Emotionally Exhausted? Try Empathy

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Living in this ceaselessly demanding world, how do we recover from emotional exhaustion? I've been noticing what my body feels like in my exhausted state: my feet hurt; my torso is compressed and collapsed; I'm breathing shallowly. Sometimes my back aches, my cheeks are tense, and I don't want to look anyone in the eye.

And I think, "This is physical exhaustion – nothing can help me – empathy would be useless right now." Then, if I'm lucky, someone close to me gets curious. It might sound something like "Are you worn out like an eraser on a much-sharpened pencil? Do you long for ease and understanding? Would you love the knowledge people have signed up to learn to leap effortlessly out of your brain into theirs?" And all of a sudden, my cells perk up. I start to wonder for myself, what was the moment when the exhaustion hit? Do I have a feeling of being seen, of being resonated with, of being known? These are the needs which, when unmet, can leave us wrung out like an old mop. And after I make sense of my day's experience, with its loneliness, or its frustration, or the ways in which old, implicit "embodied anticipations" of lack of connection and shame preemptively suck the life-force out of me, my energy surges back, and I say to myself "oh, I was fooled again. I thought I was really tired, but what I really needed was empathy."

I always forget that the hopelessness of not being met in the world takes us into the unmyelinated slow lane of experience, the dorsal channel of the vagus nerve, where our heart rate plummets, our blood pressure and respiration drop, and energy and information stop moving at their usual 100 meters per second and start slogging along at 1 meter per second. And when we're there, we often don't even remember what it was like to feel safe, and loved, and known.

Our healing journey, whatever it looks like, creates self-compassion and understanding, and the on-going accumulation of connected memory that lets us gradually build the bridge of empathy between pain and well-being, so that we begin to always know the way home to rejuvenation from the dark, unlit places within us. Ahh – resiliency and vagal tone, what a comfort you are!