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# No quick fixes for suffering

BY **PETRA GIMBAD**

**O**VER the weekend, I reconnected with a friend who lost someone dear to what we suspect to be AIDS-related complications. This brought back fears of losing friends to illness – be it AIDS related, depression or suicide.



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It is a painful thing to watch someone die slowly. One of my best friends said it best: The worst pain is sometimes that of seeing someone you love suffer.

The fear of watching someone you love die slowly and in pain is stronger than the fear of loss. Those who know this have also experienced how silence is the only answer when you have moved beyond speech. Many have yet to realise that cliches bring no comfort; they only exhaust and cause pain.

All the religion and philosophy in the world cannot comfort a person racked by suffering and grief.

Watching someone suffer does not have to involve a life-threatening disease. A person can face mental illness (sometimes also a life-threatening disease in itself) or live powerlessly within a situation of abuse and poverty.

In my work, it has been frustrating dealing

with funders and project managers who wish to resolve everything unrealistically in a speedy fashion. Similar to get-rich-quick schemes, you really have to wonder what are the corners one has to cut and what principles need to be sacrificed, to define that the job has been done.

A short supply of common sense leads to fear-based escapism: you cannot work with sick people, vulnerable and marginalised clients or bleak poverty and expect everything to be hunky-dory in a few months. The

change that stays can take years.

When you deal with a permanent vulnerability, such as addiction or the cruelty caused by society towards the disabled, what solution is there to be found in this lifetime? Yet, how would you expect a society that has come to expect quick fixes, and one that shoves old people in budget airline queues for taking a few seconds longer, to understand this?

When you work with people and animals, you deal with a life that is messy and all-embracing. There is no cosmetic surgery for life.

Once, I was approached by a person who asked what the organisation I worked with needed. I told him that the children I worked with needed mentors who would stay and not leave. At that point, they had enough to live on but we lacked the human resources needed to spend time with the children and simply listen

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- the very foundation of change.

When I saw the stunned look on the person's face, I realised that all he was prepared to offer was yet another project idea that we did not need at the time, as we would then be responsible to execute it on his behalf despite our overstrained resources. He was not willing to get his hands dirty. All the glory, none of the fuss.

As much as my former colleagues and I value money, considering how hard we have had to beg for it at times - we all know that it is not enough. The amount that was offered to cover the cost of the project was insufficient given that at the time, my former colleagues and I worked beyond capacity till 9pm at the earliest.

Returning to my friend and his friend who passed on - it frightens me to know that the road is hard for the people I care for dearly. The thought makes me want to run and lose all memory of the people my ex-colleagues and I knew, and eliminate the nightmares.

Quite honestly, sometimes all I want to do is forget and I know that this is human. But the best field-based humanitarians will tell you that managing your emotions professionally does not mean cutting them off, for this would diminish our ability to listen and find solutions. Or at least, respond with kindness.

Sometimes, showing compassion despite its pain, is the best we can do.

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