

## Progressive Religion ... Is Not An Oxymoron

# Compassion: A Key for Survival

By David E. Roy, Ph.D.

*Compassion* is one of those frequently used words that sounds and feels good but may not always be clear in its meaning. (Remember the promise of a "compassionate conservatism" that turned out to be one of many manipulative, empty promises?)

I agree with those who believe that the cultivation of genuine compassion is one of the primary prerequisites to ensure the world's survival, at least a world that includes human beings. This includes the transformation needed to achieve a sustainable pattern of existence with the natural world; and the evolution of human communities no longer seeking to annihilate other human communities.

I understand compassion to be rooted naturally at the core of our psyche and to represent one of the ultimates in personal development – i.e., a key goal of psychological and emotional maturity.

### What is Compassion?

Compassion originally meant to feel *with* (com-) the *pain* (passion) of another. For Christians, to take a prime example, Easter traditionally was understood to be a ritual that recognized Christ's Passion – i.e., the pain and suffering he endured with his crucifixion. Obviously, the meaning of passion has changed over the past 1000 years or so.<sup>1</sup>

Today, it would be unusual to think of *passion* as referring to pain. Instead, the word generally connotes intense and positive energy, a binding love for something else, whether a person, an occupation, or anything else that is pursued with verve and delight.

Just as passion has taken on a fuller, richer set of meanings, so has compassion. But the more interesting and important part of the word is its prefix, *com-*. This means *with* in this case.

### Feeling *With* Others

So, what does it mean to feel with others? In the fullest and deepest sense of the word, it means to feel what they are feeling as though it is our own feeling. We feel their pain as though it were our own; in fact, in a real sense, it is our own. We also can feel the positive emotions of another. If someone is feeling joy, we can feel their joy joyfully. When we are in a compassionate position, we can know from the inside, in a direct fashion, what it is like to be the other.

This is qualitatively different that the act of *imagining* what it is like to be another person. In my own mind, I understand this to be *empathy* – i.e., to feel into (*em-*) another by using our own experience in an imaginative way.

Feeling another's pain directly in the mode of compassion could motivate someone to care about the other's plight, to offer everything from sympathetic understanding (which can be quite helpful) to concrete remedies.

### **Compassion an Ideal Among the Great Religions**

It is for this reason, I believe, that the world's great religions come together in their affirmation of compassion as perhaps the greatest ideal for human kind. A few years ago, the Fresno Ministerial Association organized a program on "Compassion and the Common Good" in six faith traditions. We had religious leaders from the following traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism.

In each case, in different ways, compassion was described as that which energized and informed the heart of the tradition. In **Hinduism**, one of the primary values outlined by the speaker was *karuna*, Sanskrit for compassion. This includes a desire to do for others in need. In Buddhism, the realization that we are all one results in a high level of compassion. In fact, the Buddha nature is compassion itself.

The most central event in **Judaism** is recalled every year at Passover: Do not forget you were once slaves in Egypt; use this experience to guide you in treating others who are at the very bottom – as you were then. Passover aims at compassion.

In **Christianity**, the idea of grace – God's unearned, unconditional love – is the model for all followers in their relationships with all human beings. (A wonderful ideal but, as George Bernard Shaw said, "Christianity might be a good thing if anyone ever tried it.") To love in this manner is to fully receive another, to allow the other to fully impact us. We resonate with the other's experience. Jesus' words to the poor, the sick, the powerless in what are referred to as the Beatitudes convey compassion.

In **Islam**, the presenter said that the Quo'ran begins with the verse, "In the name of God, the most compassionate and the most merciful." Mohammed was sent as a messenger of compassion for all. The Quo'ran also says that God is pleased when we feed the hungry, tend the sick, cloth the naked.

In the **Sikh** tradition, compassion is the cornerstone. Compassion, in fact, is understood to be the root of all religion. In Sikhism, all children are of one God. Hence, one must care for all. If one's earnings are shared, God is pleased. Sikhism started in the 1500s as a way of protecting against unjust rulers and other hostile religious forces, as a way, that is, of restoring a compassionate position toward all, the poor and powerless in particular. Sikhism is radically egalitarian and the traditional Hindu caste system is denounced. This, too, can be understood as a compassionate stance.

