

Compassion in the Gay Christian Community

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In partial completion of requirements for

GPS560B: Individual and Social Change Through Compassion

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Abstract

The following is a review of literature on the topic of how the Christian community views being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT) and how compassion is applied to this population. In America, there is a particular view of this population and it has been influenced greatly by the Christian community. Some say that the religious right or Christian right, who are more “fundamental” in nature are the driving force of the current climate. When all is said and done, is the Christian community truly living up to Christ’s level of compassion?

Introduction

There are many views of the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered) population. Both secular and religious people have assumptions about this group of individuals who are as diverse as the world's nationalities and as complex as the human body, but one thing GLBT individuals share with the rest of humanity is the need for compassion. Compassion is one element that seems necessary for all people to thrive and positively progress through life's challenges. Compassion here is simply defined as empathy plus wisdom, which is a definition that David Hoisington, PhD arrived throughout his many years of scientific study on compassion. He has started the extensive research in the area of compassion and bids others to come and join in the pursuit of deep, radiant compassion. Dr. Hoisington's website, compassionspace.com is available to anyone who is interested in compassion subject matter, free of charge.

Many years have gone by with little said about compassion within the GLBT community, and even less which addresses the GLBT Christian population. There is an increasing amount of concern for affirming therapy for GLBT persons, which will hopefully start to include compassion work. However, on the opposite end there is a growing hatred and intolerance of GLBT individuals both inside and outside the church.

Compassion in the gay community is near and dear to me because I have struggled for the past forty years with my relationship to my faith and my sexuality. The key to my faith is Christ and the key to Christ is love, which includes a deep sense of compassion. The Church, defined in this article as the fundamentalist Christian church ideology, has a rigid, agenda-based

view of human sexuality. The agenda is due to generations of unclear and incorrect biblical interpretation from those who have the idea that the *right* relationship is a heterosexual relationship, one that is between one man and one woman. Let me point out here that there is no one scripture in the Bible that supports this ideology. This type of theology is man-made; however, in a homophobic society that shuns differences, it flourishes.

Within the fundamental Christian view, homosexual acts are considered a sin. Sin is a concept that is best defined in this context as: an act that is against God's law. A sin is something that potential keeps one from connecting with God (who is free from sin) and may keep one from eternal life with God after death. In this manner, one could call homosexuality a "mortal sin," which is a sin that if left unforgiven and fully absolved condemns a person to Hell after death. A good analogy of sin is to think of sin as a big glob of mud and think of God as a pure white garment. A person who is wearing a pure white garment does not want to tarnish it with a glob of mud, so then a Christian who hears that homosexuality is a sin does not want to engage in homosexuality. If one does not conform to the fundamentalist ideal then one is marked 'sinful' and cast out of fellowship with other fundamental Christians. Fortunately, Christ taught love, compassion, and hope; which includes rather than excludes.

In the research of the literature available, as well as in my own experience, it is noted that gay Christians are subject to an increased amount of anxiety over being found out regarding their sexuality, more prone to alienation from "normal" fundamentalist Christians, and suffer from low-esteem¹. These are a few examples of why compassion should be injected into the gay Christian community. My first concern really is the fundamentalist Church's ideal,

¹ <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a903827608>

which is a tradition built upon the *ideal* of being Christ-like. If one looks at the life of Christ, one will see that his life is the ultimate example of compassion and love. Today the church seems to focus more on activities that occur in the bedroom of people in committed, loving relationships than showing the love and compassion of Christ. Instead of pursuing the compassion paradigm of Christ, the church has stood firm on agenda-based translations of the Bible and in the enforcing of these "scriptural" ideals, turn GLBT Christians away by hateful discourse, alienating ideals, and shunning interpretation of scripture. What is really sad is the fact that "they" really have no clue that they are hurting instead of helping because they are so blinded by their own ignorance.

