

(Compiled and summarized by Francis Dombrowski. All credits are due to the authors used and summarized.)

What is compassion? What are the attitudes, qualities, actions that would enable another to say to you: you are a compassionate person? What are the steps we need to take to develop this precious gift?

The attitude of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion compels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow human beings, to remove ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, to respect the sanctity of every single human person, treating each one, without exception, with justice, equity and respect.

Compassion is not pity or just feeling sorry for someone in pain often accompanied by an uncritical, sentimental benevolence. Compassion means to endure something with another person, to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, to feel her pain as though it were our own and to enter generously into his point of view. The golden rule asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain and then refuse, under any circumstance, to inflict that pain on anybody else.

We know from experience that human beings do not limit their compassion to their own family and friends. Nobody is entirely without sympathy for other people. If you saw a child poised dangerously on the edge of a well, you would immediately lunge forward to save her. Your action is not inspired by self-interest; you would not stop to think whether or not she was related to you; you were not motivated by the desire to please her parents or win the admiration of your friends or by the fact that you were irritated by her cries for help. You would simply feel her plight in your gut and you would act to save. We also know that those who have constantly trained themselves in the art of compassion manifest new capacities in the human heart and mind; they discover that when they reach out consistently toward others, they are able to live with suffering that inevitably comes their way with serenity, kindness and creativity and joy. Compassion then regards the other as another self and is all embracing and excludes nobody. Jesus said:

“treat others the way you would have them treat you.” Mohammed said: “No one can be a true believer unless he desires for his neighbor what he desires for himself.”

What are the steps to grow ever deeper and wider into compassion? We can begin by visioning concentric circles of compassion, starting with ourselves, family, moving out to friends and community, then to your country and finally the globe. We are facing massive, global problems of injustice, hunger, poverty and destruction of our environment and we seem unable to find adequate solutions. We must look at ourselves and all the others with compassion, estimate our strengths and weaknesses and assess our potentials for change.

We begin with Jesus words: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you cannot love yourself, you cannot love other people either. Compassion is essential to humanity. We have a need to be cared for and to care for others. It is not easy to love ourselves. We are more inclined to criticize ourselves for our shortcomings and failures. How many in our culture are afflicted with eating disorders and addictions that come from self-hatred, fear, inadequacy, feelings of inferiority, helplessness and wanting control. If we cannot accept the reality of our own humanity with its fear, anxieties, anger, hatred selfishness, loneliness, failure, cowardice, sin and guilty, we are like to dismiss, ridicule or minimize the same in others. We all have our character traits, dark sides, upbringing, economic circumstance or the society into which we were born and we have to work hard to change the ill effects of all that has affected our personalities. If we cannot accept our shadow, we are likely to take a harsh view of the darker side of others. If we are not compassionate toward ourselves, we cannot be compassionate toward others.

Suffering is part of life and it is essential to acknowledge our own pain or we will find it impossible to have compassion for the distress of others. Look back on the experiences that have caused you distress in the past: the death of a loved one; moments of loneliness and fear; rejections, betrayals, and failures, hurts. Then send a message of encouragement and sympathy to your self. By remembering your own sorrow vividly, you will make it possible for yourself to feel empathy with others. With compassion toward yourself and with seeing your

suffering in context and perspective, you become free enough to no longer focus merely on yourself but can now go out to others and see and feel that they too have pain.

Once we realize that we are called to find a way to help ourselves and others to bear the sorrows of life with serenity, creativity and kindness. The next step in this call is to grow in the skill of empathy. When a Christian looks at the crucified Christ, his heart breaks into sympathy and fellow feeling. To make an empathic identification with people whose experiences are entirely different from our own, we need to enter imaginatively into others' lives. Imagination is crucial to the compassionate life. Instead of maintaining ourselves in a state of deliberate heartlessness in order to keep suffering at bay, we should open our hearts to the grief of others as though it were our own. We begin to be compassionate when we cannot bear the sight of another's sorrow. Such an empathic attitude can inspire us to try to alleviate another's hardship.

While it is natural to try to avoid unnecessary grief, we should be aware of our initial reluctance to get involved even emotionally. We don't want to listen to another sad story. We feel we have enough to deal with and so push another's troubles from our mind. We hurry past the homeless person, refusing to allow his plight to disturb our peace. But then it is time to remember that when you were having a bad day, what helped you to get through it – a kind word, a smile, a joke and try to give that gift to another. Take time to listen to another's pain.

We can grow in compassion by recalling a person you like or a person you dislike. Think of their good points, their contribution to your own life; their generosity, courage and sense of humor. Look deeply into their hearts, insofar as you can, and see their pain: the sufferings you are aware of and all the secret sorrows that you will never know. You will then desire them to be free of their pain and resolve to help them in any way you can. Wish for each the joy that you desire for yourself and finally admit that you all have faults, yourself, the person you like as well as the one you dislike. You grow in compassion as you gain the ability to think of others in the same way as you think of yourself.

The next important step in a compassionate life is action. One small act of kindness can turn a life around. Think of moments in your own life when somebody went out of his or her way to help you or say a kind word. We remember them and they make our day. We should also consider the effects of the unkind remarks that may seem insignificant to the one who said them but have the power to fester in our hearts for years. Our words and actions have consequences that we could never have foreseen. Mindfulness in dealing with others will urge us to shield others from destructive remarks and actions and encourage us to lighten another's life with acts of kindness and thoughtfulness. Treat others the way you wish to be treated yourself.

