

WEEK ONE

COMPASSION AS A WAY OF LIFE

INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

The joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the women and men of this age, especially the poor and those afflicted in any way, are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Jesus Christ.

—Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*¹

In my early twenties, the first line of this Vatican II document on the Church, *Gaudium et Spes* (Latin for “Joy and Hope”), aroused a vision in my heart of how I wanted to live. Ever since then, this hope has formed a motivation for my steadfast longing to respond compassionately to those whose lives bear “sorrows and anxieties,” to bring joy and hope to “those afflicted in any way.”

Paul Gilbert, professor at Derby University, describes compassion as “being sensitive to the suffering of self and others with a deep commitment to try to prevent or relieve it.”² This week we explore some of the basic components of doing this. I invite you to consider what compassion consists of in its most basic nature. This includes exploring the movement of compassion—*awareness, attitude, action*—and the four essential aspects of *nonjudgment, nonviolence, forgiveness, and mindfulness*.

Compassion is a way of life—an inner posture of how to be with suffering, both our own and others, and a desire to move that attitude into action. Compassion involves an “inside-out” movement. A radical change unfolds in us when compassion becomes a way of life, a transformation as far-reaching as an acorn growing into a tree, an egg producing a chicken, or a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly.

Each of the practices of compassion presented this week holds the possibility of changing how we think, how we respond emotionally, and what choices we make in regard to others and

our planet. We cannot accomplish this transformation on our own. Only with divine love empowering us and a daily renewal of intention will we be insistent and persistent in our efforts to live in a compassionate manner.

My experience with compassion has taught me that activating this virtue is both a challenge and an immense gift. I know that my intent to be compassionate has changed me. I have become more generous with my presence, less begrudging of the time required to be there for another. Negative criticism and judgment of others has waned considerably, and in their place has grown a greater acceptance and appreciation for those who think and act differently than I do. My understanding of the pain that our planet and nonhumans endure steadily expands. At the same time, I am always learning more about what compassion requires.

One of the ongoing strengths of compassion rests on the foundation of our unity with this world of which we are a part. We are never alone in our practice of compassion. At the same time, we continually receive what we need to sustain our life and our love. As meditation teacher Norman Fischer reminds us:

Literally every thought in our minds, every emotion that we feel, every word that comes out of our mouth, every material sustenance that we need to get through the day, comes through the kindness of and the interaction with others. And not only other people but nonhumans, too, literally the whole of the earth, the soil, the sky, the trees, the air we breathe, the water we drink. We not only depend on all of this, we are all of it and it is us.³

Keeping this bountiful support in view helps us to meet the challenges that compassion brings with it.

Each day that we give ourselves to living compassionately, we will need a trustful patience. With the exception of biologists and a few other interested human beings, most of us never pay attention to photosynthesis, that phenomenal gift of the sun to change light into food. This process takes time. Plants do not grow into full stature overnight. Some, like trees, take years to reach their full height and fruitfulness. Matt Malone, S.J., editor in chief of *America* magazine, alludes to this reality by relating the story of Hubert Lyautey, who “once suggested to his gardener that he plant a tree. The gardener objected, ‘This particular tree will not flower for a hundred years.’ To this the former French Army general replied, ‘In that case, plant it this afternoon.’”⁴

We presume that we must wait for a tree to grow. This is true also with our desire to be persons who contribute to a lessening of the world’s suffering. Compassion is the photosynthesis of the heart. It too requires the slow, trusting process of waiting for change to occur. We cannot hurry this transformation, but we can give ourselves to it as fully as possible, knowing that it entails a continual recommitment.

Mindfulness is a valuable means of maintaining and strengthening our resolve to begin anew each day. Day 6 presents the value of this spiritual practice to keep us alert so that we are aware of suffering and how we choose to respond to it. As you reflect on the topics of this week, be patient with yourself. Trust that you have a divine companion who both inspires and guides you along the way.

WEEK 1, DAY 1

AWARENESS, ATTITUDE, ACTION

Compassion is a thread that binds together the deepest centers of life beyond the borders of race, gender, religion, tribe, or creature.

—Ilia Delio, O.S.F., *Compassion*⁵

Awareness. Attitude. Action. These three essentials comprise the movement of compassion. While much of the world's suffering is observable, a portion lies tightly concealed. Unless we become *aware* of suffering, we cannot respond to it compassionately.

One day in a supermarket I met an acquaintance whom I rarely see. She smiled and commented on life "being good" in reply to my "how are you?" Three minutes into our conversation, her tears fell as she spoke about the helplessness of seeing her parents aging. Another time, at Mass on a Lenten morning, a stranger in a business suit sat next to me, seemingly content, until a cell phone behind us rang incessantly. The man turned around and hissed, "Throw the damn thing out the door!" Only at the Sign of Peace did I catch a glimpse of what disturbed his spirit. A woman came over to him and whispered, "Good luck on your deposition today." Ah, there it was—the hidden anxiety and concern about what lay ahead of him.

