

It could be that they are at a loss for words or it may be a way of dealing with their own discomfort and it may be their projecting their fears and low tolerance for pain. All this could be operating under conscious awareness. When trying to make sense of human suffering we may feel helpless when we face the fact that in many situations we actually lack control. We may rush to create meaning to console ourselves or others. We often rationalize and try to find a neat framework to fit the pain that is spilling out through the cracks. We make tragic events and losses part of a bigger plan that will help us grow and evolve.

However, using platitudes and attaching this type of explanations to others' suffering can be rather callous and it diminishes their experience and pain. It can also make people feel worse. In some sense, we are projecting our neat framework on their lived experience, because we may not have the empathic capacity to imagine what it might be like to be in their shoes or because we believe that we are genuinely helping. As a species we always look for explanations and reasons in the aftermath of events that overwhelm us. We all do it. Dani Sapiro writes: 'On the cover of *People*, the sole survivor of a plane crash expresses his gratitude to God. He doesn't understand why he alone was saved. "I put myself in God's hands," he says. "I have faith that everything happens for a reason." We look for reasons in retrospect. We tell ourselves stories. Every near miss has a narrative. Since the time of the cave dwellers we have attempted to take the random events of our existence and fashion them into something that makes sense (Devotion, 2010).

Before I go on I think it would be useful to mention that there is **'cause and effect'**, and many things are the consequences of many other things, and oftentimes, the seeds for things that happen have been planted a long time ago. There might be forces and dynamics at play that we are unaware of at any given moment. We act and respond from both a conscious and unconscious place. With many events it is wise and helpful to explore deeper causality, to pick up the thread and see where it takes us and what we can learn from it. For instance, trauma

impacts our physiology and can lead to many problems. It potentiates our sympathetic system, which is detrimental to our well being. Unresolved it will take its toll. Lung cancer might be the result of a smoking addiction, but also, emotional suffering, intersecting with our genetic predisposition. Being evicted might be the result of the interplay of many personal and social causes.

Prolonged response patterns and violations may have come about as an inability to set firm boundaries over a long period of time prior to recent events. Often causality is complex and many intersecting factors contribute to the end results. Who we are to a great extent is the result of our relationships and the things that happen to us along the way. Taking into account Dr Dan Siegel's work on interpersonal neurobiology we understand the mind as a relational process that regulates energy flow and our brains as constantly being rewired by our relational experiences and events that happen in our lives. It has also been found that social pain is coded similarly in our brains to physical pain and that both are perceived as danger to our survival.

A long while ago, I did some voluntary work at a children's hospital. It is very difficult to imagine one saying to a young child who has just undergone chemo or to a mother who is not certain if her toddler is ever going to reach adolescence that 'everything happens for a reason' and that there is some grander plan in which her child was meant to suffer to give her the opportunity to perhaps grow, for instance. There is also randomness and there is disease that happens because we are vulnerable organisms both psychologically and physically. And there are causes like environmental toxicity and other factors, but this is relevant to 'cause and effect'.

One of the children that I spent a little time with had burn scars all over his tiny body. He seemed to qualify for a severe post traumatic symptoms condition and was agitated most of the time I spent with him. His development seemed to have been arrested or slowed down. He trusted no one and ate very little. I was never told what exactly had happened to this little guy during

his short life on this planet, but there was definitely no room for platitudes about him needing this lesson to grow and evolve into a better human being.

Once it was asked of another woman and myself to try and give this little boy a shower. He cried throughout the whole process. In that experience there was no room for superficial explanations just the need to be there, get on with the task as quickly as possible and hold space for his suffering without cringing, numbing out and rushing to impose ideas that could make our own pain at witnessing it more bearable. We needed to stay with our discomfort and our *Why?* Thomas Hubl says that we have a transpersonal nervous system and that we happen in each others' bodies and self. Staying in that place, receiving the others' pain, containing it from a place of love is all that we can do at times.

At a broader level to imply that things that take place across the globe like war atrocities, genocides, terrorist acts, dislocation, child labor, dire poverty or natural disasters all happen for a reason, to teach us a lesson at some mega level, borders on cynicism and even irrationality. It is difficult to understand how God or the Universe would inflict so much devastation in Africa, for instance, as a means of teaching the people there or the rest of the world a lesson. Maybe slavery was part of this post trauma growth plan, too. Could we truly tell a mother in a war zone who is burying her child that 'things happen for a reason' to foster her own or others' growth?

The fact that as a species it is time we learned from our history is another matter. It is time to see that a shift is required if, for instance, we want to hand down a planet that can sustain future generations. Causality and the consequences of actions should be explored, identified and discussed openly. Actually, that kind of processing tends to be discouraged because it inconveniences. But believing that dispossession and famine or the plundering of the planet is part of a bigger plan of the Universe is another issue with serious social and political implications?

