

Summer of Peace 2012

Emiliana Simon-Thomas

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Cassandra: This is Cassandra Vieten, and I am the Director of Research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences and a scientist at California Pacific Medical Center. I'm very happy to be hosting this week's Science of Peace section of the Summer of Peace of The Shift Network.

Today it's my great pleasure to welcome a colleague and a new friend, Emiliana Simon Thomas, who earned her doctorate in Cognition Brain and Behavior at the UC, Berkeley using behavioral, EEG and fMRI method in her dissertation examined how negative states like fear and aversion influence thinking and decision-making.

Then during her post-doc, Emiliana moved into the positive terrain to study care/nurturance, love of humanity, compassion and awe under the mentorship of Dacher Keltner through signaling, perceiving and self-reporting of emotions to peripheral autonomic and neural indices of emotion to understanding the psychosocial benefits of emotional authenticity and connection, Emiliana continues to examine the potential for enhancing everything pro-social.

She is previously the Associate Director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford, and Emiliana recently joined the Greater Good Science Center as the Science Director with great enthusiasm for her hometown, Berkeley, and heartfelt ambition to support and grow Greater Good Science to new heights, widths and depths.

Welcome so much, Emiliana. I'm just so glad you're here, and I know that we're going to be talking today about the science of interpersonal peace.

Emiliana: Thank you so much, Cassie. It's my privilege and pleasure to be here. So I appreciate it, and I'm happy to be part of this Shift interview about the Science of Peace.

Cassandra: Well, first, I know that you're pretty recently arrived at the Greater Good Science Center, and the Greater Good Center has been collaborator and a beacon of light in the scientific world around the science of peace and positive emotion and connection. Can you tell us a little bit more about

what's going on at the Greater Good Science Center now and what you're excited about?

Emiliana: Sure, I'd love to do that. Thank you.

So the Greater Good Science Center is really committed to three main goals. The first goal is somewhat journalistic in nature, and what we try to do is identify, focus on and discover research that pertains to how human connection, interpersonal experience, and positive social relationships benefit health and well-being.

We have managed to build a wide network of scientific colleagues who frequently share with us the cutting edge work that they're doing which they turn into typical peer-reviewed top tier science academic journal type writing which is wonderful and so important but sometimes not as accessible to the average reader. We take those and turn them into fun reading and try to make them available to everybody so that this really important and cutting-edge field doesn't take so long to affect social change. We really want people to be able to capture this new knowledge and use it in their life right away. That's one of our main founding goals.

Second is to actually be involved in and to support the science. We have a couple of fellowship programs for undergraduates and graduate students. We're trying to motivate the next generation of top tier scientists in the area of research to support the Greater Good, to support positive human experience and particularly extent to which once again interpersonal well-being contributes to positive emotional experience.

The third main goal that we have is education in action. When I say education in action I'm speaking of events that we host. We invite really interesting speakers to talk about their cutting-edge work, and we're interested in providing this kind of insight to educators, to mental healthcare providers, and to really anybody else who finds that perhaps the more traditional day-to-day way of operating isn't necessarily leading to the greatest sense of well-being or effectiveness in their day-to-day life. That's really our main thrust.

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Our most exciting new initiative is one called Expanding the Science and Practice of Gratitude. We partnered with Robert Emmons at UC, Davis to get a \$5.6 million gift from the John Templeton Foundation. What we're doing with that is really promoting science to support the claim that

gratitude is fundamentally an experience and attitude that can benefit health and well-being at a both personal level and an interpersonal level.

So that initiative includes a research component. We have a large request for proposals that we advertise, and we collected 265 letters of inquiry. We invited back 60 full proposals, and we anticipate giving 12 to 15 grants for research on a range of fascinating topics from how gratitude gets supported by biological systems from the brain to instead of more peripheral autonomic systems to how biomarkers of stress and immune function shift as a consequence of engaging in a formalized gratitude practice to whether gratitude of having a grateful disposition influences gene expression.