### **Compassion as a Universal**

If the idea of compassion as a supreme ideal emerges from divergent traditions in different cultural settings, one could argue that it is a universal, something deeply rooted in the very nature of a human being.

This is supported with some surprising insights in Whitehead's process metaphysics that suggests that, at the most foundational level, it is the essence of reality to completely conform to the nature of the energy that we receive from others: to feel pain painfully, to feel joy joyfully, and so on.

### **The Implications of Being Internally Related**

Further, and of equal importance, the energy we receive comes to us in a direct fashion and becomes a part of us. This means that we are *internally* related to others. What you are feeling becomes a portion of my own experience, literally a part of me, and vice versa.

This has many implications, not the least of which is that it is in our personal best interest to be concerned about the well-being of others – for their well-being or lack of it will have a direct bearing on our own well-being. (This also works the other way; it is an act of kindness to others if we ensure our own well-being, for this enriches them.)

This also means that we cannot limit our concern exclusively to the human community. Our compassion needs to extend to the natural world as well for it is a part of us; if it is sick, diseased, so are we.

### **Compassion is Transformational**

Deep compassion is transformational. I experience this phenomenon on a daily basis when I do therapy. As people come to feel and understand where someone else is, what they are feeling, what is motivating them, there inevitably is a profound transformation in how they see and respond to those with whom they may be in intense conflict.

### **Limits on Our Ability to be Compassionate**

But, obviously, there appear to be serious limits on the human ability to be compassionate for those who are different and those who are far away. Some of this may be due to our species having spent most of our history in what are small groups by today's standards.

It may be one thing to be compassionate toward those who are seen as kin, who are from the same tribe, and something quite different to be compassionate toward those from a foreign tribe who might represent danger.

Further, the tribe to which one belongs represents the accepted world, a world known in a number of ways, including visually. For most of us, our inner map is not nearly large enough to encompass the entire globe.

### **Becoming Tikopians**

In Jared Diamond's important book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, he describes a tiny island in the Pacific named Tikopia whose civilization has endured for more than 3,000 years. The island is under 2 square miles in size. This underlies one of the unique features that makes for a common worldview: The ocean can be

seen from just about everywhere on the island. In this sense, Tikopians all see the same thing, see the natural limits of their world.

Somehow, in this way at least, we all need to become Tikopians on a far vaster scale.<sup>2</sup> If the roots of mature compassion are part of the very nature of being, are an ontological given, this task may be something we can accomplish. This is going to take dedication, a strong commitment, and a great deal of effort, including education and training to cultivate these skills.

### **The Charter for Compassion**

One exciting project that has emerged recently is called the Charter for Compassion. This project is the result of Karen Armstrong's intellect and energy. She is one of today's leading scholars on the history of the world's religions, including the history of God. If you go to <http://charterforcompassion.com>, you can learn more about this program and join in its efforts.

If readers know of other serious efforts to teach and promote compassion, I would love to receive that information and, in a future column, to pass that on.

### **Can Evolution Help?**

I also believe that there is the possibility that evolution may help take us in that direction as well, particularly if one understands that evolution may be more purposive than current Neo-Darwinian thinking would support. That, actually, is the topic for a future column.

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary marks the first written use of *passion* as a noun around 1175, referring to the suffering of pain. In 1376, Chaucer used it in a more general sense as one's own passion. The OED indicates that *passion* was used as a transitive verb in 1468 to mean stirring someone else; and by 1588 as an intransitive verb to mean showing deep feeling, especially sorrow. In general, as the centuries pass, the word has broadened to include positive subjective experiences. But it is safe to conclude that feeling the pain of another is at the root.

<sup>2</sup> I am not endorsing all of the methods they devised to survive; nor were they violence free when faced with starvation due to ecological damage. But I am suggesting the model of seeing the wholeness of their world helped them to maintain their civilization for three millennia.