There is no arguing that suffering and devastation can become an opportunity for awakening and post traumatic growth. Often we are shaken out of oblivion or ignorance. Shifts take place in our environment and priorities. I recently heard a story about a child soldier who had suffered a lot and killed people, and then was able to go on and support other children's liberation, healing and growth, but that does not cancel the loss or the destruction. Nor does it mean that someone cannot reach that place of activism and serving others through other routes.

Also, post traumatic growth and healing often do not take place due to lack of resources, support and holding contexts or severity of events. Often people's lives are simply destroyed or diminished. Many homeless people will end up dying in the street since finding their way out of that labyrinth requires more than desire. Loss and suffering do not necessarily make all people more empathic, kinder or wiser unless a healing process can take place, a loving witness is present, a holding context available. People whose survival is threatened can become aggressive and harsh. It is sometimes helpful to remember Maslow's hierarchy pyramid and bear in mind that altruistic behaviours and self actualization more often than not require other needs to be met first. Prolonged negative experiences negatively impact our wiring and physiology.

In any case, how appropriate is it to tell someone who for instance is in a wheel chair after an accident, even if psychological growth has occurred and positive things have taken place after the accident, that it all happened for a reason, as if post traumatic growth is some kind of panacea and even desirable for everyone or as if this is the only way that someone could have become a more integrated person, grown psychologically or achieved meaningful work or a dream? Also, there is no way that we can know what would have happened in the absence of the adversity. It is plausible that people grow and change and good things happen in the absence of tragedy and deep suffering.

In some sense we are imposing our beliefs and ideas of what that person might have needed and even how long they are supposed to grieve, but we cannot always assume that we know what is preferable or best for other people. When there are positive outcomes or good things follow dire events and when one is able to sublimate a tragedy or smaller loss into art or meaningful work it is a gift, but it does not cancel out the pain or terror or grief of the traumatic event /s and it is unreasonable to believe that one's life might not have evolved or positive things might not have occurred without the loss.

Before we resort to platitudes it might be helpful to pause for a moment and imagine ourself or a loved one going through it. The phrase 'everything happens for a reason' also removes accountability for social injustices, inequality, predatory behaviours, environmental destruction, and it subtly, reinforces narcissistic entitlement. Often it masks a resistance to challenge societal views and practices or seek justice. It soothes guilt and it normalizes inequity, exploitation and bad behaviour. We all intentionally or unintentionally hurt others, but appropriate responses are reflection, remorse, apology or restoration. It takes people off the hook and it can induce passivity. And as I mentioned in the previous post maybe it would be helpful to ask: *What does it serve?*

The phrase 'everything happens for reason' may also get in the way of the grieving process. It seems to imply that there will be a compensation of some kind, if not soon, much later. In some sense it is psychologically violent. It also seems to inherently involve denial of reality and the force this reality may be exerting on a person. It could soothe us and give us hope for a while, but also distract us from healing and recovery. Sometimes the deepest healing comes through accepting reality or looking at it without flinching. Clarity and realism are important and part of the healing and integrative process. Ariel Levy writes: 'They want to believe that everything happens for a reason. Some people need to believe this to indemnify themselves— against miscarriage, or misfortune in general.'

Some people need to believe it so they can say, “You’ll get pregnant again and everything will work out fine,” because they want to comfort me. But in a strange way, I am comforted by the truth’ (The Rules Do Not Apply, 2017)

It can also disempower and create guilt in the other if recovery is not swift and things fall apart. Our empathy, compassion and tangible support is all that people need when things fall apart and in times of grief and heart ache. They do not need patronizing or our own agendas dropped on them. Sometimes it is more honest, courageous and humane to accept that terrible things happen and that the pain is *that* intolerable. Certain things that happen to us are simply bad, painful, devastating or unjust. An attuned other is ideally able to contain the other’s experience. Losses and grief can be brutal processes. And there are many different kinds of losses and some cannot be eradicated, restored and fixed, only carried. Megan Devine says: some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried (from her website). Tim Lawrence says: ‘the fact that you’re faced with tragedy in itself is painful enough. How you honor what you have lost is something that you – and only you – can enact’ (from his website).

Refraining from platitudes and just acknowledging and being present may be the wisest response, This is not an easy thing in the presence of pain because it tends to stir up too much of our own stuff. Probably the most loving thing to do is facilitate the other through the grieving process if possible. Transformation comes through allowing the grieving process to unfold and through support. Hopefully, there will come a time when the person will be able to start making sense of their experience and discover how to live henceforth. Hopefully, new positive things will come their way and hopefully they will have been able to integrate their experience. Their meaning making needs to be their own and to be open to changes as time goes by, whether it fits our schemas or not. And yes, may we all be resilient enough to carry our pains and may there be compassion, growth, change and restoration for all.