So those all sound very biological and scientific, but really that's the next step for gratitude research. We already know quite a bit about how gratitude practice benefits psychological experiences like psychological well-being and relationships and resilience to trauma and things like that. So those are our most exciting new things.

Cassandra: Oh, truly wonderful, wonderful work. As you know, at the Institute of Noetic Sciences we have now for nearly four decades tried to bring science together with wisdom traditions and psychological understandings of how to create peace and well-being and reach higher level of human potential.

So in some ways I feel like the peace work that's been happening on the ground for many, many, many decades, probably for centuries that most recently and the peace movement around the world have functioned in some ways separately from a scientific perspective. So I'm curious what you think science has to contribute to both the understanding of how we cultivate individual peace but also collective peace.

Emiliana: Absolutely. That's such an important question and the answer which really drives the basic core of what we're doing at Greater Good. In a funny way science has a different cache than other domains which have explored peace and interpersonal peace and individual peace and particularly things like the wisdom tradition which with my utmost respect still has a certain appeal to certain individuals and perhaps maybe less of an appeal to others who for whatever reason don't necessarily consider themselves part of the community that has a strong allegiance to within traditions.

Same thing for peace movements. They seemed to fall on political lines and people identify there as part of that movement or as somehow distinct and on another side of the fence. The beauty of science is for the most part it's got a universal appeal. There's this idea that it's hinged upon mathematics, something numerical and quantitative. It's hinged upon biological systems that don't necessarily differ according to party lines or spiritual traditions or any of these ways that people tend to think of themselves as different from one another.

So in a funny way it's a perfect vehicle for generating information and insight that is secular and nonpartisan and nondenominational. It doesn't lend itself to a certain community or appear exclusive in other community. I appreciate that I am someone who's trained as a scientist and perhaps I'm reflecting a bit of bias on it. There may be people who don't appreciate the value and unbiased reputation of science, but I think for the most part it's more widely embraced as a source of unbiased information than other very, very important domains have been historically.

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So we're just using that or we're exploiting the fact that science has that cache and using that for the universal language so that it is accessible to everyone, so that there aren't differences and who is most likely to think it's interesting would really like to make it interesting to all people who consider themselves human. Does that make sense?

Cassandra:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that it's very true that science is this incredibly powerful tool for understanding the nature of reality that in some ways has not focused its attention as much on the inner realm and the positive realm and in all the ways that the scientific method is in its most ideal form unbiased and objective. There also has been in a sense of scientific bias toward looking at the negative or what are the pathologies of human nature and how have we evolved, the "fight or flight" response, for example, and lots and lots of attention to that over the decades that created this story of humans as essentially aggressive or self-centered.

I wonder if you can speak to a little bit of the work that's been done that's sort of turning that notion on its head and saying, yes, we do have some inherent capacities for competition and aggression and difficulties that we have just as much if not more evolved capacities for cooperation and collaboration and peace.

Emiliana:

Absolutely. I love that you reminded me to pay respect to the cultural influence on science and not just spend time celebrating science's potential contribution in culture because absolutely there is an extent to which the way people view the world determined science, and we were very much influenced by what I would fairly call a misreading of the theory of Darwinian Evolution. I say that only speaking from having looked back at what Darwin actually wrote. We got this idea of survival of the fittest. We got this idea that looking at the animal kingdom, those with the largest piece and the longest, sharpest claws and the biggest bodies were the winners.

But the funny thing is that we were not looking in the mirror at that moment. I mean, clearly that is not the case in a real universe where we're human beings who were small, hairless, very vulnerable and not very strong in the grand scheme of things in terms of what other organisms that existed are dominant on this planet. For whatever reason, the theory of evolution is something to be desired, and it doesn't explain why we've been so successful.

So why have we been so successful? Well, it's because we're such good cooperators. We're so savvy at coming together, at using our collective strength to solve a problem, at building things using multiple perspective and multiple skill sets. This is really where our advantage has arrived from. So that's just a broader view of that idea. Then more individually or biologically there's been a growing field of inquiry and discovery around what are some of these systems that we come in to the world with, that we have evolved with which enable us to connect with others which prompt us to connect with others and facilitate this strong cooperative tendency.

