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GOD'S COMPASSIONATE HEART

The Source of Compassionate Accompaniment

SUMMARY – What is the source of a spiritual director's compassionate accompaniment of directees? Although the learned skills of basic and advanced empathy will help many directors accompany their directees, contemplative practice suggests that directors actually mediate God's compassionate heart, the deepest source of compassionate accompaniment of another in this ministry. Julian of Norwich's mystical teaching on God's mercy and her description of her own mystical transformation as a result of her visions offer guidance about the process of contemplative transformation that contemporary spiritual directors might fruitfully undergo so that they, too, express God's compassionate heart. One major obstacle to such transformation and the accompaniment rooted in it is our contemporary compulsion of busyness.

Introduction

As we contemplate how we as spiritual directors discover that God is the source of our compassionate accompaniment of our directees rather than simply the learned skills of basic and advanced empathy, a visual image of God's compassion encompassing our world may help. Artist, and Sister of Mercy, Celeste Marie Nuttman, created this dynamic image of God's heart of compassion, throbbing at the center of this mandala. It may be a little difficult to see the embossed white center that is a flaming divine heart that encompasses within it the continents of our earth. This love energy undulates outward in multi-hued, wavy lines flowing out enlivened and enflamed with God's compassionate love to the world yet also always returning to the heart's center – God's heart. This is the one movement of God's being and love in us and in the world. This is an image of a God-sourced compassion in which we as spiritual directors participate.

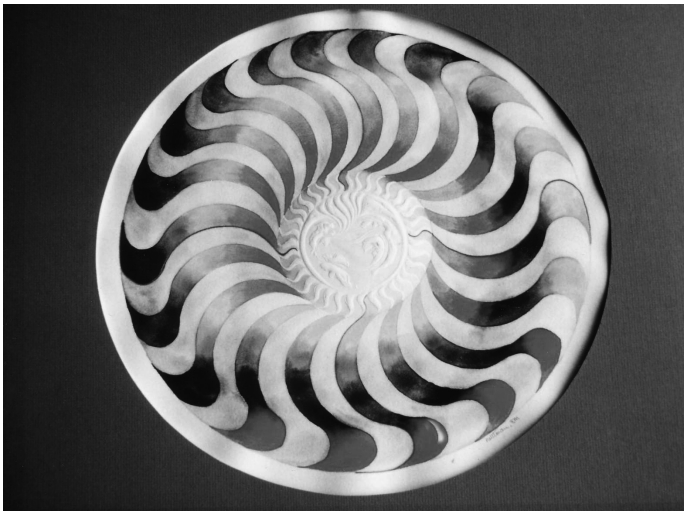

Figure 1: Centered in God[1]

Julian's Trinitarian Images of God's Mercy

As spiritual directors, our prayerful centeredness in God leads us to experience and contemplate the pain of our world. Our directees bring their suffering, their hopelessness, their pain, and their inspirited resilience to us. At the same time, we know we all have our own accumulated suffering, hopelessness, and pain residing in ourselves. A merciful or compassionate response to our own pain and theirs leads us both to accompany our directees in their misery and to move outward to our world to alleviate the unjust causes of this suffering. Catherine McAuley confidently wrote about the reciprocal relationship in the lives of Sisters of Mercy between contemplation and action, between our centeredness in God and the spiritual and corporal works of mercy as constituting 'the very business of our lives'.[2] She was convinced that God empowers the particular grace of embodying God's compassion and that we are made holy through integrally living the fullness of this charism of mercy. Through being centered in God, God makes our works of mercy fruitful not only for those we serve, those with whom we stand in solidarity and those from whom we learn mercy, but for ourselves as well. I believe this dynamic is true beyond Sisters of Mercy for whom Catherine articulated this mystery. God draws us ever closer to God's own heart, making our hearts one

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1 C. Nuttman, cnuttman@sbcglobal.net

2 I. Neumann, *Letters of Catherine McAuley 1827-1841*, Baltimore: Helicon, 1969, 390.

with God's. Plunged into the world's suffering, we rely on God's abundant and continual flow of mercy to us and through us.