What does being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered mean...is it about sexual acts? The answer may be more difficult to tease out, however, if one is born gay and they are not acting out sexually then are they still gay? I suppose it depends on who you ask. The Catholic Church in Vatican II has established that homosexuality has been traditionally looked at as being "intrinsically disordered" and homosexuals are "called to chastity."²

The fundamental Christian view is similar, but actually a bit harsher. GLBT individuals are encouraged to go through a transformation through reparative therapy, which brings those struggling with their sexuality to sexual wholeness (becoming straight)³. Exodus International, the leading authority on homosexuality related to Christianity, has notably softened their jargon on their website. They also have moved away from promising change as many used to do twenty years ago. Exodus International is a "Christian ministry that supports those wanting

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) Part 3: Sections 2357-2359

³ <http://exodusinternational.org/2009/12/sexual-orientation-and-change/>

to reconcile their faith with their sexual behavior."⁴ Unfortunately, they see homosexuality as a behavior. Being a GLBT individual is not just about sex (behavior), in my opinion. It is about who a person is, the very nature of a person, and this can include attractions, fantasies, love, companionship, connection, and sex. However, if a gay man is celibate, can he still say that he is gay? Of course, it is who he is. It is not about what he does, but who he is as a person. This is who God has created him to be.

Each human being is assigned either XX or XY chromosomes, which makes them genetically male or female. When a human baby is born, not always does the genitalia expression (phenotype) match the chromosomal assignment (genotype) of the newborn baby. However, in today's society it is common practice for a physician to make the male/female determination upon viewing the child, without the baby being tested for genotype. Is there something wrong with this picture? The first impression that the doctor has in the delivery room determines how the person is raised in society. Many cases exist that doctors have misidentified people with XX chromosome (thus female) as male at birth and others where the exact opposite has happened.

There are many things we know and do not know in science that may have an effect on attraction. Some could argue that there is a natural proclivity for XX to be attracted to XY, but the person who is raised in the role that is gender opposite to his or her chromosomal makeup may find him or herself on the outside of the fundamentalists' camp simply because of a decision they had nothing to do with. Where is the compassion from the fundamental camp

⁴ <http://exodusinternational.org/2009/12/sexual-orientation-and-change/>

then? The fact is that there is no compassion for one who does not neatly fit into the idyllic paradigm set forth through generations of fundamental standards.

Another way to look at homosexuality or the *being gay* is an idea of the eternal being that humans are. Fundamental Christians believe that they have a spirit or *soul*. The spiritual component is one that is eternal and lives beyond the space and time of the mortal body. In this way, the spirit goes on to another place after physical death. Fundamental Christians are most concerned with what happens in the afterlife, which is certainly at the center of the debate of homosexuality and sin. Sin keeps one from enjoying a relationship with God and can determine if one spends eternity with God or not.

The interesting thing about the afterlife is that one leaves the mortal body and its gender upon death. The soul of the person is a genderless entity, which does not have any reason to be one gender or another, heterosexual, or homosexual. In thinking about loving relationships here on earth, one may consider whether it is genitalia that one falls in love with or is it something else that brings a couple together? We have heard it said that people find their soul mate. The definition for a soul mate we can adopt here is a person who connects on a deep spiritual, intimate, and compatible way. If one believes that God brings together two to become one, then why does that have to be limited to genitalia and sexual expression?

Within the fundamentalist's view of "one man and one woman" there is only compassion for those who fit into that paradigm. Again the above arguments: one man and one woman argument, the chromosome/genetic argument, and the soul/spirit argument all support the rationale for a potential lack of compassion from the fundamental Christian culture. This

creates a discrepancy, or incongruence among believers in Christ. Should Christians follow Christ's example of compassion and love, or should they follow what the preacher preaches from the pulpit. The problem with following the preachers view is that it may very well be different from God's view, from Christ's example, and what the Bible *really* says about homosexuality. In Luke chapter 10, Jesus was questioned about who should be shown compassion; He gave an example of a Samaritan who showed compassion to a Levite. In this passage, Jesus challenges mankind to do as the Samaritan did and show compassion.

If the above is true then why is everyone so up-in-arms about being gay? If God is love and Jesus gave us the example of true compassion, then why does the church have such a hard time with showing compassion to GLBT individuals? This article ventures to examine the past and present views of the Christian community as well as introduce a person and groups who are attempting to reconcile GLBT individuals to compassion, the church, and Christ. Then I will discuss why compassion is necessary and how compassion can change the culture of today.

What is compassion?

Certainly since Christ was compassionate and calls his followers to the same, many people assume compassion is simply a religious act or something that only religious persons have. This is simply not true. We as humans must learn to develop a deeper sense of compassion toward our fellow human beings. Dr. David Hoisington (2007) discusses the basic components of the *theory of compassion development*⁵ with the two basic parts being able to hear the suffering of another (empathy) and being able to act with wisdom to act in a way that

⁵ http://www.compassionspace.com/Papers_on_Basic_Compassion/Theory%20of%20Compassion%20Development.pdf

reduces that suffering. Dr. Hoisington also discusses compassion as the pursuit of moving toward well-being. The *compassion space*⁶ is an advanced level of compassion in a shared space with someone who is pursuing well-being. My personal definition is "a phenomenal space that one enters with another individual to share in the experience of suffering and treat it with empathy."