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Dacher Keltner, who is the Faculty Director of the Greater Good Science Center, has done quite a bit of work looking at one of our cranial nerves called the vagus nerve. What's exciting about the vagus nerve? Well, it's a part of the nervous system that creates a highway between the heart and the mind. So what it's doing is it is emanating from a lower part of the brain and wandering -- vagus actually means wandering -- wandering throughout the body and incurring influence, and one of its main influences is to affect the heart rate.

What we've shown is that the extent to which the vagus nerve works, how tonically strong it is or influential it is can predict how

interpersonally pro-social individuals are. So people who tonically, meaning all the time, have a strong vagal influence on their heart rate are the same people who are very empathetic. In other words, they feel concerned towards others who are suffering or others who are vulnerable. They are better at reading the emotional expressions of others, and they're more likely to be trusting and cooperative, with trusting of other people and cooperative with other people.

So **[0:16:23] [Indiscernible]** like core very early evolved cranial nerve which has this incredible role in supporting interpersonal collective or behavior that's directed towards the collective goal type of functioning. Again, it just points to this idea that we're evolved biologically, we're built with mechanisms for interacting and being sensitive to one another.

Other research that's done together more recently has tried to look at what parts of the brain are involved in the cranial nerves but what actual parts of the higher brain are involved in the experience of compassion. There's quite a bit of research looking at the neural underpinnings of empathy, and I'm just going to take a quick moment to explain what the difference between empathy and compassion are and this is informed by a neurobiological perspective.

Empathy really is the process of resonating with someone else's physical and emotional experience. So you perceive somebody else crying when you have a feeling in your chest, when you're moved, when your body does something in response to that pretty much involuntarily something happens. Maybe your shoulders tense up, maybe your jaws tighten. You feel a sense of tightness. This is empathy, this early physiological response to someone else's emotion.

Empathy can also happen in the positive realm. You see somebody laughing hysterically and suddenly you find yourself laughing also. You have no reason, you have no explanation, but just that sort of infectious expression of physical response to someone else's experience, that is empathy. There's wonderful data showing that we have mechanisms to support this, that we are built with what we called "mirror neurons."

The jury is a little bit out on whether mirror neurons are special kinds of neurons that are only in the brain for the purpose of reflecting other people's states or if all neurons have the capacity to mirror. This is a cutting-edge question. What does the mirror function come from? Is it special neurons or is it that any neuron that supports your own function can also mirror a conspecific or another person's function?

In any case, that's very interesting. That's very wonderful. But what does that tell us about? Orienting towards another person's well-being. Mirroring other people is very important. It shows that we are fundamentally social. What Dacher and I were able to show using an fMRI research design which measures which structures in the brains are most involved during a particular state was that when we elicited compassion from people, we engaged this structure in the midbrain called the periaqueductal gray. This isn't the area you might have heard of in your intro psychology class or physiological psychology class or maybe you would have heard of it.

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It is a structure that is very important for two things: one, for ameliorating your own pain if you're in a situation where you have pain and you need to reduce it in order to survive or function or escape from the source of pain; and two, for tending to offspring. So in rodent studies if you damaged the periaqueductal gray the mother rats no longer get themselves into a position to appropriately nurse their offspring, their pups, and they don't protect them and they don't necessarily do the normal, maternal nurturance kinds of behaviors that you would expect.

So what's that all about? What's that telling us? Well, our interpretation is that that's at the core, that we all have this core instinct and it's not just there to help moms take care of infants, but rather it is the sort of the fuel for being concerned towards other people whether they are your offspring or just your close friend or strangers who are suffering enough that we're showing people pictures of.

