

Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception with absolute justice, equity, and respect.

--from the Charter for Compassion

How does one begin to approach such a daunting task, especially when we see so little compassion in our community, nation and world? I think we should start from within. We have often been taught that the development of self-esteem is the holy grail of psychological growth. However, self-esteem is often associated with self-centeredness, self-promotion and enthronement of the self. At the extreme, it can lead to narcissism, distorted self-perceptions, unstable self-worth as well as anger and violence towards those who threaten the ego. This engenders inevitable failure and can lead us to profoundly criticize and demean ourselves. Perhaps a better and more effective approach is one that admits our weaknesses and flaws, yet allows us to improve, accepting ourselves right where we are in our evolution of spirituality, and treating ourselves with justice, equity, and respect.

I believe the essence of compassion is encapsulated by the summary of the law as voiced in biblical scriptures and embraced by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." (NIV) I was greatly influenced by a theologian in my medical school at Loma Linda University. Dr. A. Graham Maxwell, a New Testament Greek grammarian magnified this scripture by pointing out its logical corollary. "You cannot love God unless you first understand His love for you. And you cannot love your neighbor unless you love yourself." I came to understand that loving yourself meant changing what you can and embracing even the most difficult parts of yourself to love.

Self-compassion involves kindness and understanding toward the self when confronted with personal failings. It means honoring and accepting our humanness. Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing ourselves for various inadequacies, we understand we are experiencing the human condition that is a reality shared by all. In essence this is a re-thinking of the golden rule. Self-compassion strongly implies that if we don't take care of ourselves, we are poorly equipped to care for others.

Emotions are not to be denied, but should be noticed with a heightened sense of awareness and a conscious choice about how to react to them. To adjust our mindset to one of self-compassion and create the capacity for compassion toward others requires paying attention to positive events, savoring happy experiences, contemplating the good that we see in ourselves and others. This requires taking a balanced approach to negative emotions towards the self or others so that they are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. This process is known as mindfulness and denotes the

development of receptivity to our thoughts and feelings and observing them just as they are.

The experts say the development of self-compassion leads to less anxiety, depression, negative self-talk and fear of failure. Self-compassion is linked to more optimism, happiness, wisdom, curiosity and connectedness to others. It is positively associated with life-satisfaction, personal responsibility and emotional resilience. Thus one is equipped to begin the daunting task of living a life of service, humility, and compassion.

I suspect that some readers will react to these concepts as high-flown ideals that cannot be practically lived in a real world. Limitations of compassion often relate to our fear of practicing compassion towards the parts of our self that we deem unlovable or unacceptable. The lack of compassion to those "others" in the world that are unlike us is the very root of war, poverty, racism, elitism and other "-isms" that shred our planet. We live in a world where individual worth is devalued and, indeed, the marginalization of peoples on a global scale is unprecedented.

Our human condition testifies to the ineffectiveness of our current methods of relating to one another; something else is required. I believe the Charter for Compassion offers important key concepts that can show us a way to a better future. I invite you to share your comments and experiences relating to compassion with the Spiritual Resource Center at www.spiritualityresourcecenter.com.

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