

## SYMPOSIUM

### **Interfaith and Intercultural Perspectives on Compassion**

#### **Compassion in Islam**

**Jamal Rahman**

The Prophet Muhammad said that the heart of the *Quran* is rooted in the “Basmala,” a formula that opens virtually all of the one hundred fourteen chapters of the Holy Book: “In the name of Allah, Boundlessly Compassionate and Merciful.” When a Bedouin asked the Prophet how the Basmala could be bestowed upon him, the Prophet replied: “Have compassion on yourself, and on others, and the Basmala will be bestowed upon you.” Compassion constitutes the core of Islamic spirituality.

How can one begin to explain the awe-inspiring power of mercy and gentleness? We are asked to observe nature’s closest metaphor to compassion: the element of water. There is nothing so soft and yielding as water, but it is powerful enough to wash away continents. Water, like compassion, is necessary for life: Wherever water falls, says the *Quran*, life flourishes. The Earth was parched, says the Holy Book, but God sent down the waters of mercy and the Earth was “clothed in green.” Likewise, the person who practices compassion is blessed with authentic strength and at the same time blesses the world with life-affirming grace.

#### COMPASSION FOR SELF

We are placed mysteriously on Earth and begin life in a state of bewilderment. In truth, we have no idea who we are, where we have come from, or where we are going. In Rumi’s playful words, “We all arrive here a little tipsy.” In this confused state, we need to be gentle with ourselves. We also

need the gentle care of others. We need to be touched with compassion every step of the way.

To grow compassion for ourselves, we are to embrace not only our ten thousand joys of life but also our ten thousand sorrows of life. How do we learn to embrace our uncomfortable feelings with mercy and gentleness? The human ego tends to avoid, deny, and minimize feelings that make it feel threatened. Unpleasant feelings such as anger, sadness, and jealousy possess an edge only because we perceive them as something separate from ourselves. When we acknowledge them and enfold them with mercy and gentleness, we allow them to become healed and integrated. When, with courage and compassion, we kiss our inner demons, they turn into princes and princesses. Spiritual teachers have said that the more space sorrow carves into our being, the more joy we can contain. There is, of course, no need to run towards pain and suffering—but we should not run away from them.

I once had a congregant who desperately sought spiritual techniques to forgive the man who had murdered her daughter. She yearned to be freed from her burden of hate and pain; but the more she tried to forgive, the angrier she became. In fact, she began to develop illnesses. What was missing was compassion for self: the need to honor her feelings of anger and suffering, the need to make sacred the difficult feelings by embracing them with mercy and kindness. When she allowed herself, little by little, to embrace her pain through a spiritual practice called “sacred holding,” she experienced remarkable healing: she was blessed with a sense of release and her illnesses disappeared.

#### COMPASSION FOR THE OTHER

Over time, compassion for self creates an inner spaciousness that gives us the capacity to be compassionate with the other, no matter how confrontational or adversarial he or she is. From the place of inner spaciousness, we are able to discern between behavior and being. We realize that we are confronting the antagonism, not the antagonist.

In Sufi literature there is a story about how a judge might behave while sentencing someone who has committed a terrible crime. One judge might proclaim the sentence with contempt and disdain for the criminal, eager in his heart to banish this “scum of the Earth” into oblivion. This judge does not differentiate between behavior and being. Another judge, one who has cultivated inner spaciousness, would render the same sentence—but with

solemnity and respect for the offender's soul. Out of compassion he makes sure that the offender is accorded human dignity and is not maltreated in prison. Maybe the judge even prays for the offender, sending light from his heart to the soul of the convicted person. So the same sentencing is carried out with two different energies. Is this a big deal? Absolutely! Compassion is an energy from the soul that has the power to shift heaven and earth, both in our own hearts and in the hearts of those whose lives we touch.

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## Compassion in Judaism

**Ted Falcon**

What a world we live in! As a people, we seem captivated by dramas of violence and destruction. As a world, we seem attached to warfare, whether physical, emotional, or mental. There is perhaps more talk of compassion today than ever, but there is precious little that pierces the anti-compassionate plagues delivered to us daily by our media.