The fun part that helped us make that interpretation was that we also ask people, "How compassionate do you feel? How strongly is this experience affecting you?" The higher rating individuals gave, people who are in the scanner, the stronger they said they felt, the more this area of the brain that was engaged. So again, we're just finding more and more building research to show that we have this capacity or built with this capacity, and it's really a lot of cultural expectations and ways of thinking that end up shifting our likelihood of acting on this real fundamental and core urge.

Cassandra: So that is the really good news I think that is worth sharing that we are actually inherently built this way with these capacities hardwired in. It's not just a top-down process where we have to use our newer brain to

control our animal impulses that are all lower and base, but there are actually these very bottom up built-in instincts for caregiving and collaboration and cooperation and tending to others.

As you know, we have done a lot of research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences on the kinds of experiences people have and the practices they engage in to cultivate these capacities or to build those muscles or recognize them and integrate them into their lives more often. Some of this work was actually done in collaboration with Dacher Keltner and people in his lab looking at how people really in some ways transform that cultural belief into something different which allows them to manifest the kinds of behaviors that are good for them and good for the people around them and eventually good for our entire collective as a whole.

So I wonder if you could speak a little bit to what you've learned about the kinds of experiences people have and the practices people can engage in to cultivate these capacities and these innate abilities.

Emiliana:

Absolutely. I wanted to back up one more time, Cassie. Forgive me for this, but there was a little piece that I left out from my previous explanation about these core biological systems and how we're hardwired. I'll do that and then I will tell you about some of the practices and experiences that are most helpful in terms of shifting the way one experiences and operates in the world. The last little piece is a body of research on what is affectionately known as the reward circuitry in the brain.

We know quite a bit in the domain of neuroscience about how people experience pleasure, what structures, what circuits, what networks are supporting that basic fundamental feeling of pleasure and perhaps it's brought on by a wonderful piece of chocolate cake being set down in front of you when you're just in the mood for that or perhaps it's brought on by being reunited with a family member who you haven't seen for quite some time.

I'd love to focus on the second piece because that's what the data is showing. What the data is showing is that these circuits which we spend a lot of time thinking about in the realms of personal pleasure and hedonic pleasure and building of resources and access to material pleasures, actually it turns out as equally, if not more, tuned to cooperative pleasure, to collective pleasure.

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So if we have people participate in the task where they earn money, let's say they earn \$5 for hitting a button just fast enough and we look at what's the pleasure signal in their brain for that \$5. Let's just arbitrarily say it's a \$5 to make it extra confusing. But then we say, well, we're going to have them play a game again, but this time they are going to play it with another person. It's the collective cooperative activity that ends up generating the reward.

So this time where they're playing with a partner, they again press the button fast enough in some way that is relevant or contingent upon the other person's performance also. This time they earn \$5, and we look at the activation in the brain and the reward circuitry. This fascinating thing is that when this \$5, a reward is one collectively, the activation reward system is higher so you get a \$7. Again, we are exquisitely tuned in many different levels of neural functioning to the benefits of collective engagement.

Second quicker study to describe was done by Bill Harbaugh, University of Oregon, and published in Science magazine. His study showed that when he gave people a task which sometimes require them to give some of their hard-earned reward money to charity, sometimes they got reward money themselves, there was equal activation in this pleasure circuitry both when they had to give money to the charity and when they got money themselves.

So once again we're built to desire, appreciate, and feel pleasure as a consequence of engaging in cooperative collectively rewarding experiences. So I think that that might be a good segue into the next question like what are some of the experiences and practices that we know give us some more likelihood, greater likelihood of experiencing these kinds of states, these kinds of orientation of allowing the care/nurturance impulses to play a greater role in our day-to-day experience?

I'm going to just start with the one that's at the top of my tongue, my intellectual tongue per se, because we talked a little bit about it already and that is the practice of gratitude. Over the weekend I was lucky enough to participate in an event called pathways to gratefulness which brought together a fantastic group of thinkers in the domain of gratitude and gratefulness practice. What do mean by gratitude and why is gratitude interesting?