For this article, I use the foundation that Dr. Hoisington provides for the assumptions of compassion⁷, which there are seven. The first assumption is that "compassion is defined as empathy plus wisdom." I think that this is really the basic assumption that helps us to understand the foundation of what compassion truly is. The other assumptions are: Compassion is relational, instinctually linked to our survival, follows a normal distribution in society, can be developed, directly influences wellbeing, and flourishes with support⁸. These assumptions that Dr. Hoisington asserts are good at defining what is meant throughout this article when referring to compassion. I therefore anyone interested in compassion to visit Dr. Hoisington's website (<http://www.compassionspace.com>) to learn about the extensive research that has been completed by Dr. Hoisington and his colleagues.

Historical and Current views of GLBT persons in the Christian community

Christianity has followed the tradition of homosexuality being a sin due to six that allegedly condemn homosexuality and/or homosexual acts. Upon my personal study of theology and hermeneutics, my findings do not support the modern day interpretation and the

⁶ http://www.compassionspace.com/Brief_Description_of_the_Compas.html

⁷ http://www.compassionspace.com/Compassion_Assumptions.html

⁸ http://www.compassionspace.com/Compassion_Assumptions.html

English translation of the scriptures. First, the English translations of Greek and Hebrew Scriptures do not literally translate a word “homosexual.” This is clear since the scriptures were written some 2000-7000 years ago and the word homosexual was not used in print until approximately 1869 CE (AD) and did not become popular until late nineteenth century literature. Second, biblical scholars have talked about the historical context in which the condemning scriptures were written. One story that seems to condemn homosexuality is the story of Sodom in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, this story has somehow been misinterpreted to say that the people from Sodom are homosexuals and that homosexuality is wrong. However, what bible scholars know is that the story of Sodom was not about gays and lesbians at all, but of perverted, self-centered people who were not hospitable to strangers. The story clearly points to a pervasive problem in the culture of the day, which was to demean and dehumanize the strangers that came to the town of Sodom. Other of the scriptures give us a clear pictures of male prostitutes and lecherous old men or “johns” as we know it today, which has nothing to do with the behaviors of GLBT couples in committed relationships⁹(White, 2010;). The scriptures tend to talk more about prostitution and perversion than healthy committed relationships and same-sex dating.

People who grow up in the church today are taught many things that are agenda-driven and simply not true. This type of Christianity puts a person in a place where they not only have a lack of compassion toward them from others, but creates a sense of self-compassion deprivation. The goal of this article is to bring to light the possibility of compassion and self-compassion within this population of oppressed and condemned people.

⁹ <http://www.soulforce.org/resources/what-the-bible-says-and-doesnt-say-about-homosexuality>

Over the years, the Church factions have used various types of positions on the topic of homosexuality. Andrew Yip¹⁰ has a way of putting these positions into what I feel is a fairly accurate assessment of the Church's stance on homosexuality today. Some of the positions seem to be softening in the past few years as the Church is feeling pressure from the GLBT community at large. Yip (1997)¹¹ describes a phenomenon that is backed by research evidence. The phenomenon is that most gay people have formed their own observance of spirituality that is more personally-based than looking for the support and approval of the Church (Yip, 1997). This creates a distancing from the Church both in physical proximity and psychologically, however, this does not generally cause a departure from Christianity itself (Yip, 1997).

Yip (1997)¹² describes partnerships between same sex persons as being more difficult in the eyes of the church because instead of seeing a gay Christian alone having sexual contact occasionally that may be seen as an occasional sin, whereas if the person is in a partnership, the partners are viewed as 'living in sin.'