We live in dark times of fear and violence, unpredictability, and growing scarcity of the material basis for human life – clean water and sufficient food. As Americans, we live in one of the wealthiest and perhaps most self-centered countries in the world community. We live with the constant dissonance of benefiting from our collective national wealth and opportunity at the expense of poor people and poor nations everywhere, and the poor earth itself. To sustain such cognitive and affective dissonance without losing heart, we might well draw hope and courage from the theology of Julian of Norwich who also lived in a dark time, a time perhaps darker than our own since people in her times also feared an angry, punitive God and doubted the mercy and compassion of God.

Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* begins with an account of her interior spiritual starting point when she prayed for three graces: (1) The first was an experience of Jesus' passion because she wanted to be counted among the 'lovers of God' who stood at the foot of the cross; (2) The second was a physical illness that would take her to the brink of death; (3) And she described the third as 'three wounds'. These wounds are: the wound of contrition, the wound of loving compassion, and the wound of loving desire for God. We would most likely speak of these latter three 'wounds' as 'graces' or gifts.

For Julian these three graces mark the spiritual journey of the monastic path as described by Gregory the Great: this journey begins with monastic conversion and compunction, for which she uses the shorthand of contrition. An experience of sorrow for sin initiates the spiritual journey for some leading them to monastic life. The second – loving compassion – is the fruit of this conversion and brings the person into a relationship of compassion with the Christ who suffered for us and of compassion with those who suffer – the body of Christ today in the church. And the third – longing for God – is the interior dynamic that propels growth into the fullness of mystical union with God. Thus, Julian boldly asks for the fruition of her own mystical quest through the life-changing experiences for which she prays. She clearly asks for a 'bodily sight', a fully sensory, interior, visionary experience of the suffering Christ to confirm her place among 'the lovers of God'.[3]

In response to these desires, God responded to her in fourteen showings or imaginative visions which she experienced during a physical illness that brought her to the brink of death. It is sometimes dangerous to pray for what we want! We might receive it, and it might dismay us. Julian's conclusion at the end of this series of intense mystical experiences was that God is love and endless compassion.

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[3] E. Colledge & J. Walsh, *Julian of Norwich's Showings*, New York: Paulist, 1978, 125-127.

Contemplative Process Cultivates Compassion

Contemplative prayer is one way of actively cultivating compassion. In such prayer, we seek the experience of God's or Christ's compassion, and as Julian boldly did, desire and undergo the transformative process that heals our own wounds and sinfulness and breaks our hearts open with God's compassion within this dynamic of deepening union with God. We gradually participate in God's passion ever more deeply. Julian was utterly transformed by her contemplative experience of Divine revelation and responded with all her heart.

This was the ground of her call to spiritual direction. From the window of her anchorhold which faced the street she served her town as a spiritual director. Those who consulted her sought and appreciated the wisdom and compassion she offered them. And she wrote her precious text because she recognized that God wanted her to share and promote a dramatic change in the theology and image of God prevalent in her day. She became convinced that God is endless compassion and that Christ, through his incarnation, enters the human condition so deeply that we are all meant to participate in the compassion and bliss of God. It took Julian fifteen years and a new mystical 'understanding' that came to her then before she fully understood the mercy of God that she portrayed in the long text, an expanded version of what is commonly known as the short text. She communicates this subsequent understanding of God's compassion in the 'Parable of the Lord and Servant'.[4]

Julian's interior process alone is instructive for us. We often receive in prayer, images and sensations that are clearly God-given, the result of God's communicating God's self to us and that draw us into deeper relationship with God. Yet, we are not as spiritual directors or directees always able to interpret these communications adequately when they occur. Such 'revelations' or imaginative visions may be future oriented, indicating a development that is just beginning. We recognize God is doing something within us, but exactly what requires us to grow into it. Often looking back, we gain fresh insight. Or when we recall a series of graced images, they become increasingly transparent and meaningful to us because we have grown into a new capacity to understand them. If the compassion we wish to cultivate is participation in and an extension of God's compassion, we cultivate it by praying for it and patiently allowing God to transform our hearts and minds. In this contemplative process, compassion grows in us as we grow in God. This is as true for our directees as it is for us. Cultivating compassion requires our fidelity to a deep, contemplative, transformative process.

