

Cultivating Compassion for Those Who Have Hurt Us

*The more love and hope you have invested in another person,
the deeper the pain of betrayal is. (Richard Rohr)*

*If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we
should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering
enough to disarm all hostility.
(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)*

Gloria and I have just returned home from running a week-long retreat in Spain. During the retreat, I found myself giving a talk on extending compassion to our so-called 'enemies'. Because this is a pretty challenging, but truly life-affirming practice, I thought I would share a few thoughts about it with you as we move into the miraculously merry month of May.

Virtually all human beings can feel some kind of compassion for their friends and loved ones but very few practise cultivating compassion for those who have really hurt them at some point in the past. The perfectly normal human response to those who hurt us in some way is to want to punish them. Most of us try to do this by holding onto our anger at the awful way they have treated us. But this is like trying to poison an enemy by taking a big dose of arsenic ourselves. Unfortunately, the energy of anger is most toxic to the individual who is holding onto it and usually does little or nothing to punish those against whom we insist on holding grievances.

If we are really honest with ourselves, we will probably admit that we often feel more anger and even hatred for those closest to us in the past, who abused, abandoned or imprisoned us in some way or other, than we feel toward the worst genocidal maniacs whom we have never met. Some lovely individuals end up hating and resenting their own parents far more than they do a mass murderer or a corrupt, narcissistic political leader. They blame their parents for all their present emotional pain as adults and therefore feel no compassion for their own parents whatsoever.

Virtually all of us tend to hold at least one or two strong grievances against our own parents, even those parents who did their very best to love and care for us when we were little. For example, when I was a chronically depressed young woman, I blamed my adoptive father for loving me too much, my adoptive mother for not loving me enough, and both of them for not loving me exactly the way I wanted to be loved! Parents just cannot win can they?

Please do not misunderstand me here. I am certainly not trying to minimise the terrible and long-lasting emotional pain that dysfunctional or abusive parents can inflict on their children.

However at some point in our lives, if we are truly determined to find deep joy and fulfilment before we drop dead, we need to set our intention to let go of all our stored emotional pain from our childhood and all our long held grievances against our own parents and other adults who hurt us in some way or another in our early life. We also need to let go of all the emotional pain that we have stored from past romantic relationships or close friendships that ended badly.

This letting go of stored wounds, resentments and negative emotions is true forgiveness. On the other hand, trying to forgive those who have hurt us whilst hanging on to all our stored

pain is certainly virtuous, but does not bring us the deep joy or fulfilment that a more radical, healing form of forgiveness can generate.

Unfortunately, we usually need to go through some deep self-healing, before we can extend genuine compassion to those who wounded us at some point in the past. Otherwise, we will find that we simply cannot extend our good wishes to our attackers even though we may want to do so. Alternatively, we may try to forgive those who have hurt us in a holier than thou sort of way, which is actually an egoic trick to keep us playing the role of innocent victim in relation to their unforgivable wickedness.

In my experience, we do not have to know exactly how to do this deep emotional healing of past wounds. We just have to be brave enough to set our intention to let this stored emotional pain go once and for all. Then, we ask God or the universe to assist us in finding the right individuals, books, retreats or whatever to show us exactly what to do to safely let go of our emotional pain and to support us through all the challenges of consciously healing our wounded-self.

Only once we have released some of our stored emotional pain and trauma will we be ready and able to send some genuine compassion to those who hurt us so badly in the past. The really good news I long to share with you this month is that when we are finally ready to do this, it feels wonderful!

But please never, ever beat yourself up if you find that you are simply not ready to forgive someone who abused, abandoned or betrayed you when you were young and oh so vulnerable. In my experience, we cannot rush a genuine healing process. Letting go of all our past emotional pain and angst usually happens by grace rather than by our own willpower. Moreover, there is definitely divine timing involved which is beyond our egoic understanding of the whole healing/forgiveness process.

Now as well as preparing ourselves to extend genuine compassion to all those who have hurt us in the past, it also really helps us to let go and forgive if we remember two fundamental facts about anyone who has harmed us in the past or may still be harming us in the present.

Firstly, just like us, our abuser or attacker longs to avoid suffering and to find lasting happiness. They just go about trying to avoid suffering and trying to seek pleasure in a totally unskilled and hurtful way. Secondly, we have never walked a mile in their shoes and so we cannot fully understand how or why they ended up being a damaged, and therefore damaging, human being.

So many human beings have experienced so much abuse or trauma in their early years that they grow up crooked and weak, like a tree that was planted in poor soil. Then, because they are so weak and distorted, they tend to act in really damaging ways in a totally unskilled attempt to ease their own pain. This does not mean that we should condone anyone's abusive behaviour, but it does mean that we can cultivate some genuine compassion for them – if necessary from a *very* safe distance!

I spent nearly all of my 20s and 30s blaming my adoptive parents for my long lasting emotional difficulties and neuroses. But finally, after many years of psychotherapy and a lot of deep and painful spiritual healing I was finally able to forgive all my parents - 2 biological and 2 adoptive ones. I then found that I could hold all four of them in my heart with love and gratitude. I truly believe that this fundamental inner turn around has transformed my whole life for the better.

As well as cultivating compassion for individuals from my past who inadvertently hurt me in some way or another, I now also like to pause from time to time to send some waves of compassion to individuals in the news who really push my buttons. But I have noticed that I

cannot do this unless I am ready to let go of any fear or anger I may be holding in relationship to them. If I find that I cannot do this for a particular public figure who is really 'triggering' me, I take a step backwards and simply pray that the universe will help me to be more compassionate toward them at some point in the future.

I now find that opening my compassionate heart to my 'enemies' on a regular basis helps me to stay relatively calm and loving in the midst of an increasingly divided and crazy world. Rather than moaning and groaning about those who do not share my political views or strongly held beliefs about all sorts of issues, I now like to remind myself that just like me, my political 'enemies' are doing their best to avoid suffering and to find lasting happiness. They also seem to genuinely believe that their crazy policies and actions (from my point of view) are the best way forwards for humanity.

I certainly do not have to condone the actions of my 'enemies' as I cultivate compassion for them. But I do have to resist a seductive egoic thought system that sees my political opponents as the bad guys so that I can play the role of a totally innocent victim of a wicked world.

Do I still get incredibly irritated by others' 'stupid' 'dangerous' 'irrational' beliefs and actions in this crazy world? You bet I do! However, when I hold my irritated personality-self in the soothing energy of self-compassion for a while, I find that I am then able to extend the same compassion to those who really push my buttons. This compassion practice then makes a big difference to my overall well-being and to the quality of the energy that I am constantly pumping out into the world around me.

So this month, if and only if you feel up to it, please join me from time to time in sending a wave or two of compassion out to someone in the news who really annoys you, or to someone in your past who hurt your feelings.

Whenever we do this, we will be contributing a few drops of peace, love and light to a world that is still far too full of fear and hatred. We will be sending life-supporting energy out into our troubled world, and all living things, including all the trees that are now fully clothed in their mantle of spring green leaves, will somehow benefit from our good intentions.

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