So gratitude is somewhat amorphous and that some think of it as a specific emotion, feeling grateful because someone has given you something and you appreciate that they have put some effort towards that and then it's benefited you. Some people think of it as a general outlook on the world, a grateful orientation, and this is more broadly characterized as seeing the positive in the world and appreciating how various experiences benefit you in the world.

So why is gratitude interesting? Well, when one engages in gratefulness practice -- and I'll give you an example of gratefulness practice although you can probably think of other ways to do it -- the one that has been researched most heavily is called gratitude journaling, and this is throughout the day on any given day for, let's say, two weeks people have been asked to and/or have elected to take on the habit of writing down what they're grateful for.

So I'm grateful for my brother who loaned me his lawnmower and brought it over in his truck when ours was broken, and it was super helpful because my daughter's birthday party was happening and we needed to mow the lawn. So thinking deeply about how someone else's efforts have contributed to your well-being.

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What does that do? Well, one, it allows you to think deeply about another person and thinking about another person, orienting one's self and one's awareness in an outward direction is intrinsically beneficial to your well-being, and this is going to bleed into an area that I think the Institute of Noetic Sciences has probably spent a little bit more time on which is this construct of open awareness, being able to be present in the world, not ruminating about one's self, not being vigilant about what has happened to one's self in the past 30 seconds, what is happening in the present moment, or in a more what might happen way, fantasy way and what could happen in the next 30 seconds to 10 hours.

The last time people spend in that wondering, daydreaming type of thinking, the happier they are. So if you think about gratitude once again it's a state that is really fundamentally the key features that you're orienting outward. You're orienting towards another person. You're feeling positive. You're savoring the positive experience that is occurring as a consequence of that person. With those together you're one preventing this mind wondering vigilant rumination type habit that a lot

of people end up in sometimes, and you're sort of strengthening your emotional connection to another person.

There's a wide body of research which I don't really need to go into. I'm sure someone else who's an expert would do a better job showing how important interpersonal and social support is to your health and well-being. So gratitude is one piece of the puzzle and I know that I also, as I was talking about gratitude meandered into the terrain of open awareness which others might put into a category of mindfulness, and that's a completely an allowable and happy term for us to use, those ideas, being able to be present. Watch what's going on around you. Be aware of what's going on within you and within your thoughts but without grabbing on to them and making a whole story and worrying about it is another very important aspect of health and well-being. So mindfulness, gratitude, trust, adapting a perspective of trust in the world.

We've got this wonderful literature from scientists who have studied a neuropeptide called oxytocin. Maybe you've heard of oxytocin. What we used to think about oxytocin was that, oh, it's this chemical that's so important for breastfeeding and contractions during pregnancy and granted it does have those very important physiological processes, but it turns out oxytocin plays a more broad and interesting role in interpersonal dynamics, social dynamics.

When researchers get people to use a little nasal inhaler and insert oxytocin into their bloodstream through the nasal passage and then ask them about other people, ask them questions or invite them to engage in negotiating games, people trust others more and people function or behave in a more cooperative way towards others. So trusting people is an easier or is a nice way to facilitate and open the door towards the possibility of having stronger interpersonal connections and a community of social support.

Let's see, gratitude, mindfulness, trust, giving, and I alluded to the giving literature a little bit. When I was peaking of Bill Harbaugh's work about the neural benefits of giving to charity, he's not the only one who has done this. There's a wonderful study showing that when you give individuals a certain amount of money, let's say you give them \$50 and say, "Group A, you take your \$50 and shop. Go out and buy yourself something nice. Group B, you take your \$50 and spend it on someone else, spend it on another person."

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Before any of these happens I collect a bunch of survey questions, and I get "How happy are you? How satisfied with life? How stressed are you?" And then after you spent your money either on yourself or if you're on group B on another person, I ask those questions again. It turns out people in group B are happier and more satisfied. So there's something intrinsically rewarding about giving things away, about orienting towards other people. There's something unique about that. Maybe it has to do with the fact that oxytocin systems get engaged, but that's a future empirical question that would be wonderful for someone to discover the role of oxytocin in that process.

