

Your Personal Coach

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As I travel around our community in the devastating wake of Hurricane Isabel, I have been deeply moved by the powerful sense of community and connection that has emerged amidst the debris. It is abundantly clear that the Outer Banks is filled with strong and independent people. Perhaps that is why we have chosen to live in this place of such savage beauty – a fragile strip of sand buffeted by the many moods of the ocean.

We are going forward with courage and determination – a true warrior spirit. We have embraced the wisdom of the ages that advises us to make our own way, take care of ourselves, and proceed bravely. We are living examples of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King when he said, “The ultimate measure of man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge.” Or as Helen Keller pointed out, “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.”

At a time like this, it is necessary to be strong and brave. God knows we don’t need any whiners getting in the way. But everything of substance casts a shadow and the shadow of courage is sometimes a failure to demonstrate compassion for our own losses.

There are two reactions to suffering that get in the way of healing. One is, “No one has ever suffered like I have. No one has ever experienced the same kind of pain or loss.” Clearly that’s not true, and a deep commitment to this point of view leads to self-pity. But the other unhealthy reaction to loss is a denial of one’s own pain: “I shouldn’t complain. Others have it so much worse than I do.”

Both of these positions lack compassion. In the first case, the lack of compassion is toward others. It shows a failure to “suffer with” – which is what the word “compassion” literally means. This is the plaintive wailing that resonates with a false sense of separation from others. In denying the true universality of suffering, we are refusing to acknowledge our deepest spiritual connections. In the second case, there is a lack of compassion for oneself.

It’s important to find the middle way. The strong, independent spirit so much a part of those of us who call this place home, is not prone to whining, or to believing that we are the first and last to have truly suffered. If we are in any collective danger, as we heal from this disaster, it is in not allowing ourselves to grieve our own losses.

It’s okay to feel sad about the destruction of the garden you tended so lovingly through the spring and summer. It’s okay to feel upset and exhausted by the cleanup in your yard and the uprooted trees that have torn up your carefully manicured lawn. It’s okay to cry for the damage to your boat or the destruction of Jennette’s Pier where you first learned to fish. It’s okay to mourn the loss of family photographs destroyed by floodwater or feel sorrow about the birdhouse your son made in eighth grade shop class now crushed by a falling Pine. It’s okay to want to scream at yet another day without electricity with an ice-cold beer or soda nothing more than a distant memory. This authentic grief and frustration is not wimpy, self-serving, or weak. These are real feelings that deserve personal acknowledgement and respect.

We do not deny compassion to those who have lost more – their loved ones, homes, businesses, or jobs – by allowing ourselves our own sadness, shedding our own tears. Accepting these feelings and expressing them are important for healing. This is a ‘both/and’ not an ‘either/or’ way of looking at things. The broken open heart lets *everything* in and allows the light of compassion to shine for others as well as for ourselves. Warriors often move forward with tears in their eyes. We are in no danger of whining.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.