**The Three Levels of Compassion**

**( with my apologies to Buddha**

**-and Thich Nhat Hanh)**

        John F. Elliott, MA, LMFT

 Back in my undergraduate days I had to work to support myself through college. This was in the Cenozoic era before we had personal computers, I Phones etc.

The only thing that went viral was the flu.

    The first job I got as a freshman was as a dishwasher in a nursing home with about two hundred residents. They had a giant industrial machine -which I never learned to use properly, with my efforts resembling an episode of “I Love Lucy.” I was running around, bussing tables and loading the now concrete encrusted plates into the machine. As I was hustling to get my work done one morning an elderly woman, in her 80’s (let’s call her Phyllis), yelled out, “Johnny, can you please get me a cup of coffee?"

"Of course!"

I stopped what I was doing and compassionately complied. After all, I was raised to respect my elders, I loved my grandparents and wanted to be caring and got her the cup.

 “Can you get me some cream and sugar?” I walked the twenty feet and came back.

Here you go Phyllis!” She smiled and called me a dear boy.

And the next morning “Hey Johnny could you...?" you….?"

This time I remembered the cream and sugar so didn’t have to make the two trips. And the next morning…and the next… and the next.. until…

 Sharon, the nursing supervisor, stopped me. “ELLIOTT, what are YOU doing?”  “I”, with some pride and cockiness said, “am taking care of Phyllis!"

“No you’re NOT.” Sharon said sharply.

 “What do you mean, -I was being nice."

 “No you weren’t. Quite the opposite, young man. The muscles in Phyllis’s legs are atrophying because she refuses to exercise. She has been told she has to walk, to maintain her strength and to continue to be ambulatory If this keeps up, she’ll be confined to a wheel chair.”

“Oh.” I started to feel very stupid.

 “Now Elliott, you go over there and tell Phyllis to walk over and get her own coffee.”

I walked over and in my warmest voice said:

“Now Phyllis, Sharon has told me that you need to get your own coffee, because you need to strengthen the muscles in your legs so you won’t have to be in a wheel chair…” then she interrupted me. “Johnny?’

"Yes?”

"Fuck-off.”

Well. Needless to say, I didn’t last long at the job.

I have lasted fairly long as a psychotherapist, a licensed marriage and family therapist to be exact, more than forty years.

I have learned a few things along the way that may be helpful. Compassion and empathy have always been key factors in my work and relationships. So, I’d like to clarify what these constructs mean to me in the context of Psychotherapy and Mindfulness-formerly known as Zen Buddhism.

**Level One Compassion**

         Most every major religion and set of societal values operate from the first level of compassion. We don’t want to see others we care for go through pain, or fear or frustration. We want to ease their sorrow, tell them not to worry, and point out the silver linings in the clouds that envelope them. So, we try to comfort them with solutions, or in getting them to make gratitude lists. We attempt to convince them that it’s really not so bad that someone dropped a bowling ball on their foot, -look at that guy from Afghanistan who lost both feet to a landmine! Or, that at least one of their kids isn’t a drug addict, or…. It was better to have loved and lost than never loved.

You know. We all do this at times. We try to fix it, make it better, tell them it will pass. -Even to push them and tell them to “suck it up.” Sometimes it works. (Perhaps in an emergency.) Yet our “helpfulness” here may be just as much for ourselves, perhaps even more so. Why? Because I may have a hard time admitting that neither you or I have any control over an outcome; that we are indeed helpless. That there is uncertainty in life and shit happens. Also, true compassion and empathy means feeling **with** another. To do so we have to tap into our own similar experience and relate to another from our own experience of pain or fear or frustration or despair or helplessness while concurrently being caring. We also have to be able to accept an other’s position as their truth. (Which is way different than being complacent and placative.)

The truth for me is, level one compassion often resembles sympathy more than empathy.

**Level Two Compassion**

       I’ve got this this phrase from my AA clients, “Pain is a requirement in life; suffering and misery are optional.” Sounds rather bleak. But the tenants of Buddhism also reflect this. In the Five Remembrances (a significant teaching from Buddhist philosophy), students are taught to contemplate that:

***1. I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.***

***2. I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape ill health.***

***3. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.***

***4. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.***

***5. My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.***

Based on these precepts, we are taught to be compassionate, but NOT to take away what someone needs to accept and process. Not to rob them of their strengths and capabilities by doing something for them thy need to do for themselves, -for their own self-respect and esteem.

We need to feel what we feel because our feelings are a valuation of our experience in life. They guide and direct us to take action.