Polarization seems to be the hallmark of our age, with the distinction between religion and politics becoming blurred through charges and counter-charges between political candidates and ecclesiastical authorities. What is most troubling, perhaps, is the fact that we know what can heal the polarization that leads us to demonize the other. We know what can interrupt the race toward violence that such demonization supports. We know that compassionate action is the way out of the traps that are causing such anguish in our time.

### THE TEACHING OF THE WOMB

Compassion is feeling the pain of another and seeking to alleviate it. Compassion is feeling the joy of another and seeking to enhance it. While com-

passion, in its narrowest sense, means, “to suffer pain with another,” it goes beyond empathy to require action in the world. In the words of psychologist Arthur Jersild, “Compassion is the ultimate and most meaningful embodiment of emotional maturity. It is through compassion that a person achieves the highest peak and deepest reach in his or her search for self-fulfillment.”<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew word for compassion is RaCHaMiM, and the root is Re-CHeM, which means “womb.” Compassion, expressed in Hebrew, refers to the unique action of the womb. Interestingly, HaRaCHaMaN (“the Compassionate One”) is one of the names of God in Jewish texts. Since Hebrew, like other Semitic languages, does not contain a neuter “it,” everything is grammatically configured as either masculine or feminine. Compassion is one of the feminine aspects of the One.

Whereas a masculine support system tends to include specific goals for the one who is helped, more feminine energies (and please know that we are not talking about men and women, but about the masculine and the feminine energies that both men and women contain and can express) encourage the one supported to develop the goals and qualities which are unique to them, rather than cherished by the supportive presence.

The symbol of the womb is clear: a new life is supported in its development until it is ready to proceed on its own. The womb embraces but also releases—it has to trust the integrity of the organism to grow beyond its nurturing container. In the same way, compassion does not enforce external models, but encourages an individual to discover, to honor, and to express the unique gifts of their own being.

#### THE GOLDEN RULE IS NOT A RULE BUT A REALITY

If compassion is empathy in action, the Golden Rule is one of the clearest definitions of such action. In Christianity, Jesus taught, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; this is the law (*Torah*) and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). In Judaism, the sage Hillel, an earlier contemporary of Jesus, said it this way: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole *Torah*; the rest is commentary; go now and learn.”<sup>2</sup> This basic principle is reflected in all great spiritual traditions and, therefore, it is senseless to debate which formulation is “better” because they are the same.

Ultimately, however worded, what we call the Golden Rule is the natural expression of a fuller spiritual awareness. The spiritual journey invites

us to allow our hearts and our minds to open to the absolute inter-connect-  
edness of all being. This awareness “feels,” more than “speaks,” the recogni-  
tion that the one looking at me through your eyes and the one looking at you  
through mine is the same One. We share a common Life, and to the degree to  
which we awaken to that reality, our planet’s chances for survival increase.

When we realize that whatever we do to another we ultimately do to  
ourselves, our behavior naturally changes. No one really has to give us a  
rule, because the ethic simply follows from the Realization. The difficulty  
lies in the fact that we are not always—perhaps even not often—living in  
that Realization. Most of the time, we are wandering around as separate  
ego-selves, identified with our current bodies and their immediate issues.  
From this place, even the rule won’t help us.

On Saturday, April 24, 2010, the Mayor and the City Council of Seattle  
signed a document making Seattle the very first city in the United States to  
take on a ten-year commitment to become a more compassionate city. There  
is energy behind inviting other cities to make such a commitment, but pro-  
clamations alone will never bring compassionate action.

Compassion does not happen simply because we say so; it begins when  
we do so; and no matter how hard we try to avoid it, the focus comes right  
back to each of us. We keep trying to change something “out there” when it  
can only be changed within. Change comes from a radical opening to com-  
passion for self and compassion for others that awakens within each person.

#### SO HOW DO WE OPEN OURSELVES TO COMPASSION?

Giving up our need to be right—our certainty that we are in the right and  
the other in the wrong—is one of the most difficult things for us to do. But  
that is what can open the door for truly compassionate action. It begins by  
appreciating that the other with a radically different belief holds that posi-  
tion with at least the same fervor that we do.

When we can begin to acknowledge that both parties to the debate are  
right according to their own beliefs and life experiences, the way opens for  
initiating dialogue. Conversations must not begin by focusing on our differ-  
ences, nor even on our agreements. Conversations must begin by inviting  
us to share our life experiences and bringing our life stories to each other.  
Through our stories we become more fully human to the other and by listen-  
ing carefully to stories we can begin to appreciate another’s point of view.