Compassion also requires a certain *attitude*, that of recognizing the inviolable oneness we have with all of life. We exist in a world of interconnectedness. We are not isolated individuals, even if we may feel that way at times. The suffering of one affects the suffering of all. What we think and feel about people who are suffering, especially if they do not match our notions of how they ought to believe and act, greatly affects our response.

The indwelling light of divinity unites us at a spiritual level. If I intend to be compassionate, I cannot shove people I dislike out of the way. I relearned this one morning sitting in prayer at dawn, watching charcoal clouds press heavily against the eastern horizon. In spite of this barrier, a strong, thin edge of brilliant red light arose. This persistent light led me inward to where disgust toward a political leader lodged. His hard-hearted approach to society's most vulnerable people walled off my thinking kindly about him.

As I observed the narrow band of light, I remembered Jessica Powers's poem about the Holy One "sitting on a ledge of light" in her soul.⁶ With that, the Spirit of Love opened my walled-off heart, and I thought, *This politician, too, has a ledge of light in his heart, even though I cannot see it. Soften what has concretized in yourself.* This insight did not mean accepting his noncompassionate rhetoric and heartless actions, but it did call me to look beneath that behavior and respect the Light at the core of his being.

Later that morning I received confirmation of my insight when I opened Krista Tippett's *Becoming Wise* and read a comment by Congressman John Lewis of Georgia:

You have to be taught the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence. In the religious sense, in the moral sense, you can say that in the bosom of every human being, there is a spark of the divine. So you don't have a right as a human to abuse that spark of the divine in your fellow human being. . . . If you have someone attacking you, beating you, spitting on you, you have to think of that person. Years ago that person was an innocent child, an innocent little baby. What happened? Did something go wrong? Did someone teach that person to hate, to abuse others? You try to appeal to the goodness of every human

being and you don't give up. You never give up on anyone.⁷

Research by quantum physicists like David Bohm assures us that we are also united on a physical plane by a bond of invisible connections. Our physical self consists of invisible energy packets of light and heat called photons. Instead of our bodies being a solid mass, scientists now know that every particle is in motion. Each part connects and interrelates with each other. Lynne McTaggart summarizes this research in *The Bond*: "The more scientists look, the more they discover how dependent on, and finally indivisible from, everything is with everything else."⁸ We are beings who intermingle in an undetectable way with one another. Amazing indeed.

This attitude of a common bond underlies each compassionate *action*. With our awareness of suffering, and an attitude of wanting to alleviate it, we then choose to act in a positive way for the benefit of all beings. We trust that each action taken for the good of one person or group benefits the good of all—that, as we read in *Gaudium et Spes*, "the sorrows and anxieties of the women and men of this age . . . are the sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Jesus Christ."⁹

This three-step approach can clearly be seen when Jesus approaches the widow of Nain (see Lk 7:11–17). He becomes aware of her suffering when he sees her crying at the death of her son: "He had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep'" (Lk 7:13). His heart is moved because he recognizes a human being like himself who knows loss and sorrow. This elicits loving-kindness in him and a desire to end her suffering. Jesus then acts by raising the son back to life.

We look beneath surface appearances when we are compassionate. Like Congressman Lewis, we trust the spark of divinity dwelling in humanity. On the surface we may seem to exist at a

great distance from each other. Underneath that cover of disparity lies the treasure of our oneness. The deeper down we go, the more alike we are than different. Each of us desires happiness. Each of us knows fear and the pain of nonacceptance. Each of us wants to have a loving home in the heart of another. In the wise words of conservationist Carl Safina, “The greatest story is that all of life is one.”¹⁰

REFLECTION

Of the three components of compassion—awareness, attitude, action—which do you find most difficult to live? What makes this challenging for you? How might you approach this so that it becomes less difficult?

PRAYER

Imagine that a ledge of light exists in the vast abode of yourself. You are sitting on that ledge. An embodied, compassionate presence comes and joins you. As the two of you sit together, on each in-breath whisper quietly: “I am filled with compassion.”

SCRIPTURE TO CARRY IN YOUR HEART TODAY

“Clothe yourselves with compassion” (Col 3:12).

WEEK 1, DAY 2

THE SEEDS OF COMPASSION

What we repeatedly think shapes our world. Out of compassion, substitute healthy thoughts for unhealthy ones.

—Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart*¹¹

At the opening of a retreat on compassion, I handed each participant a small transparent pouch containing four seeds. I reminded them that the seemingly inert seeds held the potential for an abundant harvest if they were carefully tended. I asked the group to consider the seeds as symbols of the four main spiritual qualities necessary for compassion's growth: *nonjudgment, nonviolence, forgiveness, and mindfulness*.