There are exceptions here in regard to biochemical imbalances, hallucinations, delusions or depression and anxiety disorders. (Which also have to be considered in context.) There is “unnecessary” pain that is not a result of the normal hardships of life. Here we may be more proactive.

Feelings and thoughts are, for the most part, neither good or bad, right or wrong, true or false. At various times it’s congruent for us to feel sad, fearful, confused, frustrated and angry, as well as happy, brave, certain, accomplished and serene.

     There’s an old Zen story about a farmer and his son…

 *Once upon the time there was an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. “Such bad luck,” they said sympathetically.*

*“Maybe,” the farmer replied.*

*The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. “How wonderful,” the neighbors exclaimed.*

*“Maybe,” replied the old man.*

*The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune.*

*“Maybe,” answered the farmer.*

*The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son’s leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out.*

*“Maybe,” said the farmer.*

In the above case, the father is being nonjudgmental about the events occurring in his life. He is not describing the world in good/bad terms. He knows there may be good in the bad and bad in the good.

This may be true even for our pain.

    There is a certain value to pain. It lets us know we're injured. It helps us to heal, as we are forced to handle those injured parts with care and attention. We may have to give up certain activities and responsibilities until we are well enough. Otherwise, we get hurt even more, and we may be ineffective in the tasks we have chosen to undertake.

And of course, pain also sucks.

Pain can allow us to reach out to others for help as well. Unless, of course, -you are a leper. People stay away from lepers. They are afraid they will catch it. You know, it's that biblical disease. The one where your body begins to rot and fall apart. Noses and fingers turning black with gangrene and smell of death. Most people don't know what leprosy really is. It is a skin disease that produces a condition of neuro-anesthesia. Anesthesia meaning lepers don't feel pain. Consequently, when lepers are injured, they don't always know it. Wounds, cuts, and sprains are often ignored. The body, in turn, continues to deteriorate and decay. We can help create that condition of leprosy in others, even with the best intentions: Don't feel sad, don't feel bad, don't feel guilty, don't feel angry, don't feel...Then of course, when the condition of leprosy has taken root, we can shun them. Because they will have transformed into unfeeling bitch/bastards. And then, feeling pain ALL the time debilitates, puts us in stasis, makes us incapable.

   The second level of compassion is being able to accept what another is feeling without judgement. Having compassion for their sorrow, fear, anger, frustration, resistance, denial, defenses, joy, without trying to take these emotions away. We can’t. Providing a silver lining or comparison is not empathic. Feeling with them is. When we are truly connected THEN there may be other actions to take

We may distract, but this will only be temporary. Part of this second level is giving up our ego and not attempting to “save” another. People can save themselves, given the right opportunity. Or they won’t, -even if the right opportunity is offered. Sometimes our helpfulness, -especially when unsolicited, is the sunny side of control.

I’m NOT saying to ignore screams for help outside your place of residence. I’m NOT saying to step over the unconscious guy in the street. I’m not saying don’t get your partner a coke from the fridge as they can get it for themselves.

 *Maybe.*

I have said to people for years that all shit is fertilizer, but it’s still shit. Perhaps being “nonjudgmental” is perceiving this duality as a synthesis. We don’t make people right or wrong for their feelings or thoughts. We accept them as their truths, without agreeing or disagreeing. We do so without having an agenda for an outcome, though perhaps we pay close attention to their goals and support what is in our power to influence.

It’s difficult to do.

I sometimes exaggerate this a bit and tell folks…

What if you’re crossing the street at a red light and the walk sign is on? A drunk driver speeds through the red-light smashes into you. Every bone in your body is broken and the ambulance gets you to the hospital.

They fix you up and, in the process, they discover you are in the early stages of lymphoma. Wow! They cure you.

Do we thank the drunk driver? Probably not, though it may reduce the amount of anger we may have. Maybe I’d even forgive them once they joined AA and the law suit was settled.

Now let’s say before I get hit, you saw the speeding car and grabbed me by my collar and prevent the accident in the first place.

I thank you for saving my life.

I die of cancer six months later.

(Just say I avoid doctors whenever I can)

Yeah, I know it’s extreme and if it were anyone else, I’d grab them by the collar too. Though I might also advise them to get a physical.

*Maybe*

**Third Level of Compassion**

 The third level compassion occurs when you achieve enlightenment. When you become Buddha.

I still don’t know what the hell that is.

When I find out, I couldn’t let you know anyway…

So for now,

Regards, All the best, Namaste’ and all that good shit.

John

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