

# Emotion In Organizations

second edition

edited by  
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# PART I

## EMOTIONAL TEXTURES

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### 2 NARRATIVES OF COMPASSION IN ORGANIZATIONS

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As my illness progressed I was trying to keep on teaching, was trying to keep doing everything and I was keeping on, keeping on. I was on medications and increasingly ill and finally I called a friend and senior colleague on a Sunday and I said: 'You have to help me figure out how to quit doing what I am doing. I can't do another day.' And she came over and spent the afternoon with me on a Sunday, reassigning my students, figuring out all the paperwork that needed to be done and doing all of those things. (Colleen, Professor)

Organizations are sites of everyday healing and pain. Colleen's story is a story of organizational compassion, organizational response to pain. As one of our participants reminded us: 'I see lots of pain which people bring to their workplaces simply because they are human beings . . . most people actually walk in through the doors as wounded people.'

What do others do in the face of this wounding? While not often talked about, and easily missed if one is not looking for them, compassionate acts are part of the weave that keeps work communities on the mend. The giving and receiving of compassion restores a sense of humanity and connection to the experiences that people have at work (Frost, 1999). Compassion is an essential part of care-giving that is 'part of, rather than separate from, work interactions' (Kahn, 1998: 43). Pain and compassion are not separate from 'being a professional' and the 'doing of work' in organizations. They are a natural and living representation of people's humanity in the workplace.

This chapter explores some foundational assumptions in our conceptualization of compassion and its link to emotion in organizations. These foundations provide the canvas for a painting of compassion stories that reveal two important insights about compassion and organization. One insight is that people often act compassionately in the face of pain without knowing what is appropriate or how compassion should be conveyed.

Compassion involves people allowing feeling to guide action, rather than the reverse. A second insight is that organizations create an emotional ecology where care and human connection are enabled or disabled. We use these two insights to pose an invitation to further study of compassion in organizations. We close with a found poem that weaves together our study participants' words, representing what we learned in a very different way. We hope that the text and the poem together awaken recognition and interest in compassion as concept and compassion as human expression.

### **Foundations**

We were guided in collecting these narratives of compassion by four assumptions. We assume that organizations are social systems and that people's interactions with others in the organization will comprise much of their experience of their work. The embeddedness of people's work experiences in interpersonal interactions and relationships means that the emotional tone and impact of these interactions is vital to an understanding of people's work experience (Berscheid, 1994; Brass, 1985; Dutton et al., 1999; Gersick et al., 2000; Ibarra, 1992; Ibarra and Smith-Lovin, 1997; Uzzi, 1996). Because work organizations are such important centres of people's time and energy, we assume that people in organizations seek a feeling of connection with one another, a feeling of belonging, and a feeling of being cared for and respected. Such feelings are provided in part by daily interactions that are caring (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Kahn, 1993; Meyerson, 1998; Miller and Stiver, 1997). At the centre of our notion of compassion is the assumption that the absence or presence of caring interactions at work dramatically impact people's experience of organizations.

Our second assumption is that people are inherently emotional beings and that people experience connection and belonging through feeling (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Miller and Stiver, 1997). As other scholars have noted, dominant discourse separates emotion from rationality and divides people in organizations from their emotional responses (Meyerson, 1998; Mumby and Putnam, 1992). Rather than separate emotion from work, we assumed that people bring emotions into their work and that emotions infiltrate the doing of work (Kahn, 1998). Sharing these emotions and responding to emotions of others is at the heart of experiences of pain and compassion in organizations.

We further assumed that people's actions and feelings are not completely determined by the organization. We attempt to understand the ways in which organizational practices bound, limit, enable and encourage the expression of pain and compassion (Shotter, 1995). We assume a world in which organizational practices provide a framework within which people experience their work (Bell and Staw, 1989).

Finally, traditional discourse in organizations often seeks to divide public from private, home from office, personal from professional (Bradbury and

Lichtenstein, 1999; Meyerson, 1998; Mumby and Putnam, 1992). We assume that these divisions are largely impossible. When we ask about acts of compassion in the workplace, we receive information about both personal and professional lives. Participants in this research described tensions that are inherent in living both a personal and an organizational life. Such tensions often limit the expression of pain in organizations. In the end, however, we cannot divide ourselves or separate pain from work (Kahn, 1998; Meyerson, 1998). Compassion is directed toward those who are suffering, regardless of whether that suffering is the result of a personal or a professional wound.