Julian's teaching on mercy and compassion is both Trinitarian and Christocentric. Her visions portray Christ within the Trinity as our Mother, who through

[4] Ibid., 267-278.

his incarnation, continuously offers motherly tenderness and compassion to fallen humanity. This is one of her main themes. She identifies God's tenderness and compassion as particularly the work of 'mother' Jesus. In her 'Parable of the Lord and Servant' she portrays God the Father as suffering with suffering humanity and the second servant (the Christ) as laboring to restore Adam.

Let's turn to Julian's own words:

> I saw two persons in bodily likeness that is to say a lord and a servant; and with that God gave me spiritual understanding. The lord sits in state, in rest and in peace. The servant stands before his lord, respectfully, ready to do his lord's will. The lord looks on his servant very lovingly and sweetly and mildly. He sends him to a certain place to do his will. Not only does the servant go, but he dashes off and runs at great speed, loving to do his lord's will. And soon he falls into a dell and is greatly injured; and then he groans and moans and tosses about and writhes, but he cannot rise or help himself in any way. And of all this, the greatest hurt which I saw in him was lack of consolation, for he could not turn his face to look on his loving lord, who was very close to him, in whom is all consolation; but like a man who was for the time extremely feeble and foolish, he paid heed to his feelings and his continuing distress, in which distress he suffered seven great pains.[5]

These pains are enumerated, and Julian emphasizes the aloneness of the servant. Julian then received a spiritual understanding that guided her interpretation of this parable. First she took the servant to represent humanity, and secondly, she took the servant to represent Christ. Thus, the servant is both Jesus and humanity.

The servant, in this parable of sin and redemption, in his impulsive anxiety to carry out his orders, falls into a ditch in such a way that he cannot see or feel God's all pervading love. This image portrays the situation of humanity that calls forth God's mercy. In this parable, sin is not willful disobedience but a form of blindness, an inability to recognize God's continuing love for humanity. The Lord, who now represents God, expresses his compassion by sending the compassionate Jesus to tend the servant in the ditch and restore the servant to the felt awareness of God's love and care for him. Julian portrays God rewarding the fallen servant for his fear, his hurts, his injuries, and all his woe. Julian understands that God's goodness and nobility requires 'that his beloved servant, whom he loved so much, should be highly blessed and rewarded forever, above what he would have been if he had not fallen, and (…) that the woe he received from [his fall] will be turned into high, surpassing honor and endless bliss'.[6]

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[5] Ibid., 267-268.
[6] Ibid., 269.

In her teaching, Julian is most concerned with combating the bleak despair of those who doubt God's love for humanity or who feel abandoned by God's love in their suffering. The first working of God's mercy for Julian brings good out of evil and suffering by placing it in the presence of God's love. Julian suggests that the experience of sinfulness (unwilled sin) leads to an experience of grace. She understands that human life is a mixture of weal and woe – well-being and suffering. Suffering is not the consequence of God's anger because her revelation confirmed for her that God is peace and rest and not anger. In the imagery of her revelations, both the rising of Christ and the falling of Adam are part of our human experience. In Christ, we are constantly protected, and by grace raised to true salvation. Although we experience darkness and blindness, 'we wait for God, and trust faithfully to have mercy and grace'.[7] Our experience of personal sin and sinfulness leads to self-knowledge and reliance on God's mercy and compassion.[8] It does not lead us to despair or to fear of God's anger.

Julian warns against viewing the actual sins of others judgmentally because that focus on what's wrong creates 'a thick mist before the soul's eye, and during that time we cannot see the beauty of God, unless we can contemplate [another's sins] with (…) compassion on him and with holy desires to God for him'.[9] In this passage, Julian conveys to us the way God views our sinfulness. God looks on us with compassion and longs for a loving relationship with the sinful person.

I am suggesting here that this warning might be an antidote for the desolation that accompanies our awareness of human evil actions as well as of social sin. Even as we are drawn to repair evil done to others, we are also called to cast the mantle of mercy over the perpetrators of evil. Just as God compels us work for justice in frequently overwhelming circumstances, so, too, God calls us to mediate God's compassion to the world. We then fix our gaze on God's merciful heart and God's desire to bring all involved into the Trinitarian embrace of love. When we see so clearly what is wrong, we need to bring this compassionate awareness to God. Rather than harshly judging the situation or persons in it, we might more fruitfully pray for God's response to this situation and the persons involved even as we open our own hearts to this same compassion.