Here are five specific steps for approaching others compassionately provided by Harry Palmer. With your attention geared to the other person, tell yourself:

Step 1: "Just like me, this person is seeking happiness in his/her life."

Step 2: "Just like me, this person is trying to avoid suffering in his/her life."

Step 3: "Just like me, this person has known sadness, loneliness and despair."

Step 4: "Just like me, this person is seeking to fill his/her needs."

Step 5: "Just like me, this person is learning about life."<sup>3</sup>

Compassion will not end conflict, but will encourage the kind of communication that can inspire creative responses unavailable before. Compassion is not about getting another to agree, nor does it demand relinquishing one's own viewpoint. Compassion allows us to become more fully human with each other in order to create the foundation for greater collaboration and more effective healing of the great issues that confront us as human beings at this time—and we can only begin right here and right now with ourselves and those we meet.

#### NOTES

1. Arthur Jersild, quotation on compassion, available online at [http://www.joyofquotes.com/compassion\\_quotes.html](http://www.joyofquotes.com/compassion_quotes.html) (Last accessed March 24, 2012).
2. *Talmud*, Shabbat, 31a.
3. Harry Palmer, *Resurfacing: Techniques for Exploring Consciousness* (Littleton, CO: Stars End Creations, Inc., 1997).

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## Compassion in Christian Practice

**Paul J. Wadell**

Every virtue helps us achieve excellence in some area of life. If justice teaches us what it means to live in right relationship with others and courage empowers us to confront the challenges of life bravely and with resolve,

compassion enables us to hear and to respond to the call that comes to us from God in those who suffer. Compassion is an indispensable virtue for anyone in Christian ministry or a helping profession. It works against the insensitivity or indifference that inhibits genuine care for persons in need, but compassion also disposes one to imitate Jesus who attended to people who were suffering with love, affection, wisdom, and heartfelt sensitivity.

The entire ministry of Jesus could be characterized as a ministry of compassion because throughout the gospels he consistently sought out the lost and afflicted and responded to their needs. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and welcomed to table all the forgotten ones who were told they could never belong. Thus, like Jesus, Christians should never safely distance themselves from the suffering and afflicted, but should befriend them. As any friend would, they should open their lives to them, seek their good, and do what they can to help them. As the word compassion suggests, instead of turning away from the stricken and afflicted, Christians, following the way of Jesus, should choose “to suffer with” them.

#### HOW COMPASSION DIFFERS FROM EMPATHY AND PITY

No one can be compassionate without empathy, yet compassion differs from empathy because empathy does not necessarily lead to action. Empathy enables me to “feel into” another person’s experience by imagining what is happening to them. Empathy sensitizes me to their predicament, and in that respect connects me to them; but it does not require that I do anything to help them—compassion does. In *The Way of Goodness and Holiness—A Spirituality for Pastoral Ministers*, Richard Gula says that compassion “includes not only a deep feeling for others who are suffering, but also the regret for what is happening and the desire to do something to help them.”<sup>1</sup> Compassionate persons are moved with sorrow at another’s misfortune because they see them not as strangers but as fellow human beings—as persons like themselves—and realize that they too would be suffering if faced with similar circumstances.

Unlike pity, which can suggest both distance from and superiority over those who suffer, the compassionate person acknowledges their solidarity or communion with the suffering, and affirms that those who suffer are not beneath them but are their equals.<sup>2</sup> Too, unlike pity which can mask the satisfaction that arises from knowing that we escaped the misfortune that befell another, the compassionate man or woman is genuinely distressed at another’s misfortune precisely because they can imagine it as their own. Pity asks noth-

ing of us but compassion, as the biblical writings in the Gospels attest, calls us out of our selves and into the world of the suffering not only that we can be with them in their suffering, but also that we do what we can to alleviate it. In short, a compassionate person characteristically notices those who are suffering, reaches out to them, and acts to lessen or remove their affliction.

