The Heart of Learning the Craft of Compassion

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This essay is written for anyone who takes the matter of learning compassion seriously. In such a time as we live, I dare say there is nothing more important. Simple-minded and stubborn, it speaks of the effort to understand and live the craft of generosity that proceeds from the heart.

As a practicing Buddhist and a psychotherapist, Aura Glaser was taken with the traditional Tibetan teaching that compassion is the ground of human happiness. She comments in her book, A Call to Compassion, that the "Tibetan tradition is replete with instruction and methodology" about the development of compassion "because while the rest of the world was focused on outer progress, Tibet was focused on inner development." Moreover, "since love and compassion are understood in this tradition to be both the engine and elixir of transformation, enormous emphasis was placed on their cultivation."

Drawing on these teachings, Glaser reimagined her practice as a therapist, making the development of compassion the healing modality she offers her clients. She distills four major points "from the essential actions and principles of these teachings:

- Compassion for self
- Compassion for others
- Equalizing and exchanging self and other (what I call radical empathy).
- No self and no other" (living compassion).

I draw loosely from Glaser and for the sake of a practical path I write of these four distillations as "steps." I trace the arc from self-compassion to living compassion as I understand it.

"Steps" demand a necessary caveat for as one approaches the

mysterium of living compassion it becomes abundantly clear that "I" was never the Source of "my" compassion and will never be.

(This is even true of self-compassion.)

Compassion is ones original nature and though we forever muddy this ordinary truth (what Buddhism calls dukkha -- wherever you are you want to be elsewhere) it is nonetheless present if we simply pause and open our eyes.

The New Yorker cartoon is apt: a doctor with his stethoscope draped over his shoulder tells the patient, "I'm afraid you are suffering from a paradigm shift." The first two sections of this essay, compassion for self and others perhaps are written within a familiar personalized paradigm but as we proceed through radical empathy the fixity and centrality of the self begins to loosen.

In living compassion one sets the self to the side so compassion can move with its radiant intelligence.

Unimpeded.

With each step the opportunity to love is always now, the place this very place. From now and from exactly where you are – withhold nothing that the craft of generosity might become the vibrant truth that you live for. Or as the Zen teacher Cheri Huber puts it, "love as much as you can from wherever you are with what you've got. That's the best you can ever do."

STEP ONE:

SELF-COMPASSION AND HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN

Recently while teaching the craft of compassion in a large drug rehabilitation facility, one worker raised the question of helping addicts heal from shame.

"They are so consumed with self-hate," he said.

He, like almost all sitting in the room, was himself a recovering addict so I asked, “How did you heal from your years of addiction, from your own shame?”

“Well, I let go and let God. I was brought to my knees,” he said.

Everyone nodded in assent. I also nodded in assent remembering how I was brought to my knees as a homeless teenage druggie. Unpacking this collective moment of recognition we were able to speak of the nature of genuine self-compassion.

I quoted Leonard Cohen’s well known lyrics: “ Forget about your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

How do we accept our radiant imperfection? How does humiliation transform into humble acceptance and tenderness for ourselves?

Latin offers the phrase *amor fati*, to “love ones fate.” which I would argue describes the foundational stratum of self-love. *Ones fate* – not you have chosen but what has been chosen for you. These parents, siblings, ancestors. This body and gender. The delights and terrors of your childhood and the hard wiring of your character.

What awakens love of ones fate and the sustaining of self-compassion? A spontaneous song of gratitude comes from recognizing that waking or sleeping we forever bask in gift.

Everything, every moment presents as gift – from the vastness of the universe to this very small life to your very next breath.

In the call and response between oneself and the world, one perceives the gift nature of everything and sings “thank you.” This

simple thank you makes it possible to love ones fate and provides the most reliable source of self-compassion.

It is gratitude that allows one to love the gamut of oneself without judgement, unfettered.

In the years I was recovering from homelessness I kept a "GRATITUDE JOURNAL" in which I wrote ten things at the end of each day for which I was grateful. My little girls laughter; the striations of red and magenta in a sunset; the small ways I was learning to be a human being. As I continued, learning gratitude became a spiritual practice in its own right. As I advanced into the complexities of living an adult life off the street, learning to love my fate became key to broadening and deepening gratitude and self-compassion.

So which came first – the chicken (gratitude) – or the egg (self-compassion)? Well gratitude does give birth to self-compassion. There is no self-compassion until one can say "thank you" for being alive. And self-compassion undeniably gives birth to gratitude, truly and profoundly.