### *What is compassion?*

We focus on a definition of compassion that centres on the connection between people. Some define compassionate acts as forms of empathy or personal support that are offered from one person to another. Psychologists who study the motivation for helping each other when in need see compassion as one of the emotions associated with empathetic concern (for example, Batson, 1991). Like empathy, compassion involves 'other-oriented feelings that are most often congruent with the perceived welfare of the other person' (Batson, 1994: 606). We assume, however, that compassion goes beyond an individual feeling of empathy and is expressed through action of some sort. In organizations, this form of caregiving often involves conveying 'an emotional presence by displaying warmth, affection and kindness' (Kahn, 1993: 546). In this sense, compassionate acts often display a form of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998) and are guided by a mutual concern that allows action in connection with others (Miller and Stiver, 1997).

One can also think about compassion as 'the heart's response to the sorrow' (Kornfield, 1993: 326). In compassion, a person surrenders him or herself to the pain of another by being with that person, at least for a moment. Compassion is associated with feelings that are fundamentally 'other regarding rather than self-regarding' (Solomon, 1998: 528). The Dalai Lama discusses 'genuine compassion [as] based on a clear acceptance or recognition that others, like oneself, want happiness and have the right to overcome suffering. On that basis one develops some kind of concern about the welfare of others, irrespective of one's attitude to oneself' (1981: 63). This focus outside of oneself facilitates another's feeling of being cared for, joined, seen, felt, known, and not alone (Kahn, 1993; Noddings, 1984).

### *Why narratives of compassion?*

This chapter is built on stories that people shared about how others responded to their pain and the pain of others in their work organizations. Our empirical context involves people in university settings.<sup>1</sup> Thus the narratives of compassion have double meaning. As a methodology and phenomena, narratives are windows into life in organizations (Boje, 1991;

Barry and Elmes, 1997; Czarniawska, 1998; Martin et al., 1983; O'Connor, 1996; Weick and Browning, 1986). As a research setting, these narratives provide openings into the organizational worlds in which we live. Through collecting stories of how people in universities experience compassion, we have become much more attuned to universities as sites of human pain and healing. While we will use primarily the voice of 'researchers', behind this stance is an unwritten text of how all four of us as university participants – two PhD students and two faculty members – have been affected deeply by the dialogues that shaped these research observations.

For organizational researchers interested in emotion at work, compassion narratives are carriers of both the feelings of being in pain and the feelings of responding to pain as they play out during the conduct of people's work. They highlight features of emotions at work that have received scant attention. First, stories of compassion at work breathe life into deadened accounts of work feeling. As Sandelands (1998: 17) describes, 'Society [and as applied here, organization] is dissected as a cadaver, a logical structure of inert elements', extinguishing the life in the social connection that exists between people. Fineman makes a similar graphic assertion when he argues that our field is 'emotionally anorexic' (Fineman, 1993: 9). Reliance on stories as data helps to hold onto a fuller and more living account of people's feelings at work.

Organizational studies has focused on display rules and how these shape the forms of expressed feelings in organizational settings (for example, Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987, 1989). Compassion narratives, while evidencing some effects of these constraints, also convey feelings of care that emerge spontaneously in response to observed or known suffering. Expressed pain is often a violation of basic display rules that divide emotion from work. When these basic display rules are transgressed others often act within the space that is opened. While it does not deny the existence of toxic organizational contexts, acts of compassion are more than normative compliance to well-grooved display rules. While compassionate expression is subject to culturally bounded display rules, we found that people experienced authentic connection with each other in the context of work when pain was expressed and response was necessary.

## Stories

### *The importance of pain*

Understanding compassion in organizations means recognizing the ubiquity of pain in the workplace. Our participants helped us to see that pain in work organizations lives in many forms and emerges from many places. Their accounts of pain were vivid, honest and sometimes horrifying.

Some people described the pain of acute losses – deaths and suicides of family members and friends. For others, the losses were of connections and relationships with others as marked by divorces, separations, and ruined

friendships or working relationships. Still others described the pain of career losses inflicted by demotions, rejections and tenure denials. Not all pain was brought on by significant losses. Participants also described the pain of small slights, disrespect and uncivil acts (Pearson and Porath, 1999) and being treated as invisible or unimportant. Experienced pain is part of the daily rhythm of organizational participation.

For example, faculty described working with the pain of students who had suffered traumatic events such as rape, suicide, sexual harassment, and abuse. They described acknowledging and working with this pain as a necessary part of the teaching experience. Similarly, staff members described working with the pain of students, other staff and faculty who they knew to be suffering. Students described other students' suffering in enduring the painful setbacks and degradations of being a student. Many people described the pain of being overloaded, experiencing crushing workloads, making it difficult to spend meaningful time with themselves, with partners and with families. The pain was often accentuated because people in universities described feeling so alone in much of their work.

#### *Compassion in the face of pain – three instances*

Three examples of compassion in the face of pain introduce a discussion of what we discovered about compassion through the stories we collected. Ken told us about responding compassionately to a colleague's illness over several years.