#### WHY COMPASSION IS INDISPENSABLE FOR MINISTRY

All virtues are rooted in love and are expressions of love. Compassion is the form love takes in response to another's suffering, and no one can minister effectively without it. Compassion is preeminent among the virtues needed for ministry because any helping profession principally involves caring for the broken and wounded among us: those who have been permanently scarred by abuse; those who were betrayed and wonder if they can trust again; those who grieve a loss they fear will never leave them; those barely holding on who are searching for reasons to hope; those who were treated unjustly and are rightly angry and bitter. They come to those who minister not only because they expect them to care and understand in ways that others may not, but also because they need someone to connect with in their pain. Suffering can turn our world upside down and make us question everything, whether its our identity, the purpose of our lives, and even the love of family and friends. It reminds us of the fragility of life, the limits of our powers, and our own inescapable mortality. But perhaps most challengingly, suffering isolates by distancing us from the projects and activities that define our lives and from the people who regularly support and sustain us.<sup>3</sup>

Knowing this, a compassionate person reaches out to the suffering precisely so they do not have to suffer alone. He or she may not always be able to remove or lessen their suffering, but they can remain present to them in their suffering. With the virtue of compassion, persons in ministry *choose* to unite themselves to those who suffer not only so they know they are not abandoned—and that they remain members of the community—but also so they know they are loved.<sup>4</sup> Their suffering may diminish them, restrict them, and even disfigure them, but it does not erase the fact that they are loved and cherished by God and, therefore, should be loved, cherished, and cared for by the community. Put differently, Christians may not have an answer to suffering, but they do have a response to it, namely an abiding and befriending presence to those who suffer.



Often the most compassionate persons are those who have known suffering, loss, and adversity in their own lives. Because they have suffered, they are able to identify sympathetically with others who suffer. They know the frustration, fear, vulnerability, pain, and fatigue that accompany suffering and thus are not only able to understand well what another sufferer is experiencing, but are also more attuned to knowing how to help them. Through the virtue of compassion, they transform their own familiarity with suffering into a gift for others.<sup>5</sup>

#### FAITHFULLY IMITATING A GOD WHO HAS BEEN COMPASSIONATE TO US

Ultimately, however, Christians are called to be compassionate because God has been compassionate and merciful to us. Compassion enables us to show gratitude for—and faithfully imitate—the compassion God has extended to humanity, particularly in Jesus. In Jesus, God entered into the chaos and sufferings and sorrows of our world to help us in our need. Jesus is God’s compassion incarnate, God’s merciful presence in person. If in Jesus God was immersed into the pain and suffering of the world, through compassion Christians choose to “suffer with” the afflicted just as in Christ God elected to become a fellow sufferer with us.<sup>6</sup> Or, as Jesus said at the conclusion of the most famous parable about compassion, the “Good Samaritan” (Lk 10: 29–37), we are to “Go and do likewise.”

#### NOTES

1. Richard M. Gula, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness—A Spirituality for Pastoral Ministers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 122.
2. Gula, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness*, 123. In his analysis of pity, Gula relies on Martha C. Nussbaum’s pivotal work, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 301–302.
3. Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 62.
4. Gula, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness*, 126–127.
5. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 64.
6. James F. Keenan, SJ, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 124–127.

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## Compassion: A Buddhist Perspective

Bryan Ferry

The Buddhist vision of compassion is constructed from a few key elements. *Bodhicitta* is considered the nectar of compassion. All people contain this seed element of *bodhicitta*. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche described *bodhicitta* as the essence or “basic goodness” in everyone.<sup>1</sup> The seed of basic goodness is watered by listening deeply to what others say and also to what is left unsaid.<sup>2</sup> Given the personal risks involved in being vulnerable, we often reveal our greatest needs through implication or saying everything except what is most important to us. Hearing the unspoken words of a patient or the embedded meaning in a student’s statement can be as important to developing an understanding of a patient or a student as listening to what they verbalize.

