn't happen. "For me," she says, "marching on Saturday was a way to reenergize and to find strength and fortitude in the strength and fortitude of others, to let them hold me up now with the hope that someday, I might be able to do the same for them." She concludes, "I started the March feeling hopeless and ended it feeling tougher, more present. I'll think of the faces of the women I walked beside until next year, when we see each other again."

In the wake of their shared tragedy, the students in Parkland, Florida found strength and fortitude in the strength and fortitude of others. When Amanda Petrusich took to the streets to voice her despair at the brokenness of the world and her frustration with the intransigence of the powers that be, she found strength and fortitude in the strength and fortitude of others.

You and I come to All Souls each week for much the same reason. We need others to forgive us when we can't forgive ourselves, bolster our courage when we are feeling afraid, ease our pain when we are feeling bruised, and point the way when we've lost our

sense of direction. Here, we find strength and fortitude in the strength and fortitude of others.

Fourteen years after Mae Gibson's friend David was killed by a car, Gibson walked into All Souls one Sunday when she was visiting New York. After 14 years of facing her disappointments and her demons alone, she found herself here on a Sunday morning.

She writes, "A grand, beautiful building welcomed me with open doors, exuding warmth and peace. I made my way to the front of the church and settled into an empty pew, where I promptly began to weep... Suddenly, and for the first time in my life, I understood that I was part of something bigger than myself. There in that cold, gray, overwhelming city, where I had once felt so much loneliness, I discovered a place where souls gather in search of love, humanity, and community. What a wonder it was that there, on that restless island, a crowd of people had come together to literally sing out their fears and their hopes. What a gift I received that day! It was as though I'd found my place in the world."

No matter whether you are a member of Generation A or Generations Z, no matter what tragedy you have suffered or what sin you have committed, no matter how lonely you feel or how lost you have been, like Mae Gibson, you have a place at All Souls. Here, you can find strength and fortitude in the strength and fortitude of others.

Marge Piercy concludes her poem with these words:

It starts when you say We
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.