He was a colleague in my department, in my field. We were on committees together. Then one [day] he showed up at my house distraught and at loose ends . . . He was sobbing and incoherent, so I stayed with him. And eventually I took him to the hospital for a kind of urgent clinical care. For three years or so he was not so good . . . But for some reason he glommed on to me. And every once in a while, once a month or so, I'd get a call and I would have to go wherever he was and be with him.

Lynn told of a small gesture from a student when she was overwhelmed by an illness in her family and the demands from her doctoral studies. As she described it:

I was working on this project and trying to do my own stuff and I felt like I was going to go crazy. And there was a baby shower that was coming up . . . I didn't know how I was going to be able to do everything I had to do and get to the store to get a present . . . One of my colleagues' students called me and said she was going to the store to get a present and said, 'Can I pick up one for you?' I know that it sounds crazy but it was such a gift. It was such a small little thing, she bought a present for me. It was just wonderful. She had thought about me and done that.

Finally, acts of compassion often involved someone offering comfort in the face of the painful loss of someone loved. Ralph, a professor and former dean told the following story:

My wife and I lost three close relatives in one year, my mother and father, and her brother died of a heart attack at 37 years of age. A lot of people came to our door and chatted about relatives that had died, and so on, but one couple came to our door and wept. And I said 'Well, come on in.' So, they came in. They didn't say anything . . . And it's interesting, because at the end of the day, my wife and I would go over the day's grieving. And the couple that really served us and cared for us and showed compassion was the couple that had said nothing, but had listened and hugged and wept with us.

### *Visions of compassion*

Compassion is one way in which people reach out to others when they are hurting. The picture of compassion seen through the stories we collected reveals a rich range of possible ways that people express and receive compassion at work – from small gestures such as buying a gift to much larger and more extensive acts such as going to a colleague's aid over a period of years.

Sometime the acts of compassion were planned and deliberate, as when someone learned about another's loss or difficulty and consciously made the effort to connect. We see this in Ralph's story of how others responded to the deaths his family suffered. We heard inspiring accounts of how people altered the rhythms of their own lives to accommodate and respond to the suffering of others. Consider the case of Abe, a graduate school dean who deliberately stepped in to help a faculty member in pain. A witness to the act told us the story:

Jerry was a very bright academic who had a history of emotional pain that included a very unhappy and unloving childhood. He was in a faculty where he felt under-appreciated and he was regarded by most of his colleagues as a jerk. He was also a poor teacher. He would act up with the dean of the department. If the dean wanted him to write a paper or do something he was often so angry that he would put the request in his drawer and refuse to do it. One day this dean came over to him and said, 'Let's go for lunch. I want to take you out.' And he took him for lunch and he said: 'What's going on, tell me about this, what's happening?' And Jerry told him he was having all these problems, and he was just starting to work [them] out. And the dean said, 'Oh I see. Why don't you come to my place every Tuesday and Thursday evening and we will work together.' And they worked on his papers and the dean was an incredible mentor to him.

Many of the compassionate tales were of spontaneous and unplanned giving in the face of someone else's suffering. Sometimes these were the hugs, e-mails, cards or other gestures of care that people extended immediately upon learning of a colleague's suffering. On other occasions whole groups of people dropped what they were doing and responded as a collective. Angela told a heartbreaking story of her husband's death from an inheritable disease and the yearly terror of having to test her children to see if there were signs that they also harboured the disease. She described getting the dreaded

phone call that indicated her son had been diagnosed as positive with the disease and having to go immediately to run a staff meeting:

I sort of ran the meeting and they said 'we're planning for next year'. And somebody said, 'Oh Angela, you know you look a little burned out, maybe we shouldn't be talking about planning right now.' And then I said, 'Oh, it's not my job. It's not because of that,' and then I started weeping, and saying what it was, and all of a sudden, everybody in that room was offering help.

Compassionate acts can be solo or collective. In Ken's story, one colleague provides comfort and assistance to another. In Angela's story it is a group of people gathered for a meeting who spontaneously offer help. We also heard about organized efforts from groups that provided comfort in the face of experienced pain. Clare, a graduate student undergoing chemotherapy treatments for cancer, described how fellow graduate students organized a meal-cooking intervention for her and her husband. In her words:

When I was going through treatment, shortly after I had been diagnosed with cancer, some of my fellow doctoral students volunteered to cook for my husband and me. So they would come over every two weeks with a big cooler full of prepared meals at their own expense. We decided to start paying them for the food because the gesture was just too large for us to accept. So they would just bring us ten prepared meals every couple of weeks and we would stock up our freezers and our bellies would be full.