Understanding is the second and, perhaps, most vital element of developing compassion. As Buddhists, we listen to develop a visceral understanding of the other. We hope to develop a felt sense impression of the other. Rogerian psychologists describe this as entering into the private perceptual world of another.<sup>3</sup> In Buddhism, we go a step further. We believe that interdependence, interconnected social, personal, and physiological networks give us physiological insight into one another’s experience. I not only share common social experiences with other Southern Californians or personal experiences with others in my supervisory peer group, but when I listen with all my attention placed on a patient, their verbal and facial gestures trigger cues in my own nervous system that allow me to develop a physical sense of what they might be experiencing. Physically mirroring patients’ or students’ gestures allow me an even wider, more experiential understanding of their concerns. A quote from Franklin Ernst, Jr. has long guided my pastoral care, “To listen is to move. To listen is to be moved...”<sup>4</sup>

Empathy is the fruition of compassion. As my own cultural, interpersonal, and sense memories are triggered, I experience sympathetic joy or pain for those with whom I am attending. As my heart is stirred, my *bod-*

*hicitta* is awakened, first for myself, and then for the other. Honoring and respecting the pain or joy I feel in myself allows me to fully empathize with the other. I can then express my empathy in ways that are most genuine. For instance, I may try to tailor my words to be as accessible to a 15-year-old Latino patient as possible, but I use my own words to express my compassion, drawn from my sympathetic reactions to the patient's suffering. The flowering of compassion might be empathically attending with a child. But it also may be holding a space for a room full of angry patient-family members to vent as I feel their frustration. At the children's hospital in which I work, compassion can also be celebrating with children.

### COMPASSION IN SUPERVISION

My supervisory practice of compassion is both facilitative and participatory. I mirror the concern of my students and express my concern for patients through them. While I reflect a range of emotions with students, so that they may do likewise with patients, my Buddhist supervisory practice is also to enter into my students' reactions to patients. My supervisory practice of compassion is to listen deeply to my students to gain a felt sense impression of their experience. Joining my students in their reactions to patients allows me to not only model an empathetic reaction to the student, but also allows me to express my intuitive response to the patient's suffering, the ripening of my *bodhicitta* for patients. We then have two responses to their patient's suffering, the student's and my own, on which to reflect. As students are learning to identify their emotions and develop their intuition, but do not yet know how to form pastoral responses from their reactions, I can offer interventions drawn from my response to the patient. Finally, joining my students in their experience of patients reminds us that supervision is not just a theoretical exercise, but preparation for actual engagement with the real problems that our patients face. My expression of concern for my students' patients reminds my students not to get too cerebral in their own pastoral care, but to be heartfelt in their responses.

The process of developing compassion in the Buddhist sense is quite intentional. I encourage students to slow down, deliberately attend with patients, and listen intently. As understanding develops in them and empathy arises, they feel called to share their compassion with patients. They experiment with sharing joy, pain, and empathy with their patients. During verbatims we review these responses and explore how skillfully the students

made use of their compassion. Yet, my question is not necessarily whether a student found the most accurate pastoral intervention, i.e., perfectly matching the grief of a patient, but rather how deeply they allowed themselves to sink into the patient's experience and develop their own compassion.

I expect that students will lose their bearings the first time they fully enter into the experience of another. A small degree shock is to be expected the first time they enter the perceptual understanding of a patient and develop their own feelings for that patient's struggles with mortality. The student may initially be at a loss for words or become painfully emotional. In these instances, I draw on Rogers' belief that the psyche can regulate itself, integrating the traumatic experience and making room for both shock and a more skillful response the next time the student engages a similar patient experience.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as a Buddhist, I also believe that *bodhicitta*, expressed as empathy in this case, must be cultivated by the student as they engage the patient's experience and process their own reactions. This helps the student avoid becoming traumatized by entering into the patients' experiences and develop understanding of patients as persons.

#### NOTES

1. Chögyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publishing, 1984), 29.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Plum Village Chanting and Recitation Book* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2000), 17.
3. Brian Thorne, *Carl Rogers* (London: Sage, 1992), 31.
4. Franklin Ernst, Jr., *Who's Listening? Handbook of Listening Activity* (Vallejo, CA: Addresso'Set, 1973), 113
5. Carl Rogers, *Client Centered Therapy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951), 74.

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## An Intercultural Perspective on Compassion

### Estuardo Bazini-Barakat

My earliest recollections of compassion, either expressing it or receiving it, are treasured moments that occurred within my nuclear family. It extended to my cultural and faith community, my educational, and vocational group. Hence, compassion in my life experience comes as a result of—and results in—mutually empathic and empowering interactions.