In this privileged ministry of spiritual direction, we accompany our suffering and burdened directees, guided by the wisdom of our lived experience of God's compassion meeting us within our own version of confronting personal and

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7 Ibid., 279.

8 J. Nuth, *Wisdom's daughter: The theology of Julian of Norwich*, New York: Crossroad, 1991, Ch. 6.

9 Colledge & Walsh, *Julian of Norwich's Showings*, 328.

social sin and evil. I think of spiritual directors who offer spiritual direction to the incarcerated. They minister both to those who ought to be there in order to protect society rightly from their aggression as well as to those who might be serving sentences quite disproportionate to their crimes or to those who might have been wrongly convicted. Their very presence in the prison brings the balm of compassion with them. What sustains a redemptive, reparative vision in us that all things are possible for God? The conviction that the nature of God is compassion and not vindictive punishment. God seeks to restore and repair the world. And when we are disheartened and diminished, and our hope languishes, we so often experience courage and openness of heart in our directees who have found a way to cast themselves into the arms of God despite their particular suffering. God touches, consoles, and expands our own hearts so often through our directees' courage in suffering.

The second work of mercy in Julian's vision is the full-flowering of the divine image in the human person. Christ indwells the human person, increasing and restoring the divine likeness in us. Just as we were created in the image of the Trinity, so our second making restores and increases our likeness to God. Julian says, 'We are enclosed in Him, and he is enclosed in us…for it is his delight to reign blessedly in our understanding, and sit restfully in our soul, and to dwell endlessly in our soul, working us all into him'.[10] As Joan Nuth has described:

> This being centered in God and Christ dwelling within our center brings about the renewed, redeemed, new humanity of the church and world communities. This occurs through the action of God's spirit who increases our love and desire for God, who restores and increases wisdom in us, who strengthens us, and who releases love and compassion for others in us. This hope-filled theology of redemption is meant to comfort everyone. It is meant to strengthen us in hope. Julian first experiences Christ's compassion for humanity as a response to human sin, then she felt compassion for Christ in his passion, and finally she realized how much God's compassion is meant for everyone. She comes to the conviction that all compassion felt for one's neighbor is Christ's compassion in us.[11]

Consequently, if all compassion felt for one's neighbor participates in God's compassion, we see more clearly what cultivating compassion based on this text from Julian looks like. The only mercy we have to offer to the world is the mercy we have received from God. Just as Jesus is our mother in mercy, so too we become mothers in mercy to the world as we allow God's compassion to flow through us.

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[10] Ibid., 292.

[11] Nuth, *Wisdom's daughter*, 136-147 (summarized by the author).

The middle English words Julian uses to convey this overflowing working of mercy in the Trinity are: *compassion*, *ruth*, *pity*, *mercy*, *joy*, and *bliss*. Julian's middle-English drew on Anglo-Saxon word roots, French influences, and the Latin translation of the Scriptures as well as other spiritual texts in Latin. According to the Australian theologian Kerrie Hide, Julian's vocabulary for compassion and mercy

> reaffirms the comforting presence of God as human beings labor through life. The semantics and etymology of compassion lead back to the Hebrew *rahamim* (trembling womb), the Greek *oiktirmos* (the feeling of compassion) and *splanchna* (the bowels or seat of the emotions), and the Latin *compassio* (suffering with, feeling sympathy and agreement). In Middle English compassion (*ruth*) conveys a sharing of suffering with another, sympathy and a feeling of sorrow for another's troubles, and involvement in an affliction as in 1Cor. 12:26, 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it'. Like compassion, pity expresses the tenderness or concern aroused by the misfortune of others. Mercy and pity denote the forbearance and tolerance shown to powerless people who expect a severe response. Julian defines mercy as a 'compassionate property, which belongs to motherhood in tender love. (…) Mercy works, protecting, enduring, vivifying, and healing, and it is all of the tenderness of love' (14:48. 262). Ruth, pity, and mercy all imply elements of tenderness, graciousness, pathos, steadfastness, and faithful love. They communicate the love metaphorically felt in the womb or the belly of God that becomes tangible in acts of grace that comfort us in the midst of pain.[12]

