

Why Do We Need Communal Discourse on Compassion?

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The terms compassion and empathy are frequently used by the media, our government and both religious and human service agencies. Perhaps it is assumed that when we hear, or read, these terms that we all understand them in the same way. But often one person's understanding of these terms is not the same as all others. If we do have different ways of understanding these terms then it is also likely that we have different ways in which we apply the use of these concepts. Communal discourse about how we understand and apply both empathy and compassion will help us all to improve our knowledge and our skills. This will then move us toward a culture of compassion.

It is easy for anyone to search the Internet or the vast number of published articles to see how often the terms empathy or compassion are used. If a definition of is given then it is also easy to see how varied the definitions are across this broad base of use. Not everyone defines empathy or compassion the same way. I have proposed that empathy and compassion are linked together. Compassion without empathy maybe redefined as sympathy or altruism. This is just one example of the confusion that exists around the use of these two terms.

It is also common knowledge that some people demonstrate more empathy and compassion than others. It is almost a universal experience that people can say they have met someone whom they considered had low levels of empathy or compassion. Occasionally some people will also say that they have met someone, or heard of someone, who demonstrated deeper, or more advanced levels, of empathy and compassion. There is some research on this issue of different levels of empathy knowledge and practice (see my advanced works www.SacredHealingNow.com) and how that relates to the relief of suffering. But can we accept this premise that some people can have advanced levels of compassion?

If we accept the idea that there are different levels at which people understand and practice compassion than that may mean we need to examine our own understanding. If we claim to be compassionate than improving our abilities to be compassionate should be part of how we live. This can be a difficult process for some. Most people who think of themselves as compassionate may not have taken the time to examine, in depth, what that mean or how they personally define and apply the concept. Even though the term compassion is thrown about often there is little in depth discourse about the varying ways in which people understand and practice compassion. This lack of communal discourse then leaves us to our own internal musing, from which we may then conclude that our understanding is ultimately the final word on the topic. How are we to examine the nature of our compassion understanding when there is no communal discourse? This is the most important reason

for having open communal discourse – it helps us to examine our own understanding and practice of compassion in relation to how others understand and practice. Communal discourse can offer us ways to expand our knowledge and improve our practice if we can accept the idea and move beyond the personal relational issues, and the organizational dynamics, that prevent it from occurring.

Compassion is a relational phenomenon. This means simply that our knowledge of compassion, and often our resistance to expanding compassion knowledge, comes from our history with relationships. Suppose we wished to expand our compassion to deeper levels. How would we go about doing that? The first step would be to personally explore our own relational stance in connection with compassion. The second step would be to explore our compassion readiness in connection with our relational stance. Both of these are difficult to accomplish in a self-reflective state that is separate from others. This is because compassion is relational and we need relationships in order to grow in our compassion understanding. But not just any relationships, we need to experience compassionate relationships that include open discourse about compassion. It is these types of relationships that allow us to examine compassion and to develop it further. Unfortunately many people do not get the opportunity to sit within such relationships, particularly ones that offer exposure to advanced levels of compassion combined with open discourse.

There are many reasons why we do not get the opportunity to sit in one of these deep compassionate relationships that include open discourse. These reasons may be related to compassion readiness of the individual, to culture, to the dynamics on the moment, to beliefs, to suffering, or to reasons just not clear to us at that time. But resistance to sitting in a space of compassion is just as informative as those times when we are able to sit in the compassion space. Again this is where open discourse is quite helpful. Yet, for some reason, we have not moved in this direction toward communal discourse. We have not moved toward becoming a culture that freely and openly discusses why we can sometimes sit with compassion and why sometimes we have difficulty doing so. Open discourse on this has the potential for advancing our understanding and practice of compassion and moving us toward a culture of compassion.

Harvard researchers studied leaders who helped organizations make positive contributions to our apparently tumultuous world. The authors said:

“When the ground moves beneath us, the resulting fissures open up more territory in which to maneuver – open more space to imagine possibilities and find ways to our dreams.” Certain leaders have a way of helping us imagine those possibilities and find our way to our dreams. They do this by modeling and creating community discourse. “Great leaders face sacrifice, difficulties, and challenges with empathy and compassion.” With compassion they can “resonate” with each of us, and thus help us see our own possibilities. But these great leaders are also “finding it difficult to sustain their effectiveness – and resonance – over time.”

Resonance is when we know that the leader is saying, acting, writing, in a manner that resonates (matches, touches, moves) with something of value within us. This can be contagious, but it is not contagious simply by mere presence alone. American independence was not born simply on the shoulders of great men – it was also built on a foundation of great ideas that left room for continued

growth. These ideas were discussed – everywhere! These ideas were shared in discourse, and became fertile. They spread throughout the land and discourse was a strong contributing part of America becoming a culture of freedom.