I've gone through mindfulness, gratitude, trust, giving. I have on my list connect, but these things are not always mutually exclusive. But I do like to mention that separately just because I feel like as a culture one of our characteristic being a individualistic culture, and we very much value things like personal space and individuality. Those inclinations sometimes deprive us of opportunities to connect with other people who might represent wonderful opportunities for cooperation.

So in the connect realm what we like to suggest is making yourself available to other people who you might not already know. It's wonderful to connect with your friends. It's wonderful to spend time with your family and build and draw all the benefits of these existing close relationships. But one thing that people in our western culture could do more of in terms of building these muscles is make themselves available to connect with, people who are outside of that typical in group, people who are beyond the family and the close friends, perhaps smiling and making conversation with the person who is ringing up your groceries at the grocery store.

Those small incidental conversations of interest and kindness with people that you don't know can be incredibly powerful and lead to unexpected and unforeseen opportunities. So I like that connect one, just trusting humanity more broadly, allowing your heart to be open to the possibility of engaging with the world outside of you including lots of different kinds of people, all of those seem to be very important.

Cassandra: That is all great. Thank you. One question I think might be really interesting to the people on this call who are probably already working toward a lot of the things you've talked about and have engaged in these practices, they're also working with people out there in the world who are having a lot of difficulties.

So whether we have folks who are listening who are working with violent offenders or working with people who have been traumatized or working with people in warzones or really trying to work with people who are coming from a very completely different perspective, what are some things that science might have to offer to people who aren't just trying to make changes in themselves, in their own capacity for a compassion and connection that are really trying to address sometimes very longstanding difficult struggles in people's lives, in maybe their clients if they're a psychotherapist or their students if they're teachers or peace workers out in the world toward dealing with very entrenched patterns of violence or aggression or being misunderstood or being traumatized?

Is there anything that you think science can give to peacemakers, peacebuilders in the world who are trying to make this happen in the setting that they're working in?

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Emiliana: Let's see, I want to answer that question without making it seem easy because I know it's not easy. My intuition is that there are two different directions that I would suggest, and one is more focused on the people themselves, the caretakers, the peace workers, the individuals who are involved in supporting other individuals who struggle in a seemingly more traumatic way than they are themselves. And then the second is for the actual individuals themselves.

So let's start with the caretakers, the care providers, the mental health workers. What I think in their community is the most problematic common cultural claim today is that there is something called compassion fatigue that somehow interacting with people who struggle a lot and who seem unhelpable because they're so deeply entrenched in unhealthy and unproductive patterns in their own thinking and living. It ultimately beats down to care provider. That's the story of compassion fatigue.

I started out earlier talking about the difference between compassion and empathy, and then I think I never really explained how compassion was different. I explained what empathy was. Empathy is necessary but not sufficient for compassion, and there certainly is a possibility that for the highly empathetic person who doesn't utilize some other important tools of mindfulness, of self-appraisal, of social attribution -- and I'll go through those -- that empathy fatigue is a possible result, that people can

end up taking on the emotions and the struggles and the pain of others in such a way that they personalize it and it builds up and it becomes their own problem.

But what happens to make empathy turn into compassion I believe is unlimited. We have an unlimited capacity for compassion. That belief and ability and muscle that I like the analogy that you gave me earlier, that muscle of compassion, is really important for these people, the people who are out there in the trenches who are helping. Being confident in your capacity to help others without suffering from your own anxiety, distress, defeat, diffidence is really critical.

So how do we do this? Well, we don't fit in empathy. We move from empathy to compassion. How do we do this? If you experience empathy which is this state of being physically moved by another person's suffering, every time you have a physical experience in your body or mind very quickly figures out what that's about. What does this mean? Is this a threat to me? Is this a joy to me? Is this a pleasure to me? What is this thing, and why is it happening?