Compassion, as I understand it, is a heightened awareness of the suffering of those with whom I relate as informed by my own experience of suffering. My hope is that this similarity of feelings and thoughts leads to fruitful dialogue and fruitful interactions: to relieve that suffering. According to relational cultural theorists, these kinds of empathic and empowering interactions have mutual benefits. The recipient of care together with the one giving it engage in a mutuality that has the potential to increase a sense of worth, inner peace, healing, and a desire for more interaction.<sup>1</sup> As an immigrant to the United States, I have benefited from this mutuality. I have been the recipient of others' compassion in my assimilation into a new culture. As I navigate through shifting cultural waters even now, I feel validated and cared for because of the ways others empathize with my stress and my suffering. Deep memories well up from these experiences.

In turn, these memories inspire me to cultivate a compassionate heart to do the same for others. I use my immigration experience and the feelings that arise with it—*anxiety, confusion, a sense of inadequacy*—to connect to my students in CPE. When students are exposed to the unfamiliar and the unknown I think of the power of compassion. As their experience resonates with my own, my compassion becomes a driving force. It moves me to create an environment in which all the participants feel reassured and allowed to express their uncomfortable feelings. I model compassion for them and create opportunities for mutual support through assignments. As our learning environment becomes a fertile soil for growth and healing, our teacher-student mutuality—both teaching and learning (education), both giving and receiving care (pastoral)—is mirrored in the student-patient encounter (clinical).

Furthermore, I invite my students to apply this compassion to all sentient beings and to all of life. Darwin states that our compassion is first ex-

tended to our family. We then extend it “into larger communities...and...to all members of the same nation.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he refers to the importance of extending our care not only to all humans but to other animals as well. According to Darwin, the concern for the well-being of animals demonstrates the highest level of moral development a human being can reach.

#### INBORN AND CULTIVATED

Although compassion is a central force in all world religions, it has only very recently become a particular topic of scientific study. As such, compassion “is not simply a private unobservable set of thoughts or beliefs but it sometimes manifests in a specific observable set of actions,” states Paul Ekman. Scientific research on primates has clearly proven that consoling, helping, and supporting does happen in animals. To provide that care, animals “must recognize the emotion of the other animal...the distress or fear.” Ekman calls this “emotion recognition.”<sup>3</sup>

In Ekman’s view, compassion differs in four ways from emotions:

1. Compassion needs to be cultivated, while emotions do not;
2. Compassion once cultivated is an enduring feature of the person, while emotions come and go;
3. Compassion does not distort our perception of reality, while emotions do initially, during the refractory period; and
4. The focus of compassion is restricted to the relief of suffering.

“Compassion,” according to the Dalai Lama, “does not develop spontaneously, but through training, through reasoning.” Ekman confirms this notion when he says that nature only gives us a start. If compassion is to extend beyond the immediate family it needs to be cultivated.

#### BUILDING A MORE HUMANE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

I see myself engaged in a vocation in which passion for pastoral care, social justice, and advocacy are combined to serve the indigent and disenfranchised in the inner city of Los Angeles. My survival experience in Guatemala and in Los Angeles has helped me recognize the urgent human need to live in a relational matrix. Here, I have come to the realization that my long time desire of relating across cultures has finally become a joyful, nurturing and life-enhancing experience. I should not, however, romanticize my immersion into different cultures.

On the one hand, compassion is the driving force that motivates humans to meet their burning desire to cultivate nurturing relationships: it keeps alive a commitment to adjust to an ever evolving network of connections. It continues to bring stability and healing to our ever expanding relational matrix. On the other hand, I realize that every one engaged in a relational matrix poses a great potential danger to self and others. Everyone experiences suffering throughout this fragile network. Everyone has the potential to hurt and to be hurt by others.

Although there is not even consensus among scientists about how to define compassion, there is an increasing number of opportunities for dialogue among experts from different fields. I see these opportunities for dialogue as a borderland in which experts from overlapping fields inform each other's understanding of human interaction, values, and growth. Recently emerging fields, such as sociobiology, help me further understand the interaction of nature (genetics) and nurture (culture) on human growth and interaction.<sup>6</sup> *Biophilia* suggests that there is an instinctive bond between humans and other living systems.<sup>7</sup>

Not much is known about why some people, without any special training, are much more compassionate, feeling concern for the suffering of total strangers, or why they act on that concern. However, from recent discoveries in neuroscience on the brain's plasticity, I have learned more of the brain's ability to rewire itself—to generate new cells—to alter its function which results in people's heightened ability and flexibility to respond to new circumstances. Neuroscience is helping me make sense of the functional, developmental, and healing aspects of the human nervous system.<sup>8</sup>

My hope is that as children of the same creation we will be able to build a network of possibilities and life-enhancing encounters. The survival of our planet and the whole ecosystem is intimately related to our solidarity with every living, and non-living, thing on Earth and beyond.

