



## Compassion: The Doorway to Faith

Clay Nelson © 24 September 2017

I wrote this sermon prior to knowing yesterday's election results. All I know is that those results will be very much on our minds this morning. It has been a roller-coaster campaign with leadership changes in three of the parties. Poll results shifted almost daily, sometimes dramatically, leaving confusion in their wake. There were the usual outbreaks of dirty politics and debates about what influence they would have on the final outcome. There were the debates about the debates and who "won". But once the dust, or stardust, if you will, settles I believe historians will see this as the "compassion election".

After nine years of policies that resulted in increasing income and wealth inequality to record levels, an inexcusable rise in homelessness and children living in poverty, a critically underfunded health care system, greater damage to our environment, a housing crisis that froze the younger generation out of home ownership, and a huge rise in student debt that will be a ball and chain around the next generation's aspirations for decades to come, suddenly all the major parties expressed concern about the vulnerable in our society—even the incumbents. As an electorate, we were challenged to vote for the best interests of others, for a change, rather than our own. The Facebook meme, "Paying taxes is love" describes the shift. No matter what the results of the election were yesterday, it is this change of heart that gives me faith in our future as a country. If it resulted in a change in government, that faith is magnified greatly. If it didn't, I can take comfort that the present government has been pushed by the voters to be more compassionate, be it ever so reluctantly.

In the aftermath of this election, what intrigues me as both a theologian and political junkie is how we as a people can have closed our hearts to those not blessed by our privilege for the past nine years, and now be opening the door of our hearts to show them compassion. How can we as a people have both hardened and softened hearts?

Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh seems to share my intrigue in this paradox. He explores it in his poem *Call Me by My True Names*:

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow  
because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply: I arrive in every second  
to be a bud on a spring branch,

to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile,  
learning to sing in my new nest,

to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,  
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,  
in order to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and  
death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing

on the surface of the river,

and I am the bird which,  
when spring comes, arrives in time  
to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,  
and I am also the grass-snake who,

approaching in silence,  
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda,  
all skin and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,  
and I am the arms merchant,  
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the [young] girl,  
refugee on a small boat,  
who throws herself into the ocean  
after being [violated] by a sea pirate,

and I am the pirate,  
my heart not yet capable  
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,  
with plenty of power in my hands,

and I am the man who has to pay  
his “debt of blood” to my people,  
dying slowly in a forced labour camp.

My joy is like spring,  
so warm it makes flowers bloom  
in all walks of life.

My pain is like a river of tears,  
so full it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,  
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up,  
and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.

In it, Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that the way to open the door is to actually share a name with the beautiful  
and the ugly, the violent and the tender.

It's a challenging poem...and it seems to raise the question: Is it possible—or indeed realistic or advisable—to  
open our hearts that wide?

Apparently, it is.

There is a village where there's been no crime—not even petty theft—for more than four hundred years.

This village is located in a region of India that has one of the highest crime rates in the country. And yet, in Shani Shingnapur, the home of about three thousand people, there are no disputes between neighbours...no murders or crimes whatsoever. When shopkeepers go on vacation, they simply put a wooden plank across the door, confident that nothing will be stolen.

What could account for this phenomenon?

The people of the village worship a Hindu god: Lord Shani. They have great faith that Shani will protect them. That faith is one thing that sets the village apart. But there's something else, too. None of the buildings has doors, locks or keys. As one resident describes it: "Everybody lives together here, with our hearts connected."

We would all like to live in a place that embodies the interdependent web of all existence, but our reptile brain tells us that it is neither practical nor realistic to leave our doors unlocked. Yet a deeper part of ourselves, which neuroscientists tell us resides in our more highly evolved frontal cortex, wants us to leave the door to our heart open, no matter what.

Rumi, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet, captures both our yearning and our fear:

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness  
comes as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,  
Still, treat each guest honourably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whatever comes. because each has been sent.

Well, that said... From a practical standpoint, who wouldn't want to bar the door?

We tend not to welcome the shadow sides of ourselves. The aspects of ourselves and others that do not conform to our hopes and dreams... that make terrible mistakes... that fail... that let others down.

Yet the poet calls us to attend to them. Don't lock and bar the door for they could be "a guide from beyond." I envision that guide to be the compassionate person we seek to become.

Denying that we have a dark side will not open the door. We must call our shadow sides by their true names if we are also to discover our capacity to love ourselves, the first requirement if we are ever to show compassion to our neighbour.

Karen Armstrong, theologian, historian, and author of numerous books, including *12 Steps to Living a Compassionate life*, shared a story in an address to Unitarian Universalists about the late rabbi Albert Friedlander. "He had grown up in Nazi Germany, and as a child was bewildered and distressed by the vicious anti-Semitic propaganda that assailed him on all sides. One night, when he was about eight years old, he

deliberately lay awake and made a list of all his good qualities. He told himself firmly that he was not what the Nazis said, that he had talents and special gifts of heart and mind, which he enumerated to himself one by one. Finally, he vowed that if he survived, he would use those qualities to build a better world. This was an extraordinary insight for a child in such circumstances. Albert was one of the kindest people I have ever met; he was almost pathologically gentle and must have brought help and counsel to thousands. But he always said that he could have done no good at all unless he had learned, at that terrible moment of history, to love himself.”

The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield tells a very powerful story about compassion. It is the kind of wisdom story that may be hard to take in—because it may challenge our assumptions about the human capacity for forgiveness and for love.

Kornfield writes:

“Once on a train from Washington to Philadelphia, I found myself seated next to a man who had run a rehabilitation program for juvenile offenders in Washington D.C.

“Most of the youths he worked with were gang members who had committed homicide. One fourteen-year-old boy in the program had shot and killed an innocent teenager to prove himself to his gang.

“At the trial, the victim’s mother sat impassively silent until the end, when the youth was convicted of the killing. After the verdict was announced, she stood up slowly and stared directly at the young man and said, ‘I am going to kill you.’ The youth was then taken away.

“After six months had gone by the woman went to visit her son’s killer. He had been living on the streets before committing the crime, and she was the only visitor he’d had.

“For a time, they talked, and when she left she gave him some money for cigarettes. Then she started step-by-step to visit him more regularly, bringing food and small gifts. Near the end of his three-year sentence, she asked him what he would be doing when he got out.

“He was confused and uncertain, so she offered to set him up with a job at a friend’s company. “Then she inquired about where he would live, and since he had no family to return to, she offered him temporary use of the spare room in her home.

“For eight months he lived there, ate her food and worked at the job. Then one evening she called him into the living room to talk. She sat down opposite him and waited. Then she said:

“‘Do you remember in the courtroom when I said I was going to kill you?’

“‘I sure do,’ he replied.

“‘Well, I did,’ she went on. ‘I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth. I wanted him to die. That’s why I started to visit you and bring you things. That’s why I got you the job and let you live here in my house. That’s how I set about changing you. And that old boy, he’s gone.

“‘So now I want to ask you: since my son is gone, and that killer is gone, if you’ll stay here.’”

Kornfield concludes: “That any heart could open that widely and in that way... and through such tragedy...is hard for me—and perhaps many of us—to imagine. It may seem indeed ‘beyond us’ ... And yet, as the wisdom teachers tell us, that mother is also ‘of us.’ She, too, is one of our ‘true names.’”

Compassion is not a pleasant sensation that originates and remains with the person doing the feeling. It’s an active and intimate connecting with others: a sharing of mutual vulnerability.

Only by letting Life in—including the aspects of life that are difficult or strange—can we gain access to the deep Self that transcends our individuality.

In the language of spiritual wisdom, the “heart” is more than a part of the body: it connects us with the entire body of life.