Compassion was expressed directly and indirectly. Direct forms of compassion involved face-to-face verbal interactions or physical expressions of touch that communicated a presence and care for another. Indirect expressions of compassion were different. Sometimes people acted as buffers in attempts to alleviate the pain of another. Nathan described a boss who tried to prepare others to help a co-worker if needed:

When Alan was breaking up with Mary he was late to work, he was making mistakes, and the boss was understanding about it. He allowed him to make more mistakes than he usually would have. He sort of let the rest of us know that we needed to keep an eye out to help him or whatever. He talked to everybody about it.

Compassion also comes in its own time. Compassionate acts were sometimes as short as the time it took to write a card or give a hug. Alternatively, expressions of compassion sometimes spanned the space of years as a person responded to repeated episodes of the same kind of pain, as in Ken's story above. Compassion often means giving time to another. As one interviewee expressed: 'To me, a compassionate work would be to make yourself available when you don't have time.' Compassionate responding involves recognizing when there is a limited opening through which people can connect. As Ken put it, 'You know these opportunities come and they slip by and you let them go and you get on with your life.' They are not moments

that can be easily recovered. When someone shares that they have lost a parent or that their job is being restructured, in the words of one of our participants: 'You just have that interstitial space, that moment between the two of you where you can make a difference.'

### **Knowledge**

One of our faculty participants, after feeling the difference others' responses made to the healing from his father's death, provided this advice:

If you don't know what to say, say anything. If you don't know what to say, at least say something to acknowledge it happened. . . . I think even if you don't know the person well enough to do it, acknowledging it in some way is infinitely better than to not say anything. (Greg, professor)

### *Acting in the face of not-knowing*

At the core of compassion is the idea that in some way one is moved by someone else's pain and acts to connect with the person to signal that one cares. As Josh described: compassion involves 'giving them the space to express their pain, whatever that pain might be about and to listen in a way that, you know, that is both just listening but also being active . . . in how you respond back, that is sensitive to the person. And it is more than just a passing acknowledgement that this person is in pain.' Miller and Stiver (1997) have described the kind of connection that Josh articulates as mutual empathy. They describe ways in which people connect with others and use feelings of connection to guide responses.

Often we assume that people must know before they act. However, Josh shows us that compassion is action in the face of not-knowing. The emotional connection with another provides a direction for action. Shotter (1995) describes this as 'feeling one's way forward' (p. 127) in organizations. Connection with another often demands immediate action and interplay. People rarely know when or under what circumstances compassion will be required. They do not know the facts of their co-workers' lives. Instead, people must allow room for a connection to be established and they must follow the feelings in the connection to respond in the best way they know how.

This kind of connecting seems to entail an ability to attune to the needs of the other. Being able to see or imagine another's pain implies a form of empathy or connected knowing (Belenky et al., 1986). Patricia Benner and her colleagues (1996) describe a skill of emotional attunement in highly proficient nurses that illustrates this quality. Attuned nurses have a capacity to read a situation in a patient and to grasp its emotional tone: to know when something is 'off' when it looks 'ok' on the surface, or to sense that it's actually 'ok' despite appearances to the contrary. Compassionate action involves moving from not-knowing and using attunement to guide action.

We speculate that people who are skilled in compassionate responding are able to attune themselves quickly to what others are feeling, and are also able to act out of that attunement. One participant describes the feeling of attunement when his co-worker reaches out to him: 'like the times when Jenny asks me if I'm okay, I know that somebody cares about me . . . There's no rhyme or reason for when she asks me, but when she asks me I need to be asked. She knows that somehow . . . We feel the life of each other . . . And it means so much to me and I know she knows that.' In this sense, compassion involves the alignment of action with attunement. Miller and Stiver (1997) suggest that people develop larger repertoires of responses as they engage in this type of mutuality and resonance with another's feelings. Few of our participants felt that they knew how to express compassion or that they knew how to engage in compassionate action before they were called to do so. Compassion involves reaching toward another in ways that allow feeling to guide action.

### *When compassion fails*

People's suffering is not always met with compassionate responses when it is shared in organizations. Just as there are barriers to the sharing of pain, such as fear of being seen as weak or fear of burdening others, there are also barriers to the expression of compassion in organizations. Time and timing are important barriers. When people are overloaded or overwhelmed they often feel incapable of responding compassionately. When organizations emotionally exhaust their members, people disconnect from their work and their co-workers (Kahn, 1993).