Without discourse resonance will not spread on its own because “the default position is dissonance”. What this means is although showing compassion is very important, bringing it into the everyday dialog of people is equally important. Like America’s shift to a culture of freedom, this is what it will take to make the shift to a culture of compassion. The default position in dialog is dissonance. This is quite obvious almost everywhere one looks, and any reader should easily identify, we can find examples of negative, critical, complaining, and sometimes attacking dialog. This is the position most people “default” to, and not the position of compassion – despite the many compassionate role models. This is the main reason why some leaders lose their strength of resonance.

The researchers suggest that strength of resonance is maintained through the practices of mindfulness (or focused attention and awareness), hope (holding on to possibility), and support for compassion. They define compassion as “the desire to reach out and help another whether or not their condition is based on suffering and pain ... compassion is the emotional expression of benevolence.” The idea of helping someone means that we are truly aware of that person’s needs, we listened without bias. When we offer to help person with a need we also offer the possibility to reduce suffering. The Dalai Lama talks about suffering as including feeling worthless, or having no purpose. Helping people with this is also compassion - including the use of discourse. This definition begins to move into what is often called The Greater Compassion – helping one person see their possibilities is a step toward helping us all, the Greater Community, see. Discourse can help people see new possibilities.

Passing it on through discourse helped America become a land of freedom. Passing it on can also help us become a culture of compassion. But this cannot happen if we stand firm thinking “I am compassionate and all I have to do is give someone a hug and they will know compassion and then pass that on” – as if that action was absolutely contagious. It just is not true, because of the default position. The compassionate actions have to be accompanied by dialog, visualization of new possibilities and striving for improvement, for a higher quality of compassion, for a stronger compassion - just as America did in its quest for freedom.

In several books dealing with compassion The Dalai Lama points out the need to develop strong and mindful compassion. Strong compassion is a continually developing process. It is a process that is enhanced through discourse focused on the nature of that process and all the possibilities presented to us by the compassion heroes who went before us.

Perhaps the most obvious reason why communal discourse on the nature of compassion is needed is because we all have something to share. Compassion is relational and in being so we all have relational experiences to share. No two compassion relationship experiences are identical. This means that there exists the possibility that something within your compassion experience may help another person. This idea that your compassion experience might help another person is even further enhanced when you

think that there are people at all different levels of compassion understanding and compassion readiness. Your experiences may be at a level that is just a bit more developed than another person's and thus can be used to help the person see the possibilities that exist. Yet if we do not have communal discourse then we are not opening the door to this sharing potential.

There are many steps each of us can take in helping our society move toward a culture of compassion, but the first is accepting the idea of communal discourse and its possibility for moving us forward. Once an individual accepts this idea then that person can take the next step – engage in compassion discourse with one person. Then try a second, and a third. Perhaps write down some experiences and make them available to a broader public through the Internet. But do not hold compassion tightly within. That is like a clenched fist around a butterfly. Take the time to “pass it on” using discourse, art, writing, and relationships. The message of compassion sent beforehand can like preparing the ground to receive a new seed. In addition silence about compassion gives way to voices that speak of everything else but! This can harden the ground to any seed presented.

Above quotes are from “Resonant Leadership”, by Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, (2005)

Below is a quote from a man who risked his life and saved Jewish people from Hitler (from “The Hand of Compassion: Portraits of Moral Choice during the Holocaust” by Kristin R. Moore, 2004):

“If you assume that the rescuers are not unique, because there have always been people like this at all times, then hopefully we will have some in the future.

For me, then, the problem and the rescuers in some ways become more important because by understanding these rescuers we can understand what it is that makes people help other human beings. The really important question is: “Why did good people become this way?” it is not enough to say “Good people are good period.”

Something to think about! What do you think about what he says? How would you answer the question he asks? We, as a society, are not engaged in active discourse about compassion, and thus it makes it difficult to answer the above question except from a personal perspective. This silent, personal, voice of compassion can become a voice of strong compassion, a voice that provides wisdom on how to bring about a culture of compassion.

Like during the holocaust, when compassion doesn't have an active, attentive, voice then that is when another voice can be heard first – like the voice of fear, aggression, and apathy. But having another voice be heard over compassion is not limited to those war times. It is something that occurs to all of us. None of us can hold a perfect state of compassion. In addition there has been research that shows when an authority figure “pressures” a person to do harm then 2/3rds will. We also know the effects of peer pressure with a voice that is not of compassion, and the “mob effect” which can lead to riot and harming others. There ARE other voices that people will listen to when the voice of compassion is not strong. This is happening in the world today and one of the most important reasons why we need to take the time to give compassion a voice.

Finally, if we are to move toward a culture of compassion then we need to do what has been done for the past 50,000 years and what made a significant difference in our human development – that is to “pass it on”, improving as we do. But, to pass on compassion wisdom we need to engage in a communal discourse about what we already know and in what direction we might travel to evolve toward stronger compassionate beings. We have yet to do this as a global community, but it certainly is possible for us to do so. We can consciously contribute to our mimetic evolution that moves us toward strong compassion and away from violence. But this will not happen if compassion does not have a voice.