

Your Pain Isn't Special



Send him mail.



“Insight for the Young and Unrestrained” is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

Whenever the occasional local massacre or tragedy occurs, it serves as a reminder to the people nearby that evil exists in the world and it has very real consequences. People become easily saddened and sorrowful because the terrible events they’ve witnessed have hit close to home, and that makes the victims easy to identify with. Terror becomes real when we can suddenly picture it happening to those we know and care about.

These sorrowful feelings serve as instigators of change, whether it be effective change or not. They make us want to take steps to create a world where evil actions cannot exist anymore. They are but momentary and passing feelings, however. In time, homeostasis returns to all but those most personally affected by whatever the latest injustice happens to be. Life goes on, or so we tell ourselves.

This is, of course, all a great delusion. Anyone with even a glimpse of worldwide awareness knows that great acts of evil are happening at any given time across much of the planet to all types of people. We don’t care about those people though, not in the same way we do when it happens on our own soil. They are too different than we like to believe ourselves to be, and we cannot properly identify with their plight, even if we make the effort to become aware of it.

People become emotionally neutered in time, and these now and then tragedies serve only as an excuse to once again experiment with being a creature capable of true empathy toward a fellow man. They’re a mask we get to wear to play along in the game of social normalness, much in the same way that Christmas and the holiday season serve as an excuse to see the family you might never talk to for 11 months out of the year. It’s what we do to remain what think “human” is supposed to mean.

Imagine if for a moment the entire population of the earth opened their hearts enough to feel the magnitude of sorrow appropriate for all the crimes against humanity being

committed right now. Imagine if we had the capacity to not be so selective in the crises we acknowledge. How many African girls facing forceful clitoral dismemberment did you cry for today? How many of the Chinese schoolchildren being beaten and committing suicide entered your mind at some point on your way to work? Try not to let it ruin your day. Actually, do let it ruin your day. I hope every person reading this has an extremely shitty day thinking about everyone else whose days are incomparably shittier.

It is our inability to feel which allows these evils to continue to exist. Tough guys pride themselves in their tolerance for physical pain, but who on earth has an emotional pain tolerance large enough to accommodate all the suffering of all the mistreated and murdered people of the world? We're weak in this regard. I can't help but think that if enough people allowed themselves, for even a moment, to experience a sorrow so soul-wrenching as to be appropriate for all the deplorable acts occurring in the world that we could fix this whole mess in no time.

It hurts, and it sucks, and there's no getting around it. This is what our species does to itself. If you want to be part of the cure, be a force actively working against evil, then have the courage to hurt for those whom no one else will. Become so overwhelmed with the magnitude of this sorrow that you become useless. Try to console yourself with the company of friends and family, or a cheap comedy, or a walk on the beach, or pictures of grammatically-stunted cats, and realize that none of that will begin to make a dent in the overwhelming dread you feel when you really try to apply true principles of empathy on a scale so large.

And if you've never witnessed or experienced true first-hand suffering and inhumanity... then I feel sorry for you. Your depth of emotional maturity will always be limited by the furthest extent to which you know human experience can extend, including both the highest highs and the lowest lows. The process hurts. It's one of the only things that truly terrifies me: knowing that right now, somewhere on this planet there is a suffering so deep that if I were to witness it I would be utterly psychologically destroyed. My personal quest in life revolves around gradually becoming strong enough to take on evil in its most complete and terrifying forms. I don't care if that sounds cartoonish or delusional, because I know exactly what I mean when I say it. If you think the world is more or less hunky-dory and there's nothing worth getting so worked up about, then I feel obligated to inform you that it is you who live in a cartoon world. But don't worry. It hasn't bothered you so far, so why should now be any different?

So give up on these emotional holidays. There are no days or events more special than the rest. There is no most wonderful time of the year, or moments that demand silence and respect for the fallen. The fallen are everywhere. Everyday is a memorial. Stop picking and choosing when you'll let yourself be human for the sake of upkeeping the social balance. You either celebrate everyday with all the joys and sorrows it brings, or you live a

compartmentalized existence. To treat some pain as more special or sacred than another is arrogance in its ugliest form.

I apologize if this sounds harsh, but it's important for the sake of ending the kinds of crimes we mourn over that we all come to acknowledge their prevalence and destructive power. It's only when we are willing to feel the pain of others around the world that we will be able to put a stop to it. We could save the world so easily, if we had but a tiny bit more emotional fortitude.