In addition to time pressure, acts of compassion are blocked when people feel unsure about what kind of expression of compassion is appropriate. Sometimes a lack of knowledge about a person or their situation creates barriers to compassionate action. As our participants told us, when people encounter pain from others whom they don't know too well, they wait for a sign that someone wants help. They worry about 'crossing a line' and getting too personal when someone may wish to keep their pain private. As Vicki explained, 'Unless they've conveyed to me that it's a problem, I don't go prying because I'm concerned they may not want to talk about it.'

People struggle with the lack of knowledge about what to do in the face of tremendous loss. Cindy asks the questions all of us face when confronting the ultimate pain of death: 'So how do we relate? How do we give them space? What do you do with the person who you are sitting across from, who knows they have only got maybe next week or maybe the next day. What do you do to relate to them?' Though we can provide no simple answers to these poignant questions, they are the questions with which all organizational members grapple. Because these questions can seem overwhelming, organizational members may be daunted by tremendous loss and compassionate responses may be hindered or lost.

Finally, not everyone is prepared to receive compassion from others, as it implies vulnerability and closeness. Some of our participants expressed not wanting compassionate attention from their colleagues. One academic gave explicit instructions that no condolences be sent on the loss of a partner. Another, whose parent had passed away, explained: 'it wasn't something I wanted to hide, but I didn't want to be getting e-mails from people I'd never known.' Sometimes too there was a sense that talking to others doesn't help, that 'There's nothing that someone can say to you to make [the pain] go away; it's just there.'

Issues of power imbalance and hierarchy may play an important role in people's reluctance to reveal their pain. Fear of unwanted repercussions on the job prevents some from opening up. An untenured professor worried about how a senior colleague would see her professionally: 'I was afraid she'd think less of me if I let her into some of the personal problems I was going through.' Internalized voices, such as 'You imagine you're handicapped in some way' or 'I don't feel as smart as I used to . . . I feel damaged and less capable . . .' reinforced the sense that revelation could hurt a career. One participant explained that it is: 'The pain of uncertainty, the pain of wondering if they're going to be used in some way, or manipulated in some way, or even, the pain of thinking the worst about yourself and your prospects within the company.'

Fear of jeopardizing one's employment future also affected those responding compassionately. When Fred took time to be with his child he would think: 'what am I doing here? It's 3 in the afternoon and I'm supposed to work on trying to get promoted, and I'm at the park for four hours on a Thursday afternoon.' Another expressed his concern: 'if I show solidarity or compassion . . . to a co-worker that is in disfavour with the . . . supervisor, then I could be looked at in a very different light professionally.' John, a supervisor, speculates that sometimes people may feel coerced to open up when they'd rather not. 'If your boss asks you a personal question . . . you may not feel like you know that person well enough to talk to them . . . It's hard, you don't want to tell the boss that it's none of her business, or that you don't feel like talking about it.' He worries about the double bind: that he now may be seen as uninterested or uncompassionate.

These fears were realized for some who experienced uncompassionate responses to their pain. One woman, who experienced severe financial hardship following a disability, states: 'I have been treated with extreme levels of condescension, contempt, and exclusion because of it.' A professor whose father had passed away recalls a colleague's impatient response to his pain: 'He said to me, "So how long do you think it will take you to get over this [death of his father]? Three weeks, maybe?" . . . and I almost said "f—you", you know. And I just looked at him and said, "No I think it's going to take a lot longer than that."'

## Organizations

Ralph, a former dean of a religious college, noted:

I think a compassionate organization deals with the pain [of the organization]. There will always be failure and mistakes and one of the things we look for in an organization is how it treats people when they make mistakes. We just made a huge mistake with our catalogue. One faculty member's picture and name was left out, a senior member of the faculty. Now that's a huge mistake when you have 5000 copies of the catalogue actually printed, sitting in a carton. It was a senior but new administrator who made the mistake. The president exercised very important leadership in saying that we will pay the price as a community to do the right thing in this and do it in such a way that there is no dishonor brought to anyone.

Expressed pain is an invitation to connect. Expressed compassion is a response that affirms the human connection. While these expressions are often exchanged between two or a few people, they are facilitated or hindered by the organizations where people study and work.

### *An ecology of compassion*

Organizations as behavioural settings can ease or make more difficult people's compassion giving. Universities as organizations create cultures, develop rules and procedures, promote leaders, and structure people's time in ways that affect compassionate responding. At a basic level, organizations are distinguished by shared values, beliefs and norms that place different levels of emphasis on being caring towards others. Kahn (1998) demonstrates patterns of organizational care that flow throughout organizational systems. Behaviour within these systems serves either to replenish or deplete people's emotional and caring resources (Kahn, 1993). Different cultures give rise to different value for compassionate expressions as normal or not, valued or not, deviant or not. Cialdini (1999), writing about dishonest practices in organizations, finds that organizational practices spread like tumours and beget similar practices across the organization. An organizational system that responds with compassion time and again thus fosters compassionate seeing and acting in its members.