Yip (1997)¹³ describes these positions and factions as described below with the caveat that the Church historically has been resistant to positive changes. The first of the types is the Roman Catholic Church, which has historically taken the stance of "rejecting-punitive position", which means that they believe homosexuality is an "objective disorder" and that same-sex acts are "intrinsically disordered" making no room for the possibility of homosexuality being innate (Yip, 1997). The second is what the Church of England has adopted in the past thirty years,

¹⁰ <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a903827608>

¹¹ <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a903827608>

¹² <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a903827608>

¹³ <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a903827608>

which is the “rejecting-nonpunitive position.” This position does not condemn homosexual orientation, but homosexuals should not act on the physical expression because it is against the teachings of Christianity. This may have changed since the Yip (1997)¹⁴ article was written since the Anglican Church has undergone a split in this subject matter. Yip (1997)¹⁵ mentions one last position, called the “discriminatory acceptance position,” which offers different standards for gay laity and gay clergy that projects a type of double standard.

In Yip (1997)¹⁶ questionnaires were collected from 60 gay males with the mean age of 43, he found that there were respondents who found it incongruent for Christians and the Church to be teaching that Jesus hates homosexuality. They commented on the compassion, love, and acceptance that Jesus taught in word and example was incongruous with the common teaching of the Church. The respondents commented on how the church seems to sit in judgment, while Christ taught about the speck in the other’s eye and removing the plank from one’s own eye.

For years, there has been opposition to GLBT people by the church. The church is formed of believers in Christ. This group is an extremely large group of laity and clergy from a variety of backgrounds, denominations, and affiliations. The church as a whole does not embrace homosexuality, but rather condemns it. There are factions in the church that do affirm and even embrace homosexuals but they are looked upon as the “alternative” or “deceived.” There is a divide between those churches that embrace GLBT individuals and those that do not.

¹⁴ <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a903827608>

¹⁵ <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a903827608>

¹⁶ <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a903827608>

As it stands, the majority still firmly believe that homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism are sins and therefore condemn the person to hell at the end of their lives.

F. Earle Fox and David Virtue have written a book called "Homosexuality: Good and Right in the eyes of God?" which talks about compassion from a different perspective. The authors discuss compassion as having to exist in the structure of "truth," which is based on an extreme right Christian view. The fact that they use of the word compassion would lead one to believe that they are understanding of other viewpoints, however, compassion is only part of the equation when one subscribes to their "truth." The whole read was utterly biased and twisted on factual information about male homosexuality. The quest for truth certainly was difficult to find in this article that is filled with odd statistics on shaky facts. It also did not mention female homosexuality or lesbianism. Maybe there is a gender bias as well. Unfortunately, there was no Christian compassion to be found within.

In a recent article, written by Cathy Lynn Grossman for the USA TODAY, a megachurch called the Crystal Cathedral (one I have personally gone to Christmas productions where hundreds of GLBT individuals perform in the choir and play) has created a contract for members of the choir that states; "I understand that the Crystal Cathedral Ministries teaches that sexual intimacy is intended by God to only be within the bonds of marriage, between one man and one woman." This covenant was the work of Sheila Schuller Coleman, the daughter of the founder and senior pastor, and the church administrators who now run the ministry (Grossman, 2011). However, Dr. Robert Schuller, the founder of the ministry, told *The Orange County Register* that he "strongly disapproves of anti-gay covenant his own church administrators

asked choir members to sign, stating that it goes against the principles of tolerance, acceptance, and positive thinking on which he built his 50-year-old ministry” (Grossman, 2011). Here we see a wonderful example of operating with empathy plus wisdom and operating outside of compassion.

I believe that the road forward has to be paved with compassion and acceptance. Riggle, Olsen, Whitman, Rostosky, Strong (2008) believe that "affirmative psychological services for gay men and lesbians not only address symptom reduction but psychosocial well-being and flourishing¹⁷." I could not agree more. By supporting and further accepting in the compassionate space of therapy, the clinician helps the individual grow in multiple ways. Using compassion to carry out the affirmative therapeutic style is a way to well-being for the individual and supports the idea that therapy is not only a safe place, but also a way of trying out and building confidence that one can overcome suffering. The therapist who is able to provide a compassionate space for the individual is all supporting and affirming the individual's faith and values. The individual feels affirmed by the compassion shown by the clinician, supported in their sense of being, and supported in his or her Christian values.

There is a growing group of individuals who are finding that there is a place for them to worship as believers in Christ and also function in their God-given sexuality. These groups of people are outcasts of mainstream Christianity, but are a growing group of self-compassionate and others-compassionate group of individuals, such as Soulforce and the like. There is a small movement by key figures who have pioneered a path toward civil and spiritual equality. Many who have chosen to follow this path and work toward compassionate and empathic treatment

¹⁷ <http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=2008-03262-013>

of GLBT Christians. For me it is important to educate the general public, gay Christians, and especially mental health providers on the compassionate, affirming way in which we need to respond to this segment of society. I focus on the gay Christian community here, but this applies to all conservative ideologies and people. Whether a gay Christian, or any other religion or creed, all equally need compassion in order to achieve true well-being in this life.