#### NOTES

1. Jean Baker Miller and Irene Pierce Stiver, *The Healing Connection: How Women Form Relationships in Therapy and in Life* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997), 39–41, 50–51, 166–167.
2. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1871), 77, 492. See also Charles Darwin, *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*, 3rd ed., Paul Ekman, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), originally published 1872.
3. The Dalai Lama and Paul Ekman, *Emotional Awareness* (New York: Times Books, 2008) 139–145, 150. See also Frans B. M. de Waal, "On the Possibility of Animal Empathy," in *Feelings and Emotions: The Amsterdam Symposium, Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction Series*,

Antony S. R. Manstead, Nico Frijda, and Agneta Fischer, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 381–401.

4. The Dalai Lama and Paul Ekman, *Emotional Awareness*, 140–141
5. Ibid.
6. Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2000), v–viii, 547–574. Wilson defines sociobiology as “the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior.” Sociobiology is an attempt to explain the evolutionary mechanics behind social behaviors such as altruism, aggression, and nurturance. The nature versus nurture debate concerns the relative importance of an individual’s innate qualities (nature) versus personal experiences (nurture) in determining or causing individual differences in physical and behavioral traits. In the contemporary nature versus nurture debate the definition of “nurture” has expanded to include influences on development arising from prenatal, parental, extended family, and peer experiences, and extending to influences such as media, marketing, and socio-economic status.
7. Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1984)
8. David Perlmutter and Alberto Villoldo, “The Gift of Neuroplasticity,” in *Power Up your Brain: The Neuroscience of Enlightenment* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc., 2011), 69–74.

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## A Supervisor’s Reflection on Compassion

**Tahara Akmal**

I was raised in Southern California as a Muslim American. In the neighborhood where I grew up, there were families from a variety of races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions. I found comfort in attending church with my best friend’s families and praying with classmates from different religions before school performances or if someone was sick or hurt. I was curious about others, sincerely wanting to know people. This was due in part to the diversity in my community, as well as the model I had in my family of origin.

My father was a devout Muslim and my mother a loving Christian. Both of my parents would often lend a hand to others, opening our home to women and children in need, serving the community, and being charitable. Therefore, I initially learned about compassion from my parents’ example.



As I became an adult and began to discover that life can be difficult, I looked to God for compassion and mercy for myself. As I explored the Qur'an and *hadiths* or traditions of the Prophet Mohammed, I discovered a God of immense love and compassion for all of creation. A God who the Prophet says, in a sacred *hadith qudsi*, "When He decreed the Creation, pledged Himself by writing in His book which is laid down with Him, '*Indeed My Mercy and Compassion prevail over My Anger.*'"<sup>1</sup> I embrace the value to show compassion and respect to all people in my work as an interfaith chaplain and in teaching CPE students.

### THE WOMB OF COMPASSION

Sheikh Jamal Rahman explains in his article that the Qur'an reminds its reader at the beginning of every chapter (except one), that God is "Boundlessly Compassionate," which according to Rahman constitutes the foundation of Islamic spirituality. The 55th chapter in the Qur'an titled *Ar-Rahman*, "The Most Compassionate," consistently reminds its reader of God's Graciousness and Compassion through a question that is repeated throughout the verses: "*Which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?*" My answer to that question long ago was that I did not want to deny any blessings from My Lord. Life experiences had given me some wisdom to know that blessings came in a variety of packages but God's compassion is always present.

