

Compassion: Vital to our Survival (Part 1)

In her career with Concern Worldwide, Brid Kennedy supported teams in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Haiti. She completed an MA in Applied Spirituality in 2023.

The wars in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan and many other areas bear witness to the need to be compassionate. The theologian Matthew Fox believes that compassion is vital to our survival as a species and as individuals in this time of global turmoil, the rise of authoritarianism and the destruction of Mother Earth. Cultivating compassion may be our saving grace.

Compassion means literally ‘feeling together with’. Compassion is being moved in our depths by another person’s experience and by going beyond our prejudices to respond with care and kindness to another person’s suffering.

We are most fully human, when we see someone in the truth of his or her experience and are moved to respond with kindness and care. Pausing from the busyness of our lives and recognising the tenderness of the humanity of another person restores us to our humanity. The pulse of care and connection within us is resuscitated and our hearts beat freely with love.

Compassion is the heartbeat of humanity, restoring the heart of our humanity. Its healing can make human again the hardened heart of another. Compassion is an untapped human superpower that can help us shift out of our patterns of control and

dominance. Compassion bridges the divides that prevent us from seeing the goodness in ourselves and each other.

Do we always see the goodness in ourselves? Think of how often we berate and criticise ourselves. Focusing an open heart towards others while closing our hearts to ourselves is like screaming our way into silence. We can only treat another with care and kindness when we have had self-compassion. According to Meister Eckhart ‘compassion begins at home’ with self-compassion which is frequently missing in our world.

Self-compassion can begin with us becoming aware of our inner critic. By noticing what we are saying to or doing to ourselves, we can begin the process of being kind and caring to ourselves rather than beating ourselves up. This self-compassion is our asset to finding peace and restoring our sense of self and love. When we extend to ourselves the care and kindness that we may do to a suffering child, it brings us home to ourselves.

When we neglect self-compassion, both ourselves and our loved ones suffer. Without compassion the soul decays. It takes strength to be compassionate, and it can be difficult.



Palestinians inspect a house, after an Israeli air strike, in the city of Rafah, south of the Gaza Strip

Many of us are challenged to be like Nelson Mandela, who invited his jailor of twenty seven years to stand at his side during his presidential inauguration. Ordinary folks like us can be in awe and inspired by him.

Compassion is not about wishing away unpleasant emotions and feigning politeness to those we secretly despise. It challenges us to meet adversaries and those who hold contempt for us in an empathetic understanding that is forgiving and restorative. When a person or society is in despair, it does not care about itself and certainly not about others. Despair kills compassion. When we are in despair, we need an immense dose of awakening to the beauty of life.

Compassion is genuine loving regard that flows freely from our hearts. It tames the furies we hold for others as it calms our difficult emotions

and tormenting self-talk. By freeing ourselves of past hurts and mistakes through forgiveness and letting go, we learn to live in the present without worrying about the future (fear) or the past (regret). Our compassionate heart is then generous and naturally able to extend to others. This generosity is linked with kindness, and kindness is compassion. If each of us has that spark of kindness, the inherent dignity in us will cause us to rise and demand the justice and equality that is everyone's birthright.

Even in the depths of despair, compassion can spring forth. The path of compassion reconnects us to the sources of life and love that sustain us. It invites us to go deeply inwards knowing that we are held and healed in love and be liberated from the inner turbulence that disconnects us from our compassionate self.