Modern-day Passionary

Dr. Mel White is one such person who has spent his life giving to the community of GLBT Christians and non-Christians. He has been inspired by the nonviolent movements of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. (www.soulforce.org, 2011). His ministry is based on the principles called “satyagraha,” which means 'soulforce.' Gandhi’s satyagraha principles reflect those taught by Jesus Christ. Mel embraced these principles in order to help in aiding the suffering of GLBT persons (www.soulforce.org, 2011). In this way, I found that this act and vision of wisdom plus empathy fits into the compassion definition. Mel has traveled around the world ministering and talking to various

Compassion as a way to change the current climate

One article, written by two self-proclaimed “orthodox” Christians from the Wesleyan tradition, discusses compassion toward gay persons. Zahniser and Boyd’s work was an effort to discuss the Christian call to love gay and lesbian people compassionately (Zahniser & Boyd, 2008). While still assuming that being gay is a choice, the authors feel that the approach from a compassionate perspective provides the best way to be Christ-like. They feel that since GLBT individuals are treated badly and rejected by Christians they should “suffer with” them

(Zahniser & Boyd, 2008). Their definition of compassion is “a combination of empathy...and a desire to act on behalf of the other” (Zahniser & Boyd, 2008). They also feel that paying close attention to judgments and opinions about homosexuality hampers the “practice of Christian compassion” (Zahniser & Boyd, 2008).

Zahniser & Boyd, 2008 go on to point out that as followers of Christ, Christians are commanded to love. This is noted as the greatest command by Jesus himself to love one’s neighbor, which partially fulfills all of the past commandments in biblical texts. According to Zahniser & Boyd, 2008, the “life of love is a life of entering into the context of the other,” which is therefore a part of “entering into the pain and suffering” (compassion) of that person (p.219). If a person is a follower of Christ and agrees with the command to love, then he or she is willing to enter into the pain and suffering of another as a part of the type of love Christ calls them to. In this way, followers of Christ are required to love all people with a divinely endorsed compassion. Jesus was a great example of this compassion as he ministered compassion and love to the most unlovely of people. Jesus had a way of ministering the compassion space to all who were sick, oppressed, and unlovely. If he could do this, then Christians in the modern day Church should be able to be compassionate toward the GLBT individual as a part of this command to love.

The current U.S. president has been an ally in the current fight of DADT (Don’t Ask Don’t Tell) and DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) policies that currently prohibit GLBT individuals’ equal rights. President Obama has supported change in these policies and has created an

environment where overturning legislature can occur. In a proclamation¹⁸ made in May 2010, President Obama made encouraging statements about the goals of his administration to uphold old and design new ways to ensure equal rights for the GLBT community. Many of the promises made to the GLBT community have already been implemented and many are currently being worked toward. President Obama's desire is to see that equal rights are extended to all people regardless of sexual orientation and gender issues. The president's proclamation¹⁹ is not something that he was forced to put out, but rather a human compassion issue. He seems to realize the importance of empathy for this cross-section of the American population.

According to a book release advertisement, Dr. Nancy Heche and Joe Dallas have written a book about understanding homosexuality from a Christian's perspective. When reading the advertisement, the reader is led to believe that the authors have written this with a compassionate eye, but the message still seems to be the same "love the sinner, but don't accept the sin." They may leave out "hate the sin," nevertheless; I find that they are basically saying "we will love you into submission." Although it starts out with compassion for the person (sinner) this line of thinking still ends up short of true compassion.

In the religious arena, a man named Jay Bakker (son of Jim Bakker, famous for embezzling monies) has a ministry that is supportive of GLBT individuals and welcomes them into his church. He also has gone above and beyond, supporting ministries such as Soulforce and the like. Jay is a straight man himself, but is one of the allies that gay Christians all pray for. Jay has been known to talk about the compassion of Christ and how he sees all people through

¹⁸ <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/2010-13672.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/2010-13672.pdf>

the eyes of Christ. His ministry is a hip, punk style group of Christians who reach out to those who are otherwise cast away from the mainstream church experience. His ministry's goal has been to "include everyone in the community, no matter how diverse their lifestyle" from its inception (www.revolutionnyc.com/about). Jay's vision has been to reflect the unconditional love and grace of Christ to all people without exclusion. After all, this vision and ministry goal is an example of what Christianity is all about. Jay has found a niche that is spreading or radiating compassion to all people regardless of what walk of life the person comes from. In reviewing topics of his "sermons," he hits on topics that are compassionate and inclusive.

