

Peace: The Virtue of COMPASSION

by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD

One of the consequences of living in a global community is that we become aware of the great amount of suffering on this planet. We view it on television, read it in the news, and see it in our communities. Consider how the following facts make you feel:

- One in four people worldwide live in abject poverty, unable to feed themselves on earnings of less than \$1 per day.
- 30,000 children die daily for lack of safe drinking water, sanitation or hunger.
- One-sixth of the world's population is illiterate, most of them women.
- Over 250 million people lose their homes, land, livelihoods, or loved ones annually as a result of natural disasters — mostly floods, drought/famine, and windstorms.
- 93,000 acres of tropical rainforest (the “lungs” of the Earth that regulate climate) are deforested daily; worldwide over 2400 plant and animal species disappear daily.
- One-third of Earth's population doesn't have enough water to live on.

The call for your compassion does not have to originate with global suffering or when a natural disaster hits. Your care and concern about others should also begin within your home and family, as in an illness, death, loss of job, abuse, or hurt feelings; or, within your friendships and community.

Compassion literally means to feel with, to suffer with, and it almost always elicits a tender response in our heart. It could be said that compassion is the ultimate litmus test of our connection with others: Can we first *feel* distress in another, and then can we *act* on their behalf.

Circle of Compassion

Compassion begins to appear when you question how your feelings and actions extend to others. The simplest way to begin is to create a *Circle of Compassion* for your life. Place yourself at the center surrounded by loved ones, family, friends, community, and other cultures. Then superimpose your circle with Nature: pets, plants, open spaces, unique geographic landscapes, water, and air. Within this model, the Dalai Lama gives this instruction: “If you want

others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” Only if it were so simple, right?

Dr. Michael Fox of the Humane Society notes that “Compassion is a total embracing of all living things; otherwise it is a masquerade of sentimentality and patronage.” In other words, our desire to help others should not be driven by the thought that we ought to. Instead, as Vietnamese spiritual teacher Thich Nhat Hanh points out, we should express our compassionate thoughts and actions “until we see clearly that our love is not contingent upon the other person being lovable.” In this way we are drawn to action as a way to practice reverence for life, to embrace another’s sacredness, and to offer a peaceful and hopeful sanctuary for their wellbeing.

Think of your Circle of Compassion in the Native American way of the Sacred Hoop, wherein all life is held and honored. The very first step to cultivating compassion, therefore, is listening and feeling with your heart and mind the voices of this planet that need your kindness, prayer, generosity, or forgiveness. The next step may be a little more difficult; for you might feel a personal resistance that makes it seem difficult or awkward to reach out to others. Don’t worry; this is part of being human. The following *Barriers to Compassion* may help you better understand such resistance.

7 Barriers to Compassion

1. Judgment. A major block to compassion is judgment: forming harsh opinions and criticism, or adopting attitudes of insensitivity, indifference, or arrogance that keep us separate from others. Judgment often takes the form of “isms”: racism, sexism, classism, ageism, faithism, and nationalism. But it can also show itself in personal relationships, such as negative thinking, put-downs, avoidance, or criticism.

Ask yourself: “Do I have particular judgments that keep me distant from others?”

2. Fear/Discomfort. Many people fear getting close to others because it has the potential to uncover personal pain, discomfort, or emotional wounds. Seeing others suffer may cause us to think it could easily happen to us, i.e. our own life or sense of security may seem fragile or impermanent.

Ask yourself: “Do I prefer to relate to life directly with hope so as to make a difference, or

do I choose to live and die in fear?”

3. **Lack of awareness.** It is possible to be unaware or misinformed of the extent to which others are struggling from day-to-day, be they a family member, threatened species, or the victim of a natural catastrophe.

Ask yourself: “Am I interested enough in my family, community, natural environment, and other places on Earth such that I know when they are in distress?”

4. **“There but for the grace of God go I.”** It is natural to feel relieved that others’ misfortunes are not our own, that we live in some protective grace. But such thinking reinforces our separateness from others, leading us to believe that God, or good karma, is on our side.

Ask yourself: “If something happened to me, wouldn’t I want to know that others cared about my wellbeing and, be it friend or stranger, reached out to comfort and support me in any way possible?”

5. **“Something’s already being done.”** Sometimes we can hide our reluctance to reach out to others behind the argument that their needs are already being met by a large host of organizations, philanthropic support, volunteers, and professionals. Consequently, we may think we are “off the hook,” or even that our small contribution would get lost in the larger picture.

Ask yourself: “What is really preventing me from diving in and helping others?”

6. **Apathy.** Everyone is capable of compassion yet most people tend to avoid it because it’s uncomfortable, or we simply just don’t care. Consequently, we create “outs” for our lack of concern, often citing that we don’t have the time to help or get involved, or that we don’t have the money to donate. Apathy can also show itself as ennui (world-weariness), where our own stressful or angst-ridden life gives us little energy or desire to consider the needs of others.

Ask yourself: “In what ways do I create excuses for not reaching out to others when it most counts?”

7. **Unresolved issues.** It is possible that people carry old wounds and hurts from life, often from childhood. Perhaps a history of physical or emotional abuse makes it difficult to feel close to

others. Maybe one suffered the loss of a loved one, or the breakup of a relationship, and this has closed off the heart's ability to reach out. Perhaps the difficulty to "make ends meet" causes one to hoard things, thus losing a spirit of generosity.

Ask yourself: "What old issues in my life keep me distant from others?"

How to Open the Heart

The practice of compassion is often likened to opening the heart. But how can we do this and keep our heart open? Following are some basic ideas:

- Quiet your mind and try to be present at times of distress so that you are aware of your feelings.
- Examine any tension inside you that harbors mistrust, anxiety, fear, or the need to control or defend your personal boundaries.
- Allow yourself to feel the suffering in the world, including your own.
- Don't turn away from pain, but move toward it caringly.
- Be gentle and patient with yourself, accepting that both positive and negative thoughts and feelings arise in the heart and mind as a natural part of being human.
- Notice life's difficulties randomly occurring throughout the day: a fly helplessly beating itself against the window in a struggle to get out, a person missing their bus, a panhandler, a traffic accident, a shopper who's dropped their groceries, a person in a wheelchair, a crying child.
- Start small: let a fly out of the house instead of swatting it, repot an ailing plant, apologize, ask if you can help, kindly and sincerely touch someone.
- Identify with your neighbors in their distress.
- Use the media to vicariously make a caring connection to people around the world; include a connection to animals and Nature as well.
- Offer inward prayer for relief of a person, animal, or nature's discomfort.
- With greater courage, approach what you find repulsive; help those you think you cannot help.
- Use the Buddhist technique of *tonglen* ("receiving-sending"): if you observe someone, a creature, or even Nature, and are moved by their distress, just breathe it in and then breathe out for them, yourself, and the whole world, love, strength, relief and relaxation. Similarly, whenever you see or feel happiness, breathe that in and then breathe/send it out as happiness with the wish that the whole world could feel joy, peace and comfort.

Remember:

Compassion can be an invaluable gift of sanctuary and peace to yourself and others. Consequently, you cannot help but feeling and extending peace and hope to all in their time of need. By your kindness you become your “brother and sister’s keeper” because you have truly kept them in your heart. As you journey throughout your day, and throughout the world, remember Plato’s words:

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

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