The Arabic word for God's characteristic of Compassion and Graciousness is *rahman* and *rahim*. Both words are derived from the root, *rhm*, meaning womb. The image of God's compassion is connected with the womb from which all life enters into the world. The womb is a place of nourishment, tenderness, and protection that resonates with me as a woman and mother. I was glad to learn from Rabbi Ted Falcon that the Hebrew word for compassion in Judaism is also connected to the womb. Reading about this correlation between the two languages reminded me of a trip I made to Jerusalem in 2003. As I stood next to my Jewish sisters in prayer at the Western Wall, my soul was overwhelmed with feelings of a deep connection with them during our prayers. Kinship and relationship are additional meanings of the word *rhm*, symbolic of how extending loving kindness and compassion invites relationship and community.

God extended mercy and compassion to humanity beginning in the Garden after the 'deceptive one' leads Adam and his spouse to disrupt the relationship with their Creator under the guise of being their "*sincere advis-*

er” (Q. 7:21). The Qur’an describes that Adam and Eve wronged their own souls, (Q. 7:23); Adam asked for forgiveness and God accepted and granted forgiveness (Q. 200:121–122). Muslim Scholar M. Fethullah Gülen writes, “While Adam dealt a blow to his essence through failing, it was God’s forgiveness that elevated him to Prophethood.”<sup>2</sup> The essence Gülen refers to is the inherent goodness in every human that Bryan Ferry writes about.

#### COMPASSION AND SUFFERING

The Garden story serves as a metaphor of how life events can move individuals to be confused and fearful of losing connection to and compassion from God and others. As I am engaged in the CPE supervisory education process, I am mindful that students come to CPE with their personal stories which are often full of confusion and doubt about a variety of issues. My role is to be open and compassionate to every student I teach and every patient I serve as a chaplain. I have the honor to bear witness to suffering and be a compassionate presence.

Paul Wadell suggests that Jesus did not distance himself from suffering. As I have developed my theology of spiritual care in a hospital setting, I learned from the Book of Matthew and other sacred texts, along with a sacred *hadith qudsi*, the importance God has placed on not turning away from suffering and illness:

Then the King will say...‘I was sick and you looked after me...’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you sick...?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ (Matthew, 25:36, 39, 40)

O son of Adam, I was sick yet you did not visit me.’ He will reply, ‘O Allah, how could I have visited You since you are Lord of the Worlds?’ Allah will say: ‘Did you not know that so and so, a servant of mine was sick, and yet you did not visit him? Should you have visited him you would have found Me by him.’<sup>3</sup>

The Biblical Scripture and *hadith qudsi* exemplify the level of compassion that God has for those who are sick and suffering. They impart the merciful heart of God toward his servants who are struggling with illness. It also describes the relationship God encourages humankind to enter into with those who are sick and in need of compassion, as well as an invitation God offers us to join Him in the care of a human soul at the bedside.

Not only is God concerned with how compassionate we are to other human beings, God also includes the animal kingdom as worthy of just

and compassionate treatment. There are stories in my faith tradition that describe God's pleasure with individuals who showed kindness toward animals. Estuardo Bazini-Barakat's references to Darwin's view of morality and compassion is tied to having concern for the well-being of animals. Gülen concurs when he writes that "Showing compassion to all living beings is a requirement of being human."<sup>4</sup>

Chaplain Bazini-Barakat's use of self around his struggle as an immigrant helped me connect with CPE students in their feelings of confusion and anxiety. I have had to navigate feelings of anxiety and being different as a Muslim woman in ACPE supervisory education. I love Sheikh Rahman's quote from Rumi: "We all arrive here a little tipsy." That describes how it felt for me when I first entered supervisory education. I do not feel sober yet; however, I am compassionate with myself and with every student I teach and I give myself permission to feel "tipsy" at times as I make my way through the supervisory process. Becoming a supervisory candidate in ACPE was very affirming. I am grateful to God and my candidacy committee who engaged me, listened to my story and theology, challenged me to know myself, and showed me compassion.

#### NOTES

1. Stephen Hirstenstein and Martin Notcutt, trans., *Divine Sayings: The Mishkat al-Anwar of Ibn 'Arabi* (Oxford, UK: Anqa Publishing, 2004), 42.
2. Fethullah M. Gülen, *Essays Perspectives Opinions* (Rutherford, NJ: The Light, Inc., 2002), 42.
3. Hirstenstein and Notcutt, *Divine Sayings*, 75.
4. Gülen, *Essays Perspectives Opinions*, 42.

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