A recent article²⁰ in the New York Times compares the official Catholic Church policy on same-sex marriage and equality for same-sex couples to the view of parishioners. The article discusses a survey was completed by the Public Religion Research Institute, March 2011, which showed 74 percent of Catholics surveyed supported rights of same-sex couples to marry or form civil unions. In comparison to their evangelical Christian counterparts, only 16 percent of evangelicals approve of same-sex marriages. In a small way, this seems to be a more progressive approach than even ten years ago. What the survey does not tell us is about the various groups levels of compassion. Is it safe to say that Catholics, as a group, are more accepting or progressive in their views on same-sex couples, and therefore more compassionate? In addition, what does it say about evangelicals' compassion levels?

Interview with a compassionate person

²⁰ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/fashion/24Noticed.html?_r=1

My interviewee is a very close, compassionate friend of mine. For this interview, we will call her Mary. Mary is in her early sixties and comes from a mixed Jewish background. She currently works on a psychiatric unit as a counselor and known by colleagues and clients to be a compassionate and deeply caring person. Mary's personal definition of compassion is; "Compassion proclaims the power of the tender and merciful heart in the face of the suffering of others. It is opening one's heart to extend comfort, to share in their pain, and meet them with self...it is tenderhearted connection with all life and its creatures...it is selfless service from the heart's capacity to love, [and] to tend to the sorrows of others as our own."

When asked to *describe how she has developed compassion over the years*, Mary attributes much of her early development to her parents. She found that both her mother and father were great examples of compassion and kindness to others, even to their death. Additionally, Mary responded that she has developed her compassion from peer role modeling, daily practice, and through continuous study and self-growth. She also attributes her compassion development to a connection with God and her "higher self." Mary identifies the movie, *Miracle Worker*, a story about Helen Keller that inspired and deeply moved her into the field of Special Education. This chapter in her life brought her many "wonderful" years of helping children, adolescents, adults, teachers, and parents. In her twenties, Mary began a journey of seeking contact with her "higher self" and God. Through the years she has studied extensively Eastern religions, Judaism, Christianity, Yoga and meditation, and "Pathwork." She continues to study and learn many things about herself and others through her work.

Mary was asked to *describe how positive or negative events in life have shaped her compassion toward others*. She responds that she has "discovered her deepest struggles and sufferings," allowing her "heart to open towards others." Mary reports that the loss of her parents presented a deep pain and grief, which enabled her to understand the "incredible process of birth, death, and letting go." Mary discusses a car accident at age 30 that severely injured by being thrown 78 feet and severely damaging her legs. Physicians told her that she would never walk again and did not walk for one year. She spent time in a wheelchair with appliances fixed to her legs. She would ride in a van with mentally and physically disabled patients, which was a flip from working in Special Education with disabled persons. Mary was now on the other side as a patient, which she reports was extremely humbling.

In recent years, Mary has experienced the painful loss of a 27-year marriage. Her ex-husband had a long-time public affair, which he denies up to the present. She describes this as a cruel and deep pain. Mary continues to hold "his being with compassion and forgiveness." She reports that is an ongoing effort to let go and travel through the forgiveness process.

Mary also attributes the experiences of difficult people in her life as part of what has shaped her compassion toward others. There have been many experiences of Special Education parents, school board colleagues, her ex-husband, and "people who have not reached a place of open heart" that have helped shaped her response to compassion toward others. Mary admits that these all have been her greatest teachers of compassion.

When asked to *describe how the same events have shaped compassion toward herself*, Mary answered: "I have come to understand mercy, compassion, and forgiveness for myself, of

myself recently." She describes this as a part of a phase of opening her heart toward herself and accepting herself for who she "truly" is. Mary sees these events as part of being able to hold herself tenderly in forgiveness and compassion. In recent months she has been working on a "forgiveness project for Pathwork," which is special focus on her marriage and her "lower" self. This has been helpful in understanding herself as well as being able to be tender toward herself. Mary reports that she is now "holding Mary and 'little' Mary ("child consciousness") with great compassion and tenderness."

