

A Samurai warrior to Zen Buddhist master:

Tell me the nature of heaven and hell."

"Why should I tell a miserable, puny, worthless creature like you anything at all?" Warrior raises sword to strike the master teacher down.

"That is hell," the teacher said.

Because the Samurai warrior was soul-ripened he realizes that he has made his own hell in an instant. He sheaths his sword and bows with tears of repentance.

"That is heaven," says the teacher.

How do we create our own heaven and hell? Listening and compassion may have a lot to do with whichever place we find ourselves at any given moment.

Can you have compassion for yourself? Or genuinely only for another? What IS compassion? How is it different from love? How are listening and compassion related?

I have 20 sick (may be heard as 26) sheep. One dies. How many do I have left? *[get different answers and point out possible ways of hearing]*

We mishear people a lot. We misunderstand their intentions even when we do hear their words. Or we mean different things by the same words. And this all goes on without our awareness that we are missing meanings left and right – but dealing with the consequences of mishearing and misunderstanding one another.

The capacity to listen begins with noticing how much we do not listen. What would it be to take on being curious about our capacity to listen deeply? How often, without realizing it, do we totally miss what is *behind* what others say? Behind their mannerisms and gestures and tone of voice. We don't wonder: what is really going on over there?

Compassion is feeling for another in their discomfort or pain and acting to alleviate it. It is different from loving kindness which is wishing someone well, wishing them happiness but without intervention or contribution.

I had a graced moment of mutual alleviation of loneliness a few months ago at the airport. It was a compassion exchange between equals. We were waiting at the gate to get on the plane. On my right were a 40'ish white woman and an elderly Black couple. A wheelchair was brought for the gentleman. Some trouble in getting it to work and the young woman stepped up to help. He was clearly upset and embarrassed by her help. I had a rare moment of total clarity saw everything: his embarrassment and her caring. I was looking at him and he saw me and just glared back. I held his gaze gently and after a few moments – who knows how long? – I nodded without taking my eyes off him. He relaxed and smile a small bittersweet smile and looked away. We had a graced moment between two equals.

Now this was not difficult. There was an energy, an aliveness, an edginess, yes. But I did not need a few days to recover from compassion fatigue after that! It was nourishing to my spirit to have connected with this man.

What blocks our naturally compassionate hearts? We tend to get locked in our thoughts, opinions and points of view. We weave our thoughts together into a solid reality -- all our judgments, opinions and prejudices -- until we have made a big deal tapestry out of all of it. And it is real and we are right.

Compassion entails facing and coming to be at ease with the parts of ourselves we have ignored or rejected: our limitations, our mean thoughts, our determination to figure everything and everyone out once and for all.

Here's a parable: a woman is sitting in a boat in a river at dusk. She smiles as she sees a boat in the distance thinking of someone else enjoying the evening. The other boat begins to come closer to her. It is heading right for her. She waves her hands and says, "Watch out. Turn aside!" The boat continues gaining speed with the waves and she stands and shakes her fist, "You fool, turn aside now or we will crash!" The boat slams right into her and she sees that the boat is empty....

We are often crashing into empty boats, screaming and shaking our fists, certain that what we think we see is there. Certain that we heard what was really said.

That person is a grouch, we decide, until we find out he is in constant pain.

That person is selfish and thinks only of herself -- and we have evidence! - until we find out she has a sick daughter in another country and a possible lawsuit.

He is always in another world, we decide, until we find out he is scared of people and doesn't know what to say to anyone and this is his way of dealing with that fear.

It may assist us in developing a compassionate heart by realizing that we do strange things when we are in pain or are afraid. We are lonely and we say mean words; we want someone to love us and so we insult them.

We rarely take a moment as we are forming our opinions to pause and wonder: is it possible I didn't get the whole picture?

God's realm, we could say, is the space of all points of view at one eternal moment. The WHOOOLLEEE picture, all at once. Our human realm is the space of partial, uncertain, ambiguous and not being in control of a lot. I lead a weekly bereavement support group and one of the hardest facts to confront is our inability to keep someone we love alive.

We cannot have compassion for anyone, by the way, if we are retaining the right to resent the person or group. Holding resentment is locking ourselves into the past. Nailing one shoe to the floor and turning in circles. You can have compassion only in the present. You can listen only in the present.

Pema Chodron: "the present moment is a pretty vulnerable place and...this can be completely unnerving and completely tender at the same time."

Jesus was all about identifying secret suffering and pointing out the path to ending it. Teaching people how could take charge of their lives and end their own needless suffering and that of each other.

Breakfast on the Beach with Jesus. What a lovely moment! What could be more beautiful or desirable? It is also the scene of a challenging mission for Simon Peter. He is to go forth and generate compassion in himself for other people, nourish others, proactively enter the lives of others who do not have enough (food, clothing, shelter, engaging work, companionship, meaningful & nourishing conversation, love, friendship, creative outlets.) Then he is to train others to train others and so on and so forth, like ripples on a lake, compassion leading to more compassion.

Between September 18 and November 20, 2011, Pastor Diane did a 12-part sermon series on the *Charter for Compassion* promulgated by former nun and dynamic theologian, Karen Armstrong. Diane wrote: "Our idea of community has become increasingly individualized. Our tendency for self-focus continues to be fed by an international sense of entitlement. While technology has broadened our exposure to cultures and ideas far beyond our borders, our brains and hearts have not embraced those who are different as brothers and sisters."

In another sermon, she wrote: "Compassion, according to Karen Armstrong, requires us all day and every day to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there.... This may seem like a contradiction – dethrone yourself and love yourself. But this is exactly what we want to do. We want to become comfortable with who we are so that we might feel free to offer ourselves to others."

This church has signed on to the Charter for Compassion. Pastor Diane and Fr. John Carter in the Episcopal Church and I have been talking at different times and places, independently, about the Charter for Compassion. Pastor Diane and I are in total alignment in generating in Salisbury/Lakeville a series of conversations or inquiries, into compassion. There is no plan beyond that. We do not have a blueprint but there is a vision brewing amongst a growing number of people:

What impact could it have if Salisbury declared itself a Town of Compassion? Danbury has done this. West Conn University's Board of Governors has declared it to be a University of Compassion. What if that momentum slowly built and more towns in Connecticut took a stand to be Cities and Towns of Compassion. Then, what if Connecticut became a state of compassion? What impact would that have on the world? On the possibility of peace where there is no peace?

Everyone knows they have something inside themselves they want to express and that they are not doing it. What would you love to contribute to such an initiative?

So...listening and compassion. What to do now? Some practices.

First, about forgiveness. We can begin today to practice forgiving ourselves and coming to be at peace with aspects of ourselves that we have rejected. We can use the words, "I am willing to forgive myself," several times a day, *especially* when we hear the critic in our head.

About listening. We can interrupt our automatic ways of (*not*) being with others by cultivating curiosity and wonder: "I wonder what she meant by that? I wonder what he cares about? What else would they like to say?"

About compassion, begin by locating the tenderness you already have, without any effort. Tenderness for a child, an animal, a garden, a friend, a special tree. Fan the flames of that natural sweetness within you.

I close with the first part of a longer poem by John Fox called,

Finding What You Didn't Lose

*When someone deeply listens to you
it is like holding out a dented cup
you've had since childhood
and watching it fill up with
cold, fresh water.
When it balances on top of the brim
you are understood.
When it overflows and touches your skin, you are loved.
When someone deeply listens to you,
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote
your first poem begins to glow in your mind's eye.*

AMEN