Our ideas of causality are confused by the radiant truth of love.

Which came first?
Emphatically both – which makes the love of ones fate vibrant and durable. Whether one enters the door of *gratitude* or *self-compassion* one arrives in the same place.

The authentic interrogation of loving ones fate arises in any circumstance where ones undone by the unforeseen. You've lost your job. The father of your children has left you for another man. You grandmother who you thought would live forever has suddenly died.

Your doctor has just informed you that you have multiple sclerosis.

I have sometimes asked friends or patients “what have you learned from your heart condition (or cancer or AIDS or addiction and recovery, etc) that you could not have learned any other way? A pregnant question to be sure that invites the ethos of loving ones fate. When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis five years ago it was my turn to ask that question of myself and ask it fully and completely.

Time to walk my walk.

MS found me a stubbornly young and arrogant man when a range of “symptoms” I’d seen from the outside as a nurse now took *my* body. Falling down in public and unable to get up, incontinent of urine and shit, a unreliable set of legs, sleepless and out of my mind on steroid therapy, losing my eyesight not knowing if it was mine to be blind.

Etc.

Early on, not yet recovered from my first exacerbation, I hiked to my refuge on the Big Sur coast to spend two weeks alone in prayer and reflection. It took eight hours to hike what I knew to be an hour walk and I didn’t know if I’d be able to walk out. This was *amor fati* proper.

“Let go and let God.” I had to give up the fetish of certainty. For twenty years I’d assumed it would be mine to see my older wife through the end of her life but that was suddenly far from certain.

Everything – everything – was far from certain.

To my knees.
To my knees.

Now, these years later. only gratitude remains of my passage through MS. Indeed the medicine of gratitude, of embracing my fate, seems tied up with my healing. It's been two years since my last exacerbation and I don't anticipate another. As I wrote this chapter my neurologist, Dr. Russ Shimizu, was shocked at my recent MRI.

I'am free of MS .Few would recognize me as someone with an "incurable" neuromuscular disease.

The transformation of humiliation to humility was, like with so many, a passage through dis-ease. The catalyst of that transformation was gratitude.

That is how the light of self-compassion gets in.

STEP TWO:

COMPASSION FOR OTHERS

The Buddha defines compassion with such clarity. Compassion, he says, is sympathetic joy and sympathetic sorrow – sorrow over another's sorrow and delight over another's delight.

This is the stuff of profound teaching. It is sacred for its homely truth.

These ancient understandings can seem abstract but when we live

by them they are vivid, warm, sometimes intimate.
"How far you go in this life," writes George Washington Carver, "depends on you being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the strong, because one day you will have been all of these."

Sympathy is grounded in the fact that we, or someone we love, did or will experience the same thing as those we take care of. It's just a matter of time before you or a loved one is ill, perhaps hospitalized. One out of two men and one in three women will die of cancer. We know, don't we, it's just a matter of time before you or someone you dearly loves dies.

We diminish our own hearts if we deny the jeopardy that is the common truth of being human and mortal.

Sorrow and joy are the fabric of the everyday, renewed with each new life experience.
"Joy and woe are woven fine / A clothing for the soul divine" writes William Blake. They are the raw material out of which a compassionate life is discovered and lived.

If we live our lives consciously – that is to say with the intent of extending compassion to ourselves and everyone we meet – then all that we are and do is the act of weaving.

This weaving is an act of joy as is opening to another's sorrow. Meeting sorrow we are freed from our self-preoccupation which is where our suffering renews itself.

Compassion is, in fact, joy.

We hold our experiences of sorrow and joy as stories and these stories instruct our souls in the range of experience that makes every human life a common and blessed thing.

The work of anyone who seeks to awaken compassion involves gathering his or her own stories like seeds. They hold the possibility of sprouting and in time perhaps bear

fruit for nourishment or flowers for beauty.

We all know sympathetic joy.

Your friend's HIV test comes back clean, your sister had her first child and she's a doll, the lump in your aunt's breast turns out to be benign, your cousin finally got out of a very bad marriage and she's starting to smile again.

I emphasize suffering not to deny the sheer blessed fact of being alive but because we would rather deny suffering. But the denial of suffering is a machine that itself generates
such suffering!

Joy that relies on the denial of suffering is a superficial and fragile fiction. Eventually it will be undone. Misery can be hidden away in the shadow of an overly optimistic culture, but when it is brought out into the open as the common ground of suffering, it can awaken compassion.

In this sense, linking your personal suffering to that of others becomes a gift to you and through you, a gift to them.

