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Commentary: Filling the Empathy Gap

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Some health professionals save lives; however, all health professionals have the power to save humanity. By saving humanity, I mean restoring mankind's *humaneness*, which is the capacity to act with benevolence and compassion towards each other. The daily news, which is rarely *new* anymore, is all about war, terrorism, migrant crises, human trafficking, child abuse, mass shootings, and stories that reflect mankind's inability to get along with each other and the planet. The remedy for our ailing humanity is right under our noses.

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Gandhi said that each of us has an ethical imperative to be the change he or she wishes to see in the world. This is great advice as long as we're all wishing for *good* things. There are people who out of ignorance or malintent don't know or don't care about what's best for somebody else. In an ethical world, people who act with malintent toward humanity will suffer the wheels of justice, which grind slow but grind fine, to paraphrase Sun Tzu. People who aren't outright malevolent but act out of ignorance and misinformation can be educated.

The key questions for saving humanity from ignorance and malintent are 1) What should be taught? and 2) Who shall teach it?" The answers to these questions are being demonstrated right now in the daily relationships between caregivers and their patients.

The survival of humanity depends on our capacity for benevolence and compassion; and no one is more qualified to teach these virtues and fill the empathy gap than you and me and other healthcare professionals. After all, beneficence (to do good) and nonmaleficence (to refrain from doing harm) are the fundamental guiding ethical principles for all the medical, nursing, and allied health professions. Doctors, dentists, nurses, physician assistants, dental hygienists, respiratory therapists, optometrists, and other health professionals demonstrate humanism and compassion on daily basis. Medical professionals practice empathy because of the fruit it bears. Empathy is the basis of trust, which contributes to quality care, which then results in good patient outcomes. What works for medical professionals in the health arena, can act as a model for human relationships everywhere.

Medical professionals are the Good Samaritans of our time. The essence of healthcare is service to others, which is diametrically opposed to self-interest. The empathy and compassion caregivers have for patients is a fiduciary duty, but that doesn't make it any less real or genuine; nor does it mean that the caregiver's capacity for empathy and compassion is limited to his or her patients. Medical professionals express respect and concern for coworkers, realizing that quality healthcare is always a team effort. Caregivers also nurture their own families to cultivate loving and happy relationships at home. They express concern for extended kin, offering help and guidance without any expectation for reward or payment. Contrary to self-interest, greed, or indifference, medical professionals are guided by ethical principles that emphasize attending to the needs of others. Caregivers have the opportunity to practice the highest levels of professionalism, respect, gratitude, empathy, and compassion, and because practice makes perfect, they are the community's resident experts on how the ethical approach can resolve social and environmental problems.

In this way, the *calling*, which motivates some people to become caregivers, extends beyond saving lives to saving humanity. Think of the impact you can have as a caregiver, not only at work but in the world at large, by acting as a role model and filling in the empathy gaps wherever they occur.