Another basic attitude for compassion is how little I know about the other. We need to have an open mind and heart that can make a place for the other. All too often we impose our own experience, beliefs, opinion on others and on events, making hurtful, inaccurate and snap judgments, not only about individuals but about whole cultures. It often becomes clear how little we really know. Deep compassion demands we let go of our self-assurance that makes us identify with one opinion rather than another, become quarrelsome and unkind, say this could not mean that and think we have responsibility to change others to suit ourselves. If we are determined to remain trapped in our own perspective, our own understanding, our own likes, dislikes, comforts and opinions, we will remain not only small and narrow but become judgmental and unkind to others. We need to forget about ourselves for a while, empty our hearts of our self-importance so we can make a place for the other and not distort their experience or reality with our own needs and prejudices. To love means to suddenly realize that somebody else exists, possesses her own world, life experience, need and gift and to learn how to understand, respect, cherish that other. So we must be mindful and look around our immediate circle of family, community, friends, strangers. What do you really know about each and every one of them? What are their deepest fears and hopes? What are their most intimate dreams and feelings?

Another important step in compassion is to learn how we should speak to one another in dialogue. In democratic assemblies citizens learn how to debate, to marshal arguments logically and effectively and to argue their opinion against one another in order to win. Nobody was expected

to change his mind or be converted to the other side. This is not the way to compassion. With compassion one enters empathetically into the other's viewpoint or experience. True dialogue is a spiritual exercise designed to create a profound change in the participants. In the first place its purpose was that each person should understand the depth of his ignorance and nobody must be pushed into a position about which he feels uncomfortable or on the defensive. Each participant should make a place for the other in his mind, listening intently and sympathetically to the ideas of his partners in dialogue and allowing them even to unsettle his own convictions. In return, they would permit their minds to be informed and changed by his contribution.

Compassionate dialogue suggests that if one person feels there is nothing dearer to himself than himself and his own ideas, he should realize that everybody else feels exactly the same. A person who loves the self should not harm the self of others says Pasenadi. Genuine dialogue starts from where people actually are rather than where we think they ought to be. Our questions should lead to personal insight for each other. We have to decide whether we want to win an argument, show our viewpoint is better or seek the truth and be ready to change our views if the evidence is sufficient or at least just listen to become aware of the underlying message, to hear the pain or fear that surfaces in body language, tone of voice and choice of imagery. And in listening we need to find the meaning by considering the context, the background out of which someone speaks. When we hear a statement that at first seems odd or false, we try to find a context in which it makes sense, because we want to understand what is being said. In this effort it is important to realize that the speaker shares the same humanity as yourself and even though your belief systems may differ, you both are seeking some meaning. We need to find the truth in each other's hearts. We cannot hold our beliefs so exclusively that we disbelieve all the rest; otherwise we will lose much good and fail to recognize the real truth. God is not limited by any one creed.

So when we are about to criticize another nation or religion, we need to catch ourselves and ask whether our own country or religion may have been responsible for a similar abuse in the past. As we develop concern for everybody we are seeking a more objective overview that sees the situation as a whole. This means an awareness of prejudice,

preconceptions, attachments, and blind spots that can cloud our understanding. We cannot be compassionate without being accurately informed on our own history as well as that of the other.

With an empathic understanding of the context, we will find that we can imagine ourselves, in similar circumstances, feeling and thinking the same with some of their frustration, humiliation and despair. We have to see where people are coming from and in this way broaden our perspective and make place for the other. As we develop a compassionate heart we should feel an increasing sense of responsibility for the suffering of others and resolve to do everything we can to free them from their pain. Compassion comes to its height and depth when we can look into another's face and see ourselves. In the end we are one and the same beyond our secondary conditions. So treat others the way you want to be treated yourself. Everyone is in some pain and we are not alone in our suffering. We come to be unable to bear the sight of another's sorrow so that we feel it almost as intensely as we feel our own. So instead of steeling ourselves against the intrusion of other people's pain, we should regard our exposure to global suffering as a spiritual opportunity. Make a place for the other in your life, develop concern for everybody in some way, make a difference in the life of another and do not allow yourself to feel paralyzed by the immensity of global misery. You do not have to rush off to foreign parts. Suffering is not confined to distant parts. Take time to look around your world. You may find that you are now more sensitized to the sorrow that is present wherever you look. You will recognize the signs of poverty, loneliness, grief, fear and desolation in your own city, your own community your own family. And do not run away but choose your mission, your action. There is a need that you, and only you, can fulfill.

When the disciples allowed a stranger to enter their minds and let his ideas find a home there, they felt their hearts burned within them. When they arrive at their destination, they beg their new friend to stay the night with them. The moment of recognition comes when the stranger breaks bread and they understand that all the time they have been in the presence of the Christ. We will glimpse the risen Christ not only in the Eucharist and the study of Scripture but also when we reach out to the stranger. We may find that if instead of backing away from the stranger and rejecting his insights, we allow him to change our

perceptions, our understandings, our feelings, we may be enriched by the encounter and experience our own moments of insight and love. (Source: Karen Armstrong, Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life. Knopf, NY 2011)