We do this fairly automatically, but we also have the capacity to secondarily influence how that story turns out. I think with empathy it's very important to recognize that physical experience and practice not to personalizing it. In other words, my heart rate has gone up. I feel something like stress when I see someone else in pain or being threatened or suffering deeply as a consequence of various life experiences. What do I with that? Do I go, "This is unpleasant for me. This is my own pain and frustration. I need to run away."

That's unfortunate because that doesn't necessarily put you in a position to help. It's actually not really true. It's not really consistent with the reality. You're not the one suffering; the other person is. Just because you feel something doesn't mean you can identify it or interpret it or understand it as suffering. To get to compassion in that moment, the appraisal of the self, the understanding of what's happening in the self has to be a little bit different.

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It has to be "Oh, I'm feeling this because it's my duty and role in this moment. This is fuel for me to do something. This is actually the provision I get from my social evolutionary path, a trajectory to do something for this person. My energy is not for my own survival and escape, but it's for

me to help another. It's for me to list the car." Sorry I'm using an analogy from an early superman movie, list the car from the burning accident. You wouldn't be able to do that on a normal day.

But because you've gotten this physical arousal as a consequence of being presented with somebody else's suffering, you have extra energy to do something about it. Understanding that way is very, very important, the first step towards an experience of compassion and really where you distinguish between what I would call empathy fatigue and compassion which again is self-sustaining.

So presuming you've gotten to this place of "I'm feeling something. I understand this is my evolutionary fuel or evolutionary endowment for helping other people. What can I do to help? How can I help?" This is another tricky place where our top-down minds can either help or hinder the likelihood of getting to compassion.

We have a very adaptive habit/likelihood of when things don't work out overtime repeatedly we get to see just about it. In the case of people who are working with those most deeply suffering individuals and who have repeated experiences of perhaps not feeling like they've helped, there's another moment here that's a critical juncture. If they get the sense of "I really want to help. I know it's in me to help right now, but I've tried to help hundred times and it hasn't worked. So now I'm not going to do anything about it. There's nothing I can do."

So you don't get to the point of compassion. In fact, what usually happens in that case is the care provider suppresses their emotional experience, and this sadly is associated with all kinds of other health vulnerabilities and the risk. It's not good for people to have an emotional experience and to squash it down to just use their mind to go like, "I can't do anything about it so I'm just going to walk away" or "I can't do anything about it so I'm just going to feel angry," "I can't do anything about it so I'm just going to avoid the situation or feel ineffective." All of those are not beneficial to your health and well-being.

So how can we move that narrative? How can we change from that experience of "I haven't been able to make any impact on the past, so now I'm not going to be able to do it now"? I think that's a very important practice for care providers is to really appreciate the fact that just something as totally simple as their presence in that moment, their social, physical, open presence for that other person is in and of itself help.

They may not give the person money to pay their rent and eat food, they may not be able to solve their anxieties, they may not be able to cure them of their addictive problems, whatever it is that's going on, but the very act of sitting across from someone being present and open and just being another human being in the room that they can trust and be with is profoundly helpful. And then to value that, to remember that, to know that is a practice which I think these healthcare providers or social workers/people who work with individuals who suffer immensely can benefit from.

I'm not taking on the other people's suffering. Trusting in one's own self-efficacy as a human being, I'm here for this other person. Whether or not I solved their material or actual real-life problem, that's not the aim here. Maybe that is the aim in a broader sense, but right now I'm here as a human and that is incredibly and immensely valuable.

There's a wonderful tradition of practices about expanding one's circle of concern. I think another habit that us individualistic westerners have is to again focus only on the people who are very much like us or family or close friends but struggle with orienting our nurturing self towards individuals who fall outside of that.

So how can we expand? What kinds of practices are there for thinking about what it feels like to care and love somebody close? And just taking that, holding onto that little morsel of affection and then thinking about somebody who might be more difficult, a more difficult target and just like you would try to list something that's too heavy if you do it ten times over the course of a month every day, by the 25th day you can do it.

