

# Compassion as a Craft

All beings know suffering .and the common fact of suffering opens the way to joy and compassion.

All human beings are required to find their way through the wilderness of suffering, whether their own suffering or that of those they love. Finding their way as much as anything refines the soul of an adult.

I use “refine” for its double meaning. Like refining ore, the refinement and purification of the rough truth of our common experience of suffering can transform it into the simple and direct gesture of compassion.

And like refining the raw stuff of our feeling life the soul is remade into elegant ease and forth rightness..

Health care providers especially know suffering. but one need only to be born human to be tested in this way. But for those of us in the healing professions, human suffering is what we are trained to engage with on a daily basis, so we may be more familiar with suffering than most

When I finished nursing school over twenty years ago, one question insisted on having my attention, and it has persisted ever since: How can the craft of nursing become a practice of compassion?

As a young father and Buddhist who was trying to find his way out of hell I believed that cultivating compassion was a reliable source of meaning

I believe compassion is a craft and therefore learnable like nursing. Loving kindness is a matter of the heart, but it is most certainly also a matter of craft. As a craft it can be learned and refined. This book details the particulars of the craft.

In modern times the idea of craft has been flattened into learning an employable skill. We no longer live in a medieval world where the craft of making a mandolin was passed from father to son, from son to grandson. Yet craft suggests lineage, suggests the

possibility of mastery, the full commitment of one's life. Suggests, I believe, even spiritual path and practice.

In *Revisioning Psychology* the Jungian psychologist James Hillman writes of soul-making as a craft. He refers to the ancient Greeks, who believed that the labor of one's hands was also, potentially, the work of making a soul. The Greeks, in turn, likened the making of soul to the making of honey. They observed the diligent bee, chamber by chamber making a honeycomb and in each chamber placing the gathered sweetness. A soul is made, that is, matured, little by little through diligent attention so it can hold substance, responsiveness and skill.

So it is also with compassion as a craft. In responding to the hell of human anguish, nectar is gathered and the soul is shaped to contain it. In this text the nectar I speak of is self-compassion., presence, the capacity to act skillfully in an ambiguous world, crafting time and hastening slowly, hospitality, an eye for beauty..

One tastes this nectar when one notes how that activity of compassion nourishes both the giver and the recipient.

Mr. Borges has metastatic cancer and his prognosis is dreadful. He's terrified and in extreme pain. The shift is busy – everyone running around and I'm swept up in the general urgency. But I pause at Mr Borges door to let go of urgency for a few moments to “meet” him. so dropping myself is necessary to meet him. Which is to say listen to his fear while I'm injecting a little morphine sulfate in his IV line..

It is in the meeting that compassion happens. Subtle, simple, and direct. Mr. Borges is grateful for the morphine but more so that he was met in his time of uncertainty. “You're the first nurse who took the time to hear me,” he said. “Everybody seems so much in a hurry around here. Thank you. Truly.”

I respond, “Yes. I apologize. We get very caught up and sometimes forget to be human and pay attention.”

I noticed a picture of his daughter on his bedside table – roughly my daughters

age. We talked of his fear of dying and leaving her fatherless.

What is compassion? In its most simple sense, it is feeling with another.

The word “compassion,” from the Latin *com-passio*, means literally “suffering with another.” Its close synonym is “sympathy.” The root meaning of “passion,” despite its other later usages is “suffering,” as in the “passion of Christ.” Sympathy comes from the Greek *sym-patheia*, literally, “fellow feeling.”

When one strips away the cliché and sentimentality that sometimes attach themselves to the word, what is compassion anyway? How does one realize it? How does one bring heart to a heartless situation? Who does the heart shrink from, and what does it mean to step forth to meet that person anyway? What is compassion in truly hopeless circumstances? What is the relationship between the tangle of one’s feelings and the gesture of compassion? What might it mean to regard the afflicted one as teacher? And one’s own afflictions—are they not also teachers? What is the etiquette of one’s relationship with these teachers?

These are some of the questions this book asks. And though they are framed in the theater of medicine, each of these questions applies to life wherever it is lived. A hospital or a home where someone is ailing can sometimes turn up the heat, but the dilemmas posed arises whenever one chooses an authentic life. In matters of soul-making we all begin raw, but each of us can discover a life that remakes us if we do it for real.

These two words, “craft” and “compassion,” then, twine into a single idea: the craft of soul-making in the activity of compassion. The gesture toward a suffering being is at the same time a gesture towards one’s own awakening. This craft requires the whole of one’s life and all of what one is. When one vows to learn compassion, one soon realizes one has pledged one’s whole life—from now until one’s certain death. forever the apprentice with regard to what one doesn’t know.

One's whole life—the gamut of who one is.

Nothing less than the complete transformation of the self is required.

The way of compassion is radically individual, each of us unique in our virtues and flaws, passions. Successes, failures. I write here of both, sometimes meeting the craft with poise and grace, sometimes stumbling, blinded by narcissism or a hard heart.

Successes and failures are equally opportunities to refine compassion. Driving home after a hard shift I used to recite my failures to myself but eventually came to understand “failure” as food for developing self-compassion.

The craft of compassion is, in fact, the art of living.

One is immeasurably enriched by diligently walking the path with one's eyes opened. There may be no other way to mature, deep in one's bones. Making soul chamber by chamber, chamber by chamber making soul.

Every day a health care provider steps into the hospital or home can be like stepping into a craftpersons workshop with the grounded enthusiasm of an apprentice of what one doesn't know.

Which is to say every workday is an opportunity to learn.