

Compassion in Troubled Times

What is an ideal death? Qualities such as going beyond fear, feeling deeply connected with loved ones, and realizing oneness with the Divine, with God and with non-dual reality as death approaches, are hallmarks of dying openly and a life gracefully lived. During twenty-nine years of being a spiritual guide for the dying, I have participated in such a full death occasionally, but much more often deeply held psychological issues preclude a complete letting go into the divine embrace as life in a body comes to an end. Being

caught in fear or anger, lack of passionate involvement in the living/dying process, attachment to opinions – all these limit the spiritual possibility that dying presents.

The only way through these constrictions is compassion for them – compassion for the part of your body that may soon kill you, compassion for the parts of your personal-

ity that make being present almost unbearable. Before we can deeply explore the spiritual potential in the dying process, we must courageously and passionately dive into the parts of our humanity that resist letting go into freedom. Compassion, the open heart relating to suffering, is the necessary foundation.

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Seven blunders of the world that lead to violence: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, politics without principle.

—Mahatma Gandhi





*The lowest of the low that you can
think of, is dearer to me than
your only son is to you.*
—The Baal Shem Tov

Realizing compassion as the foundation of the healing process for one with a life-threatening illness clearly extends to our own healing as individuals, and as members of our families, of our communities, of our nation, and of the world. Whenever we yearn to move toward more openness and freedom, compassion for that which suffers is the core foundation. In fact, most of us probably feel compassion for the ill, for the dying, for the hungry and the oppressed.

However, compassion in public life has profoundly diminished over the past decade. No longer are we surprised to see drivers on a crowded road enraged with each other. The expectation of integrity, civility, justice, mercy and cooperation from our elected officials has long since disappeared. Never before in my adult life has compassion seemed so lacking in our national and international political discourse. Power without compassion is dangerous. Everybody is self-righteously blaming the other guy.

Of course we must forcefully protect our country from those who wish to destroy it. Of course we must forcefully express our political beliefs. Yet action emanating from fear and a violent heart will never heal. This is a truly difficult time to act compassionately when so many seem to be acting with such blatant disregard for the well-being of others.

Where does your compassion cease? Is it when you think of “Islamofascist terrorists” or national political figures or someone you see every day?

Compassion is not always gentle. Compassion is literally with passion, arising from faith rather than fear. Passionate, forceful, engaged, non-violent action has never been more necessary or more challenging. What an opportunity!

—Dale Borglum



Please Call Me by My True Names

Look deeply: I arrive in every second
to be a bud on a spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird who, when spring comes,
arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake who,
approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

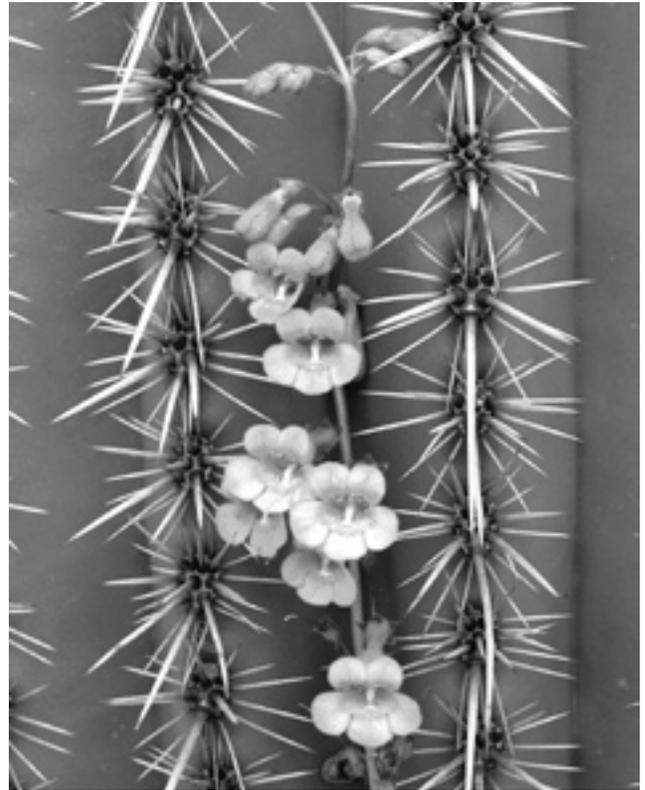
I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his "debt of blood" to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.
Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.

—Tich Nhat Hanh



The Mirror of Compassion

What does it mean to "be present"? One way to answer is to look in a mirror. Most of us do this several times a day. Notice what you see. At first what's there may seem so familiar that you assume you've seen it all already. If you're like most people, you see your face, how your hair is brushed, and those little signs that are your particular way of determining whether you look good or bad on a given day. After so many years of looking at yourself this way, it's hard to see anything else.