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So extending that little morsel of affection towards a human being who you would otherwise not necessarily feel inclined to do that, that's trainable and it's a skill and it's something that can make it much easier to experience and extend compassion towards people who one might feel are very different than themselves.

So I'm going to shift to the individuals who are on the other end of the dyad here, not the caretaker and care providers but the actual people who are suffering. What can we do? How can we bring people who are immensely, deeply suffering somewhere away from that? Outside of some of the provisions and offerings at western medical interventions

might try to provide what sometimes are helpful and sometimes are not, I genuinely feel like some of these same practices, they're going to take longer, that's going to take more practices. More practice time is essential. Things like compassion but in a funny realm and I flip it and this is reflecting the work of Kristin Neff who has coined a construct called self-compassion.

So in the same way the compassion is about being open to and present for and concerned towards the well-being of a person in front of you who's suffering, you ought to be able to turn that, turn that spotlight back inward. Be open towards your own real sources of happiness and suffering. Guide your life in a way that doesn't reiterate the suffering and that does promote and increase the likelihood of your own happiness.

Self-compassion is hard for a lot of westerners that feels indulging, that feels like it's not productive. But in all actuality self-compassion can be a very, very powerful practice and starting place for people who are suffering deeply to come to terms with what it is that's making them happy and what is it that's making them suffering and engaged in an appropriate fashion towards the sources of happiness.

Cassandra: Well, we're reaching the end of our time together, and I wonder if you have any recommendations or suggestions for listeners about where they can learn more about your work, about the work of Greater Good, and any recommendations that might be useful to peacemakers out in the world, things to read, things to engage in, places to go on the internet or books to read that you think are particularly helpful.

Emiliana: Absolutely. That's a very easy question. Thank you, Cassie. The easy answer is that the Greater Good Science Center achieves its first mission by its website, the Greater Good Science Center, its greatergood.berkeley.edu. We frequently post and feature articles that are written for any person that describe all of this research that we're talking about. We post tips. We post little surveys and questionnaires so that people can get some insight into their own skill level in various domains.

It's a wonderful resource. We span all of these different domains -- trust, connection, gratitude, mindfulness -- and again our core goal is to serve people who are working for the Greater Good and to provide them with, for the lack of better word and I don't like to use this word but it always comes up, ammunition, to provide them with the ammunition to support these important claims because you'll still end up in places where people

will say, “No, no, no, it’s a rat race. We’re dog eat dog.” You got to go with your life towards getting what’s best for you. I just think that that’s an old and outdated way of thinking, and we’re providing the evidence against that.

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So yeah, I would say go to the Greater Good website and get our newsletter. Come to an event. If you are a healthcare provider, we have The Science of a Meaningful Life series where people can come for a daylong seminar from the experts in the domain. The other just really fun read that I would recommend is Dacher Keltner’s book, Born to be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life. Really a fun read that reviews and tell us in a wonderful and accessible and sometimes anecdotal, sometimes very empirical way the growth and richness of this particular science.

So those would be my two key recommendations. There’s a lot of other books that are suggested on the Greater Good website for people who want to know more.

Cassandra: Great. Well, thank you so much. Again, this has been Emiliana Simon-Thomas who is the Science Director at the Greater Good Science Center at UC, Berkeley; and I’m Cassandra Vieten, the Director of Research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences. You can find out more about our work at noetic.org.

Thank you so much for being with us, Emiliana. It's just been wonderful to talk to you for his hour and love the work you’re doing, love where you’ve been and where you’re going and really happy to have had this opportunity.

Emiliana: Well, thank you so much, Cassandra. It’s been a pleasure. It’s really fun. I think we could probably talk for a few more hours, but I hope that I’ve distilled some of the important points. I look forward to future conversations with you. Thank you to the Institute of Noetic Sciences for including me in this series.

Cassandra: Yeah, and thanks to The Shift Network for putting it on, and we will have another seminar tomorrow and the next day. So thanks a lot.

Emiliana: Fabulous. All right. Bye-bye.

Cassandra: Bye.

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