A few examples.

Roland has AIDS, and will likely die soon. He's only thirty-five.

I lost my friend Charlie, a Vietnam vet who worked with the criminally insane, to AIDS when he was the same age. My friend Alberto had AIDS too. A month before Alberto died I did a Tarot reading for him and of course he picked up the Death card. He was so relieved to talk about it openly. All of his friends in his large gay community had lost loved ones and it was unbearable to them that it was Alberto turn. "It's time," he said.

When I bathe Roland, I think of Charlie and Alberto.

My youngest brother, Paul, was psychotic. Mad, he wandered off into the New Mexico mountains and died there. Every young psychotic could be my brother.

Carl is homeless, in his early thirties, an addict and diabetic, cellulitis oozing on his left foot, soon to be an amputee. What broke him so? I was homeless for three years as a

teenager. I'll know how to love him remembering how fierce and cold it can get.

Each of these stories of my friends and loved ones is intimately real to me, but when linked to another's suffering it is no longer mine. They are now not a burden but an opportunity for connection, which offers a kind of freedom. A naïve individualism infects the Western world, so much so that we imagine freedom to be a lonely, even alienated thing. The kind of freedom I speak of here is not independence but interdependence, the vibrant community of we who sustain one another and sometimes set one another free beyond the edge of our own precious but small life.

Clutching at personal suffering amplifies and distorts it.

Sympathetic joy and sorrow delivers us into a lived understanding of living of the human community.

Empathy is where two stories run parallel to each other and then meet.

It was one of those shifts on the oncology floor, the beginning of a double and very busy. For the first three hours did little but rush up and down the hall doing this or that. I kept passing a tough-looking Latino kid, maybe fifteen, weeping outside a patient's door. Couldn't possibly address whatever was happening with him - too much to do.

A couple of hours later it was a bit slower and there was much fuss around the nurse's station. It seems that Armando, that kid in the hall, had stuffed the public restroom sink with paper towels, turned on the water, and caused a little flood. The staff agreed to call security, "Just to scare him, that's all," said the secretary. More to the point, he and his extended family were gathered around his mother's bed. She was in the last stages of liver cancer and probably wouldn't last till morning.

I was called to act before security arrived, but I can't say I felt anything other than awkward and afraid. Had to consciously

remember I'd seen a broken kid in the hall, a frightened child.

Courage is not about having no fear, It's when you honor the fear and act as you must.

Opening the door and introduced myself. *La familia* listened expectantly while I talked clumsily in my *pocho* Spanish to Armando.

"Armando, you flooded the bathroom, didn't you?"

He said "yes" weakly, his eyes to the side and down.

"When I was a few years older than you, my father died. I didn't know how to handle it at all. Is it true that you messed up the bathroom because seeing your mom like this made you feel too many things all at once?"

"Yes."

"And you're not a bad person and won't make any more trouble?"

"Yes."

"Take care of him," I said to his family. "His heart is breaking. Some of the staff got scared and called security. I'll send them away."

Empathy is located where two stories intersect. I was once a boy who lost a parent and, like Armando, confused in my grief, acting out. We shared the common knowledge of heartbreak. From that point where our stories connected I could respond not to the "bad boy," with humiliation or calls to security. The more compassionate way was sheltering the grief of a child who was seeing his mother die in front of him.

There was a flicker of grace in those few moments with Armando and his family. I knew I wouldn't see them again but we connected. I had prevented an act of violence born of ignorance, and Armando wouldn't forget it—just as I will never forget those who were kind to me when I was out of my mind with grief.

I'd walked many a moon in Armando's moccasins Across the threshold I was able to see the moment of the dying of Armando's mother through his eyes and speak to him and

his family accordingly

We are forever meeting “ourselves.” Grandmother and grandfather, mother, father. brother, sister. Friend, neighbor or the strangest of strangers. They deliver us to the family and community in us and community and next of kin that we are in.

Everyone we meet present an opportunity for self-compassion because we are not different from them.

We walk through the life that we’ve lived even as we walk through whatever comes our way, the two meeting each other in a field of sympathetic sorrow and joy. Here we can see sorrow and joy as the possibility of compassion that lives within the stories of our lives and the lives we bear witness to.

The spirit of kindness is deathless. Perhaps you’ve met it in moments but it existed long before your birth and will persist long after your gone. It is the bedrock from which we all spring, the God that is love and the love that is God.

I call the place of shared humanity the village. You are – we are all - of the village simply by virtue of being born.