Several participants had worked in different university settings and noted the difference in compassionate responses. For example, faculty members talked about differences in responses to tenure decisions and the departure of organizational members at different universities. Jacques (1993) describes an organizational culture of connection that facilitates informational exchanges and creates a value of caring. Clearly universities as organizations establish an emotional ecology within which their members interact. That emotional ecology can facilitate or retard compassionate action.

One important aspect of an emotional ecology is a working environment in which people are given permission and space to attend to their pain. Kahn (1998) describes the importance of emotional attachments that create whole social systems, with compassionate and caring relationships being developed by the collective. Meyerson (1998) describes organizations that normalize and make room for caring for people who are overloaded and experience burnout. Universities varied considerably in the degree to which they exhibited responses to their members' suffering. For example, one participant described an institution that made an apartment near a hospital available to a staff member to allow her to be near a family member in a coma. We heard stories of administrators arranging workloads and providing help for those experiencing difficulties. We heard of the importance of organizational routines such as sending flowers, notes of condolence, and other actions that represent a form of regularized caring. Actions like these help to establish a framework for compassionate action by organizational members and create a pattern of organizational care that comes out of such an emotional ecology (Kahn, 1993). The absence of these behaviours also creates patterns of organizational response that are perceived as cold or uncaring (Cialdini, 1999).

Organizational leaders and prominent organizational citizens can exemplify compassionate or uncompassionate reactions to the suffering of organizational members, and by doing so, reinforce or diminish a sense that compassionate responding is valued (Bass, 1990; Kahn, 1993). We heard several other stories of how deans' and administrators' actions were actively interpreted as signals of what the organizations cared about, and therefore the kinds of actions that would be valued (Pfeffer, 1981).

#### *Characteristics of an ecology of compassion*

Compassion can help make others in an organization feel cared for, seen, felt, known and not alone (Kahn, 1993; Noddings, 1984). In this way, compassion can be healing, even if the healing is not directed toward the initial source of pain. Because feeling and mutual empathy guides compassionate action, healing is a transformation of the connection and emotion in both the compassion giver and the recipient. Through our collection of compassion narratives we identified five characteristics of interactions within an ecology of compassion.

Compassionate responses affirm a person's existence by making the other person 'present' (Buber, 1974). Compassion requires authentic human presence with another. In 'The human moment at work', psychiatrist Edward Hallowell (1999) talks about people's need to experience moments of authentic psychological connection. He describes the human moment as having two prerequisites: 'people's physical presence and their emotional and intellectual attention' (p. 59). For the human moment to work: 'You have to set aside what you are doing, put down the memo you were reading, disengage from your laptop, abandon your day dream and focus on the

person you are with' (p. 60). This skill of recognizing the need in another person is an integral part of the process of giving compassion. One of our participants explained: 'Compassion is the willingness to drop what you are engaged in, in order to attend to a person's real feelings, longings, aspirations, pain . . . to leave a task unfinished and to attune to a person is a real act of love in the organizational context.' In a similar vein, another participant told us: 'Compassion demands our patience, sensitivity, a giving over of ourselves. When people act compassionately, their world shifts to being present with another.' Conveying felt presence is a powerful message in an organizational setting, where invisibility and production are often the essence of daily experience. As Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1999) claims: 'As we hurtle through our lives, such moments are altogether too rare, and the relationships in which they occur provide a reminder of what nourishes us most profoundly, perhaps even an echo or reminder of our earliest relationships. In such moments, we feel present and acknowledged' (p. 197).

Compassion giving and receiving sometimes altered the felt connection between people. In the terms of network theorists, a compassionate response in the face of pain often changes a weak tie into a strong tie (Granovetter, 1973), with a change in attendant levels of felt trust and reliance. Compassionate acts can change attachments from weak to strong, where a relationship gains greater emotional weight in someone's life (Kahn, 1998). The compassion receiver often recognized that the quality of connection between two people had been transformed. As Greg told us, 'After someone has been compassionate, they loom as an important person in my life.' Sometimes the transformation in connection was profound. Margaret described a colleague who comforted her during a painful divorce. In this case, a compassionate response dulled the pain in the short term, and created a lasting friendship in the long term. In her words: 'Wow, how did that make me feel? It made me laugh; it stopped the pain for a moment and made me laugh. It was an amazing friendship that formed through that. And again, she is not only a great friend, but a great colleague, also in academia struggling her own struggles.'

