

Sympathy at Work at Work

When I hear the word “sympathy,” my first thoughts are of condolence to someone who has lost a loved one. Such is the power of the greeting card and advertising industries. Deeper reflection can take us beyond this solitary understanding to a broader meaning. In actuality, the Greek word from which “sympathy” derives means “of like feelings” or “having common feelings” and lends itself to a broader range of shared emotions.

Sympathy as a faith-based value begins with love, with love so thorough as to regard others as self. It brings us to see others’ troubles as shared; their grief *and* joy as our own. Their feelings and experiences become ours. The feelings are shared. There is no judgment or agreement about the feelings; we are just united in the emotion.

Sometimes true sympathy surprises us. Normally at wakes, I have a few sympathetic words or phrases ready to say. But, several years ago, the spouse of a woman, who over a number of years was a successor, a co-worker, and a boss of mine, passed away. I knew of her deep love for him, and I cared for her as a fellow educator. When I reached her in the receiving line at the wake, I had no words. She and I just hugged. I felt her grief as my own. Sympathy is beyond pity, beyond the trite or expected verbal expressions. It is a sincerity of feeling, of shared emotion.

The divine love that we are blessed to mirror to those in our workplaces leads to attachment and perhaps to an intuitive understanding of their emotions and needs. Much as parents develop an intuitive understanding of the needs of their infant from their various cries and non-verbal expressions, so we can become with our co-workers. There is joy to be shared in a task completed, a job well-done. There is trepidation and joy to be shared with a newly hired co-worker. There is frustration to be shared in facing a sticky, persistent work-related problem and satisfaction, even celebration, when the problem is resolved.

At any setting in which we work, home, volunteer site, or our employment, there are people and there are emotions. There is always a need for sympathy, for someone to understand and share with co-workers job related or home related joys and sorrows, blisses and distresses, triumphs and disappointments, and even the tedium and/or the excitement of the journey between the worst and the best of feelings.

The sympathy that love enables makes it easier for love to flow into acts of mercy. In a sense, sympathy is a channel for our peace. We give it and we receive it.

SYMPATHY— A Faith Based Value at Work

1. What does applying the faith-based value of sympathy in your workplace mean to you? What do you think it would mean to those with whom you work? How does its meaning change for your different workplaces, for example, home or where you volunteer?
2. Why is it important to gain an understanding of sympathy in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
3. How do/could you apply the concept of sympathy in your workplace(s)?
4. What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based sympathy in your workplace(s)? How would the workplace sound different? Look different? Feel different?
5. What first step are you willing to take this week?