Mary was then asked to *explain how the process of compassion development has helped her to be compassionate to the affirming and non-supportive people she has encountered*. She believes that it is from her "own personal journey" and through her "struggles and suffering," in the "blessedness of feeling the outpouring of love from others, in witnessing feelings of invaluable giving" from her parents, and from forty plus years of embracing self-discovery that have helped her in dealing with all types of people. She also believes that developing her "higher inner self," God within and asking God to help her forgive others and herself have also been instrumental in the treatment of all.

Mary was asked to *describe any spiritual component that has bearing on compassion*. She reports that for her "it has been a gift of unfolding; it has become [her] life's work." Over the years she has had many examples that she has studied from Buddha to Jesus and other poets and mystics along the way. Mary feels that it is "all coming from God without, God within, an open heart, and timeless wisdom and love."

The last survey comment was *to give an example of a passionate that has been an inspiration to pursue compassion*. Phan Thi Kim Phuc is the girl in the famous photo from the Vietnam War, who was running naked down the road with an expression of unimaginable terror, her clothes has been burned off scorched by Napalm. She survived 17 surgeries and eventually became a UNESCO goodwill ambassador. This was one Mary's passionaries because of the great amount of forgiveness and compassion "Kim" had for people. "Kim" attributes her healing (Physical and emotional) to compassion and love. Mary feels that "Kim's" story is one that is filled with inspiration to be compassionate and forgiving even in adversity.

My sense of Mary is that she truly "gets" compassion. She is one that I feel exudes or radiates compassion.²¹ What I would attribute this to is all of the experiences good, bad, and ugly. Living life is not easy, but I believe that if one uses the tough times to rise above and learn the benefit of it, one can live compassionately. Mary has experienced some fairly tragic situations in life, but she is one of the most compassionate human beings I have met to date. People cannot help but love her because she simply radiates a deep sense of compassion. I also see the ongoing self-assessment and learning that she describes. She truly practices compassion and is on an ongoing journey of growth compassionate living. She is a true inspiration to me and I am truly honored to call her my friend.

I believe there are several things that I and other "Christians" can learn from Mary is that one's own fears, morals, heartbreaks, beliefs, disappointments, or spirituality do not have to be a blockade for compassion. Although there are groups that hold the belief that homosexuality is wrong or sinful, I feel they should be able to hold a place for compassion

²¹ http://www.sacredhealingnow.com/Ultimate_Relationship.html

toward the GLBT individual. Compassion is not automatically linked to a relationship with God or the Divine, the individual has to work on the connection. I think that possibly why compassion has such a strong quality is the fact that it is so closely linked to a divine connection and heightened awareness or mindfulness of the other person's pain or suffering.

Summary and Conclusion

Compassion and the compassion space are becoming increasingly vital to human existence. Yes, compassion has always played an important role in human society, but as we become more technologically advanced and have less opportunity to reach out to a real person we are lulled into a false sense of well-being. True well-being is the connection we have with each other and to the divine. I believe that compassion is linked to our social nature, we simply need each other.

In the GLBT Christian community there has historically been little compassion shown to the community and then in turn from the community. It is one of my life's goals to not only help GLBT people to receive compassion, but to exude compassion to others outside the community of GLBT Christians whether they deserve it or not. After all, Jesus was the best role model for this. He simply gave out love and compassion even with knowing that people would turn their backs on Him.

There are scores of papers related to compassion and many papers related to GLBT issues, including an annotated bibliography on gifted secondary GLBT students. This annotated

bibliography by Treat and Whittenburg (2006) ²²is a comprehensive resource for educators who work with gifted youth. This resource can be helpful in order to provide secondary GLBT individuals with compassionate affirming support in the classroom and beyond. This tool can also be used to teach educators a more in depth view of the GLBT students they serve.

I certainly hope this article and future articles about compassion pertaining to the GLBT and Christian communities helps to end all of our society's hang-ups of misguided theology and fear of the unknown. Learning how to just *be* compassionate to everyone one comes in contact is challenging. I feel that if one is willing to suffer through one's own road blocks to compassionate living and practice compassion, we can all contribute to making the world a better place. The journey starts within.

²² <http://journals.prufock.com/IJP/c.abs/the-journal-of-secondary-gifted-education/volume17/issue4/article404>

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