There were cases where witnessing the compassionate actions modelled a form of contact that changed the quality of connection between the whole. Anne, a faculty member in the arts, told of a student's struggle with representing her partner's suicide in a class assignment. When the student shared her creation with other class members, the professor responded in a way that affected everyone who saw it. As she described: 'We have all been touched by death, if not suicide, in some way . . . So I just talked about that . . . None of us could understand the pain she had experienced . . . And that it was incredibly valuable for all of us to have her share it with us, what it meant, and how her life would be forever affected. And that art allows us to do this.' The student's courage and openness moved the other students deeply, enabling them to share. 'They were so supportive of her and thanked her and talked about it. Some of them opened up and said things about deaths that had affected them.'

Organizational environments can be transformed by compassion. Similarly, a professor describes how a senior colleague has ‘set up an environment of cooperation and collaboration . . . of mutual support’, by taking compassionate action to help others: ‘She is very conscious of graduate students and adjuncts, women who are struggling, who are alone . . . argu[ing] long and hard with the dean, fearlessly, on their behalf to keep them in their classes.’ As a result, the participant felt that corner of her workplace was transformed from a competitive ‘snake pit’ to a place she felt ‘comfortable and so at home’. A number of participants mentioned that they felt their units were unusually supportive: oases within a larger, hostile institution. One supervisor felt that some of his staff had transferred into his unit because of the compassionate climate, suggesting that the compassionate workplace may be a factor in both attracting and retaining staff.

### **An invitation to study compassion in organizations**

An inquiry into compassion narratives offered our participants the possibility of sharing stories in which they were caregivers to others at work. The fact is everyone we asked had stories to tell. The roles that employees took in these stories – whether staff, faculty or students – were as validators and responders to others’ suffering. The compassion stories revealed the myriad of ways that compassion is ‘done’ as a form of competent relational practice (Fletcher, 1999). At the same time, the stories were occasions in which people saw themselves as deeply human, emotional beings – affected by and troubled by the witnessing of another person’s pain. While most people expressed doubt and discomfort about whether they were responding the ‘right way’, all of the storytellers expressed a form of engagement and empathy for the other (Frank, 1992).

Thus, we see in these stories the possibility of rewriting caregiving in organizational life as a daily, everyday activity in which all people participate (Kahn 1993, 1998; Meyerson, 1998). In the same way that Kolb (1992) finds that people utilize informal channels of dispute resolution in organizations, we find that compassion is practised by all organizational members. Compassion giving is not something done only by designated professionals (such as social workers, human resource practitioners or crisis counsellors), but is done by most organizational members in the everyday doing of work in organizational communities. Like Kahn (1993) we find that caregiving and compassionate action are woven into the daily interactions in organizations.

### *Danger and blindspots in a compassion frame*

It is also important to name some of the silences and blindspots in our study account. Of course, any attempt to do so is always incomplete. First, we chose a wide brush to paint the look of compassion through the words of 22 people

living in academic settings. Differences and variations are brushed over in this type of account. It was often the variation or the anomalies that were most 'moving' or informative, and yet we have focused on patterned similarities, pushing differences into the background. This makes the compassion portrait look neater, tidier and more coherent than in fact it is. No doubt compassion varies across cultures, organizations and industries. We hope that other researchers will repaint differences that exist between individuals engaging in compassionate action in different national and organizational contexts.

Second, we have not fully explored the dynamics of power and status. Our account does not address how superior power enables people to express pain differently and, similarly, how inferior status may coerce revelation or silence, and enable or disable expression. For example, greater power in organizations is typically associated with freedom, flexibility and resources that equip people to respond compassionately. We have also not addressed the gendering of compassion giving as a partial explanation for why it is so invisible in organizations (for example, Fletcher, 1999; Jacques, 1992). There are similar silences about race, social class and other differences that could shape how compassion looks and how it feels in organizational settings.

Third, we have portrayed compassion giving implicitly as positive action. However, it is also an action that can injure the people who do it. Some of our participants noted the emotional exhaustion that can come from giving compassion without recourse to some 'protection' from the wash of pain one is dealing with. Although she loves helping, one participant reflects, 'sometimes I feel I'm not respected very much for being interested . . . They sort of think of me as something to . . . empty their wastes into . . . Or they don't think about me and my feelings very much.' As Frost and Robinson note: 'Managing organizational pain that is too intense and/or too protracted can inflict great cost on the health of those who step in and try to be compassionate. The most common toll of toxic handling . . . is burnout, both psychological and professional' (1999: 100; see also Meyerson, this volume). Beyond exhaustion and burnout, the positive valuing of compassionate action offered by 'good people' masks the ambivalence and conflict that some people felt when faced with other people's pain. The possibility of acting compassionately or not calls forth the very human dilemma of whether one wants to care for another at a particular time, in a particular place, or at a particular level of connection.