The more these seeds are nurtured, the greater the harvest of compassion. Enlivening these four aspects requires deliberate practice, interior stamina, and trust in the power of the Holy One to assist in their development. When we look into the gospels, it doesn't take long to find numerous teachings of Jesus related to these qualities: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Mt 7:1). "[Forgive] not seven times, but . . . seventy-seven times" (Mt 18:22). "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" (Lk 6:29). "Keep awake" (Mk 13:35).

Neuroscience lends credence to both the challenge and the possibility of bringing these seeds to life. We now know that every human being is born with the potential for being compassionate. Sometimes severe psychological trauma in early childhood damages this ability to sense the suffering of others, but for the majority of people this seed waits to be generative. Authors such as Paul Gilbert, Rick Hanson, and Daniel Siegel,

MD, have explored the connection between the brain and its ability to activate compassion. Gilbert writes:

Understanding our minds is perhaps one of the greatest challenges for modern science and each of us personally. . . . It's our minds that will create grasping selfishness, pitting group against group, or an open, reflective, cooperative, and sharing approach to these difficulties. And, of course, it is our minds that are the source of our own personal experiences of happiness and joy, or anxiety, misery, and despair.¹²

Neuroscientists once thought that brain cells lost an ability to adapt once a person reached a certain age. Now they teach the theory of *neuroplasticity*, which assures the possibility of brain cells changing throughout our lifetime. Research in the area of meditation, for example, has found that neurons, or nerve cells, in the part of the brain affected by meditation are much thicker and stronger for those who meditate daily for lengthy periods.

Any thought or action we do repeatedly will strengthen that part of the brain, as Daniel Siegel notes in *Mindsight*: "One of the key practical lessons of modern neuroscience is that the power to direct our attention has within it the power to shape our brain's firing patterns, as well as the power to shape the architecture of the brain itself."¹³ A common saying among neuroscientists when they speak of this is, "Neurons that fire together wire together." The more that nerve cells transmit information through electrical and chemical signals called synapses, the sturdier those areas of the brain become.¹⁴

We are capable of changing what we think and how we respond. The more intentionally we concentrate on being nonjudgmental, nonviolent, and forgiving, the stronger our possibility of being able to respond that way becomes. For instance, if I am

having difficulty in trying to be less judgmental about someone, I can reduce that negativity by consciously intending to notice my thoughts about that person, and then choosing to alter them if they are not kind. As I do so repeatedly, the neurons in that area of my brain gain strength in their ability to be less judgmental. Awareness of my thoughts increases, and I am more conscious of where I let those thoughts lead me.

I know this is possible from personal experience. In my youth I observed how adults I admired dealt with difficult relationships by using “the scissors method.” Instead of entering into dialogue when conflicts arose, they simply cut off the lines of communication by their silence, or by completely ending the relationship. Snip. Snip. Snip. No more connection. So, of course, this is what I did until young adulthood when I realized this approach strongly opposes what Jesus taught. Slowly, by staying with the intention of moving away from negative thoughts and from my desire to snip off a relationship, I went toward dialogue and communication. It took quite a few years before those neurons in my brain strengthened enough to support my ability in handling relationship conflicts differently.

We plant the seeds of compassion by being aware of our thoughts and feelings, and by the deliberate intention to think and respond in a kindhearted manner. In *The Compassionate Mind*, Paul Gilbert affirms this possibility of changing our brain: “So what you focus on, aspire to, and *practice* will make a difference to your brain and that is true for compassion training, too.”¹⁵ In other words, we can teach our minds to activate compassion, so that we do not react on impulse, or go about our lives unconsciously, missing opportunities to alleviate suffering—and create more suffering.

What do you do with your thoughts and feelings? Do they run rampant all day without being tended? Do they move your heart toward loving-kindness? The qualities of nonjudgment,

nonviolence, forgiveness, and mindfulness wait to be nurtured. I invite you to focus on each of these during the rest of this week.

REFLECTION

If you have access to four seeds, use them to represent the four seeds of compassion. If not, cut four small pieces of paper. Write the name of one of the seeds of compassion on each paper. Choose one of these, and put it in the palm of your right hand. Place your left hand on top of it, as if covering a seed in the soil. As you breathe in, breathe this quality of life into your heart. Do this for two or three minutes. Then repeat the gestures with the other three seeds, or words. Put these in a place where you will see them the rest of the week, to remind you to nurture these qualities within you.

PRAYER

Gardener of My Inner Being, you enrich the soil of my heart with your bountiful love. I will do my part each day to grow seeds of compassion in that soil.

SCRIPTURE TO CARRY IN YOUR HEART TODAY

“The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor 9:6).