Those who can meet another’s joy with joy, those who have transformed a portion of their suffering into compassion are walking a very old path.

Many have walked this way.

STEP THREE:

RADICAL EMPATHY

John Howard Griffin’s book, Black Like Me, exemplifies what Tibetans call dakshen nyamje :”equalizing and exchanging self and other.” I call dakshen nyamje radical empathy. Griffin, a white man, had his skin color changed with a pharmaceutical, shaved his head and arms and traveled through the deep south as a black man during the height of the civil rights movement.

I write of Griffin as metaphor. There is a profound education of

the heart when one slides from ones own point of view to the perspective of another.

In my early twenties, a passionate and earnest feminist, I became a housewife. My first wife, Marsha,was a speech therapist with elementary school children and I was a high school dropout. When we had our daughter it was most sensible that I stay at home with Nicole and learn the arts of bottle, diapers, potty training, the terrible twos and getting a meal on the table. While Nicole napped I'd read feminist literature and was disciplined in my efforts to understand the mind of the "other half."

Dakshen nyamje rhymes with the Cherokee proverb that you can't understand another until you've walked three moons in their moccasins.

In 1992 Los Angeles burned following the acquittal of four white policemen who had beat to a pulp a black motorist, Rodney King. The beating was caught on videotape and the black community was outraged over the decision of the all white jury. Being a biracial Mexican white guy, my concerns with the racial divides in the world had been with me since I was a child. I began what I imagined would be my second book about white and black peoples about one another.

As I began collecting the dreams of African-Americans and studied the African origins of black American culture, I was stunned to find that the dreams showed the same realm of imagery that Bantu people used to make sense of whiteness since the Portuguese turned up in the kingdom of the Kongo in the early 1500's. To do justice to what I was seeing, radical empathy was called for and would in fact change my life. First I had to put aside the my peculiar biracial story and see these dreams through a blacks eyes. I eventually went to Africa and was initiated into tribal medicine.

Griffin's brave example was
with me. Though I certainly didn't change my skin color, I was recognized as mapatya , or twin brother, of Mandaza Kandemwa. Together he and I looked at the dreams of African-Americans from

the culture at the headwaters of black America.

These three stories speak of the education of the heart, the sensibility of radical empathy. On the intimate day by day level it is, of course, much quieter.
Radical empathy follows through on the question, “what if it were I or someone close to me who is suffering so?”

Amber is twenty-five and has leukemia. She loves the theater and at her bedside there is a photo of her in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. For the moment she’s undone by a stem cell transplant, her gums bleeding, asleep on ativan. My daughter is Amber’s age and I whisper this to her father when I bring him a cup of coffee. A swift, silent understanding.

Nothing more need be said.

This is radical empathy.

Mrs. Brown just had a mastectomy, as did my wife, and she is painfully self-conscious of her flat left side. Such was the rapport between us that I borrowed from my love of my
wife’s beauty. I laughed, “The running joke with my wife is that women with two breasts have come to look a little unnatural to me.” Mrs. Brown confessed that she seemed to have more trouble with her mastectomy than her husband.
“Borrowing from my wife’s beauty” was radical empathy.

Carl is homeless, in his early thirties, an addict and diabetic, cellulitis oozing on his left foot, soon to be an amputee. What broke him so? I was homeless for years. I’ll know how to love him remembering how fierce and cold it can get.

This is radical empathy: equalizing and exchanging self and other, Ones own story is not privileged over another’s.

With radical empathy one is prepared to cross over to the mysterium: living compassion.

STEP FOUR:

LIVING COMPASSION

No self and no other is how Glaser explains the *mysterium,* the (non) vision that is living compassion. I will try to describe it though the lived truth is outside of language. Glaser merely says, "The self-other axis cannot be separated from the no-self – no-other axis if our compassion is to achieve full expression. Both are equally true, but taken alone, each is false. Self and other, and no-self and no-other, must be understood as co-existing and inter-dependent realities if we hope to find the grail of compassion."

Just as self-compassion done for real slips into compassion for others, radical empathy can give way into the spaciousness and clarity of living compassion.

"To study Zen is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things," says Dogen Zenji.

Across cultures living compassion reverberates from "not I but Christ in me," and the Muslim *fatiya* of forgetting oneself in God's will. I and Thou momentarily drops away and one is amidst the forever plural truth of living beings, loving them unconditionally.

Unconditional love is another way of expressing living compassion.