So look again. See if you are there. What do you notice of this you? Perhaps you will begin to distinguish certain qualities of yours that are most familiar. Most people, in fact, first notice the features that they wish they could change. Maybe you see the things you like about yourself, or you think others like or should like about you. Look once more and notice whether in being preoccupied with these opinions, good or bad, you are there.

Imagine now that another person is looking at you the way you're looking at yourself. How would that feel to you? Would such a look give you the feeling of being checked out or judged? Would you feel that the person was receptive to you or standoffish? Would you think that this is someone who is dedicated for life to your care and well being or who feels stuck with having to keep company with person he or she resents?

Now notice the way your eyes meet the glance coming back from the mirror. What signals reverberate in this exchange? Is this a meeting that has a taken-for-granted quality? Or is there joy and excitement, as in saying hello to somebody special? Is the looking weighted down with attacks and counterattacks, or with jockeying for approval? Or do the eyes in the mirror radiate caring and respect? What's the relationship here, as this looking is going on? Is it one in which you can't wait to turn away? Is it a welcoming embrace, a moment of recognition that nourishes the life that reflects on itself?

If what is present as you look is less than what you would like, ask yourself what would have to happen for what you'd like to be there. If the answer you come up with implies that you'd have to change yourself in any way, ask again. Ask if there's a way for you to be there fully for yourself as you are now. What would you have to see in order to recognize, embrace, and declare your love and devotion to the humanity that's there when you face yourself in the mirror.

Mission Statement

Imagine facing death without fear.

Imagine using a life-threatening illness as an opportunity for spiritual awakening.

Imagine approaching the unknown with an open heart.

We often resist change as a natural part of life.

Strength and healing can be found in life's most difficult situations.

The Living/Dying Project offers compassionate support in the spirit of mutual exploration to those facing life-threatening illness.



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Supporting Us

The Living/Dying Project continues to offer free-of-charge spiritual support to those with life-threatening illnesses and to their caregivers. Our educational programs are available nationally and internationally. We have been offering these services for almost thirty years and are the first organization in the Western world whose mission is to cultivate conscious support for the dying. During these politically divisive times, healing our individual and collective relationships with death may be the most immediate and direct means to healing that which separates us from our neighbor.

Our operation is simple and our overhead is minimal. A great majority of our budget comes from individual donations. We ask for your support, both financially and your blessings and your prayers. As well as making a donation in the enclosed envelope, there are two other ways to support us financially:

- ☞ We are a member of the escrip program. Go to escrip.com and register. Then 2–6 % of purchases you make at Whole Foods, Macy's, Andronico's, Good Earth and dozens of other stores will automatically be donated to the Project. To register with escrip, please use our group ID# 500002940 or the name Living-Dying Project (rather than Living/Dying Project with a slash).
- ☞ Shop at Under One Roof, a gift store at 549 Castro Street in San Francisco, and at underoneroof.org. 100 % of their profits go directly to 35 agencies (including us) in the Bay Area that offer support to people with AIDS. Under One Roof offers a tastefully selected inventory of home décor and personal items.

Last year, we received many gifts and donations, including a generous grant from the Betsy Gordon Foundation. Our wholehearted thanks to all of you who have supported us financially and/or with your kind thoughts and prayers. Our sincere wish is that wisdom and compassion continue to grow and flourish in your life and in the lives of those you love.

—Dale Borglum, *Executive Director*

The Mirror of Compassion *continued*

It was by looking in a mirror that I discovered how much I take myself for granted, that the human presence in me has always been blocked from my own view. I've had moments of looking into another person's eyes, being so touched by the beauty of connecting with the presence available through them that tears came. But never had I connected that way with the presence in myself. I usually treat myself as a collection of characteristics or thoughts or feelings, and occasionally as some wider entity, but never before did I recognize that my own presence could be as deeply touching as any I've ever known. I've taken for granted the chilling, distancing blankness that comes with not being present for myself.

This confrontation brought me to ask myself for my own forgiveness again, and to vow that whenever I look in the mirror, walk down the street, get up in the morning, and go to bed, I will open myself to the human presence who's there with me, and acknowledge the privilege of such company. And when I follow through on that promise, I notice that being there makes me more accessible to others. In moments of pure presence, whether I'm working or playing, a "me" isolated from them isn't even here. All of us are just being, together.

—Arthur Egendorf, *Healing From The War*

Credits

Heartfelt thanks to Steven Englander of Interface Design, 415-388-7744, who once again beautifully designed this newsletter. Steven has been a Project volunteer and a dear friend for many years.

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