## **Epilogue**

We have devoted this chapter to an exploration of the nature of compassion and the complex and nuanced issues that surround giving and receiving compassion in the workplace. We have discussed the notion of an ecology of compassion as a way to create the beginnings of a framework for viewing organizations in terms of how effectively they enhance or diminish

the emotional and caring resources of the people who work in them. We have identified some of the limitations in our study of compassion in organizations.

We close with what we call a 'found poem', created from the words of our interview participants by Monica Worline. She writes: 'In the words of Annie Dillard, whose work inspired the idea to create a found poem, poems "seldom require explanation, but this one does. . . . I did not write a word of it. Other hands composed the poem's lines – the poem's sentences. . . . I lifted them. Sometimes I dropped extra words; I never added a word.'" This poem weaves the words of our participants into an original order, but captures for us the extraordinary depth and eloquence of the stories we have collected, a part of which are evidenced in this chapter.

*Because You Dare to Name it*

Commiseration, support, problem solving, advocacy, a feeling of  
togetherness.

I think we get worn down. Like your edges are worn.

You just don't stand out like you used to.

So, it's leaning in. It's not just a job, it's caring for people.

You can see a tension in the person's face, for one thing:

Sometimes, you see it in their eyes  
Sometimes, in their body movements  
Sometimes, even in what they are saying.

Everybody was praying, sending condolences, sending cards, expressions,  
support;  
real caring, listening, little gifts; people picking up pieces, you know, to  
help practically.

Is fear a form of pain?

Because you have to hide your true self and your true feelings;

it looks like people feeling like second class citizens;

there was a real norm in our department of modesty and always presenting  
a good face.

Keep your skeletons at home.

You're not supposed to have a personal life.

You're supposed to take care of business.

The pain of uncertainty, the pain of wondering  
if they're going to be used in some way, or manipulated in some way, or  
even  
the pain of thinking the worst about yourself and your prospects within  
the company.

Mostly what people do is avoid you.

I understand it. Boy, I did it.

I have to catch myself from doing it again.

And so I have this memory of people who just backed away and didn't say anything, thinking it was the best thing.

But I was so moved that she wanted to do that: to go into the ugly personal slop of my life.

I think, no. I want to change this language. I want there to be a language for saying that I have pain with dignity.

For someone on behalf of an aggrieved or someone who is representative of the organization to be able to say, 'I forgive you'; or 'We forgive you and we do not hold this against you.'

It changed things tremendously.

I was throwing up all over the house and she hung on to my rear end, and I said, 'Oh my god, this is so humiliating.' And she said, 'Oh, fuck it, this is the bonding moment.' That's her. Wow, how did that make me feel? It made me laugh. It stopped the pain for a moment and made me laugh.

Well, for me, the great threshold is to do something.

And, you know, everybody put their arms around me and said, 'We want things to work out' and everybody was offering help; it's incredible. People offering their services, whether it's watch your house, take your dog, can I go to the store for you? Bring you meals, cover your desk. And you don't forget that. You do not forget that.

To actually feel what other people felt and the ability to insist that the feeling be addressed.

She is very conscious of graduate students and adjuncts who are women and who are struggling; who are alone; who are barely making it financially; and she argues long and hard with the dean fearlessly on their behalf to keep them in their classes.

Compassion is not in that sense a quality or a thing, it's a capacity.

I mean, we say the right things; we say that people are important,  
our most important resource,  
but then look at – what do people really need?  
I think most people really need to feel that somewhere along the line  
they're doing something valuable,  
or right, or meaningful, or it's appreciated;  
People work more hours than is humanly possible  
and they get criticized for their mistakes  
more than thanked for what they do well.

I mean, I just honestly believe that you have the moment;  
An opportunity right then for something that may never come up again.  
It's hard to live in the truth of that.

The story of my life is not dealing with pain;  
dealing with pain is what I have to do to have my life.

So I think it's where the humanity of one person meets the humanity of  
another person.

This is a really significant thing:

If an organization can be listening and caring and compassionate.

That was what the whole miracle was. We did get to do that.

Because there is so much;

People suffer so alone and there is so much.

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### **Note**

- 1 We interviewed 22 people from three university settings, including faculty, staff and students. They told us stories of their own pain, of the pain they have seen in others, and of the ways in which they have been the givers, the receivers, and the observers of compassionate acts in organizations. We have given fictional names to our informants to provide them with anonymity and to protect their confidences. The people we interviewed were all people we knew and people with whom we had some connection. The connection to our interviewees was consequential in how the interviews unfolded and the kinds of stories shared. Our

interviews were often conversations – sharing what we had learned from our own life experiences about what compassion is and how it works (or does not work) in the organizations that we inhabit as places of employment and as places of study.

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