In this, one is enlightened by all things. You are no longer self-consciously kind towards another – you step forth *as* compassion un-self-consciously. You are fully identified with the process of compassionate activity.

You know when you have entered into living compassion when the profound gift nature of the loving act reveals itself. You are not compassion if you are expecting anything in return.

Living compassion is the essential nature of human freedom.

And living compassion is pure gift. Zadie Smith describes it

precisely: “The moment when the ego disappears and you’re able to offer up your love as a gift without expectation of reward. At this moment the gift hangs, between the one who sends and the one who receives, and reveals itself as belonging to neither.”

Compassion as a presence – as presence – is most relevant here. The person who meets this or that situation compassionately is vehicle for this quality that the bottom line of which is not personal. The spiritual practice of living compassion requires that the self step aside. It is radically and blessedly simple, and its experience extraordinarily ordinary. Compassion is the environment that one is in. One is alert to its presence available to being its vehicle but one doesn’t for a moment possess compassion.

The imp in me writes in the margins: “Bodhisattvas are numberless I vow to recognize them.”

When I met Lewis I was not well. I’d just returned from Africa and my body and soul were in the African time of my friends – which is to say a slowness not at all compatible with what is required to endure a twelve-hour shift as a hospital nurse. I took to the poison of course – half a dozen cups of coffee – thinking it would help me meet the tasks at hand.

No go.

I was in a dream, agitated, the other staff members spinning around me like so many drunken dervishes. And so when I was told at 3 a.m. that I had an admit, I was less than enthused. Nonetheless, when I came to the door of his room I took a deep breath and sighed a hopeless, exhausted prayer, “Make use of me.”

Lewis was fifty-five years old, Downs syndrome, his head a lopsided melon bulging in front, his hands and feet curled up, a wheelchair at his bedside because he couldn’t walk.
His elderly mother had brought him to the hospital because he had

a nasty infected abscess in his left foot.

Admitting Lewis, I got a little of his story – very little, very sparse. His father had died recently and it was not altogether clear how long his mother would live. And then? An institution, I suppose, but it wasn't the content of his story that touched me so much as his inscrutable manner. The lack of self-pity or melodrama could certainly be read as a "cognitive deficit,"but the indefinable nature of our interaction left me stranded between interpretations.

An imbecile? A holy one? Neither or both? I simply could not read him.

"You are a remarkable man," I told him later as I cleaned his wound, laid strips of wet saline gauze across it, and wrapped it in Kerlix dressing.

"Thank you," he replied.

Did he understand what I meant? I left his room feeling put back together again, grateful and humbled by a humble soul.

Where was the spirit of kindness with Lewis? In him? In me? Or hovering between us in the neon glare as he told of his father's death while I tended his wound? It was my meeting with Lewis that convinced me that the spirit of kindness is indeed a spirit, for I could not locate it but was nonetheless healed by it. The closest I can get is to say that the meeting itself healed me of my fragmentation. Lewis's story carries light, gentle, and lucid, and through the simplicity of two men meeting across worlds I learned that compassionate activity itself is medicine. I was incoherent before we met, and was rendered whole. I could not find the thread until we received one another.

Lewis drew something out of me that was new and unanticipated, and I've tried to fold the lessons into the day-to-day life of living compassion inside and outside the hospital.

To approach another person, each interaction with quietly stated intent, hopeful, hopeless but reaching towards being available to

kindness. Yes – to keep the faith with the intent.

And then we meet – I to Thou.

In this life the spirit of kindness "bloweth where it listeth." One can be responsive to its presence but cannot control it. One can only be hospitable to it, alert to its movement in oneself and others in whatever situation.

And one can be attentive to the crazy discipline of being available as its vehicle. This is a fierce and glorious path. Fortunately, there are many teachers and, as they say, "a teacher touches infinity." It is for us to recognize them, discern their teachings, and live by what we learn.

With Lewis the self-other axis was illuminated up by a third – the spirit of kindness – and with that there was an aware self-forgetting. The thought of me being compassionate toward him would be simply false. He and I met in the environment of compassion, radiant and fresh.

My time with Lewis adds a twist of paradox to Shakespeare:

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath, it is twice bless'd
It blesses him that gives and him that takes

Lewis and I were thrice blessed because the spirit of kindness allowed us for a few moments to extend and receive mercy from each other.

Self and other are not abolished by living compassion. They are contained within selflessness but they also lend body and ground to selflessness. They are necessary to one another, interdependent truths.

The sacred nature of plurality is honored but in the meeting of two, the Hasidic Jews say, an angel is born.