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Widening the Circle of Compassion

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People who have lasting and supportive relationships in their lives are healthier in the long run than those who do not.^{1,2} Beneficial relationships come in many forms – social communities, spiritual communities, families, close friends, and even companion animals. Apparently human beings are made to share life with other living beings, to take care of and to be cared for by others.

Despite our hunger to be in relationship with other living beings, to feel that we are known and understood, loved not for what we do, but who we are, many of us find that our lives create, even encourage, separation. We value competition. We are rewarded for winning, for pushing ourselves to our limits to achieve. Drive is valorized. Those who have earned the right to call themselves *doctor* have had to work particularly long and hard, often marginalizing everyone and everything in their lives to complete school, internships, board and licensing examinations. Every patient who enters a practitioner's office is, likewise, facing his or her own pressures to achieve, to please, to earn, to succeed, to have and do it all.

When the doctor and patient meet and enter into a relationship that has healing as its goal, they must find a way to bridge the divide that exists between them. For healing to take place, honest communication is necessary. So, despite the honors and excellence that may have come to define the doctor, s/he must find a way to be real and present to the patient – not simply an expert or an authority, but also a caring human being who will listen and empathize. Likewise, the patient who enters a doctor's office has to trust not only the doctor's expertise, but also that s/he will keep confidences, will not exploit the patient's physical or emotional vulnerability, and will seek understanding without judgment. Both doctor and patient take a risk in entering this relationship and it may be tempting for both to hide behind roles and accomplishments rather than leave ego out of the interaction. But that is exactly what must happen if healing is to take place.

Compassion Born of Crisis

I had long been aware of Norman Cousins' statement to those who wish to be doctors that, "Nothing you learn is so vital to your work with patients as compassion." I believed I understood what he meant, and I considered myself a compassionate person ... though I'd never had the humbling and frightening experience of significant illness. Then it happened; I was faced with my own devastating diagnosis. It shook my faith in my body's wisdom. It challenged all that I believed about preventive lifestyles and conservative approaches to healthcare. It forced me to acknowledge the impossibility of being in complete control of every element of my life, and to humble myself and ask for help not just from both conventional and alternative healthcare providers, but also from my friends and family.

Suddenly, superwoman wasn't so super anymore. I'll never forget what my yoga teacher said to me when I told her I'd been diagnosed with cancer. "After this, you will understand the suffering of your students and patients so much better because you will have *experienced* suffering." And she was right.

Understanding That Others Struggle, Too

Now, nearly three years later, I talk to my yoga students, my chiropractic students, and my chiropractic colleagues about the reality that everyone we encounter is carrying his or her own struggle – some more aware of it than others, but all in need of acceptance and acknowledgement as fully human and worthy. As Philo of Alexandria said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

Yoga, like all other world wisdom traditions, values the cultivation of compassionate seeing. In the West, our yogic journey often begins at the physical level in an *asana* (posture) class. We may find ourselves frustrated because we

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can't bend or lift or invert like the yoga teacher – or worse (we believe), like the student on the mat next to us. We bring our lack of compassion for ourselves right onto the yoga mat with us.

The Journey, Not the Destination

With practice and the guidance of a skilled teacher, though, we discover that the process of the pose, not the end product, is the real teacher. And, as we breathe into each small adjustment of our body, inviting the mind to physical spaces we usually ignore, we find our wonder at our body's magnificence is restored. Over time, our wonder at our body causes us to reflect on the way we treat it, and many of us feel sorrow for the ways in which we've ignored our physical needs for rest, quality food, and healthful physical movement in service of career or other driving forces. Then, something magical begins to happen. We realize that others are having this same experience. Others around us feel the same fears, desire to avoid pain, want to be accepted and loved. Starting from the center, we widen the reach of our compassion to encompass those around us...

There are many ways to develop compassion. While some of us learn it from our own experiences of suffering, I am convinced that we can undertake healthy, positive disciplines that open our hearts first to ourselves and then to others. Pema Chodron and Thich Nhat Hanh both teach *lovingkindness* meditations that I have found useful in my own practice and working with yoga students.

Opening the Heart

Find a comfortable, quiet place to sit. Connect the sit bones to the floor or cushion and lift the spine up out of the pelvis, lengthening from the base through the crown of the head. Open the heart by rolling the shoulders back and down away from the ears. Soften into this position so that the body moves with the breath – avoid becoming rigid. Let the words of the *metta* prayer drop rhythmically into the mind/body. The prayer is said three times for yourself, three times for one you love, and, when you feel ready, three times for someone who challenges you, a person you find it difficult to embrace with compassion.

As you let the words vibrate in your consciousness, visualize the people for whom you are saying them – see yourself in your mind's eye and *feel* the meaning of the words; see your beloved in detail, *feel* your love for him or her; see your enemy, *feel* your enmity transformed, softened by the words of the *metta* prayer. If it feels natural at some point in this prayer to take your right hand to your heart and cover it with your left, embracing yourself, feeling the energy of your own heart pulsing with compassion, feel free to do so.

Metta Prayer

May you (I) be filled with lovingkindness.

May you (I) be well.

May you (I) be peaceful and at ease.

May you (I) be happy.

References

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