We tend to interpret pity as a stance that distances one from another, yet pity is the usual translation for the Greek word, *eleison*, as in *Kyrie, eleison*. In the Greek NT, frequently those seeking a cure, usually the unclean or the outcast, use this word when addressing Jesus. They are the powerless and do not know what to expect. Asking for pity corresponds to the social distinctions created by poverty and powerlessness when one approaches a healer or benefactor for help. Jesus' response, however, is usually described as *splachna*. He is deeply moved from his belly/womb in response to this suffering. Theologically, the depth and visceral quality of his response exemplifies God's response to the poor and oppressed, a deep felt compassion. Yet a response of pity is not entirely misguided. The earlier etymology suggests a tenderness of response, the feelings aroused by the misfortune of another. In Julian's theology, these feelings are the feelings of mothers in response to the suffering of their children. Medieval mothers often watched on unable to do much without antibiotics or other effective remedies for illness. Their tenderness is aroused as they try to relieve

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[12] K. Hide, *Gifted origins to graced fulfillment: The soteriology of Julian of Norwich*, Collegeville: Grazer, 2001, 120-121.

their child's suffering, and they suffer with their child who is suffering, just as mother Jesus does. Kerrie Hide asserts:

> The greatest act of compassion, the sending of the Son, brings joy and bliss to the Father. (…) Joy manifests a harmony that transpires through struggling with the ambiguity of existence and knowing the presence of divine love that transcends all reality. Joy embodies: darkness and light, tragedy and transformation, death and glory. It expresses hope for eternity in God. Thus the joy and bliss the Father radiates come from the knowledge that divine love is present to humanity, transforming, suffering and drawing it into eternal bliss that exceeds all that has been lost through the Fall.[13] Mercy is the active quality of love. It expresses the tender love of the divine motherhood [of Jesus]. The work of mercy is protecting, enduring, vivifying, and healing. (…) Mercy is perpetually embedded in love; its source is love and its work is to keep us in love. Ultimately mercy is 'all love in love'. In mercy Christ restores us through his Passion, death, and resurrection and ones our sensual nature to our substance.[14]

Julian's robust theology of God's mercy and loving kindness leads her to really believe in the face of the intense suffering she saw all around her in her dark times, 'that all shall be well and all things shall be well.; for the fullness of joy is to contemplate God in everything',[15] even now.

Something fresh happens in me when I contemplate mercy, pity, and compassion together with joy and bliss. We don't usually hold them together, do we? I find it a helpful reminder to realize that joy can be experienced in suffering, pain, and vulnerability. Joy is a sign of our living in God's presence. And bliss? Might it not energize us with hope to grasp that this God who loves us so often in and through others, wants only our bliss – our blessing and our happiness and is actively working to bring us toward that fulfillment of the one love of which mercy partakes. I believe the dark times in which we are called to be mercy in the world and to one another can be enlivened and strengthened by this joy and bliss. Is it not our joy to be gifted with merciful hearts in our ministry of spiritual direction? Is it not our bliss to live such compassion deeply and to cultivate it ceaselessly?

Resisting Busyness

I would like to offer one more theme that may help us in our desire to cultivate compassion in our time, that is: resisting the violence of our busyness. Western

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[13] Ibid., 121.
[14] Ibid., 141.
[15] Colledge & Walsh, *Julian of Norwich's Showings*, 237.

culture places us in situations in which there is always too much to do. The needs of our world are overwhelming and our work is endlessly time-consuming. I would, however, like to suggest that we take seriously this wisdom from Taoism that supports us in cultivating compassion through resisting the busyness that can obstruct or block God's compassion from flowing through us to our directees and out into our world. A Taiwanese graduate student drew for me not one but two characters for busyness in Chinese when I asked her to share this with me. Yi-Fen told me that the word 'busy' is composed of two figures the one for heart and the one for death.

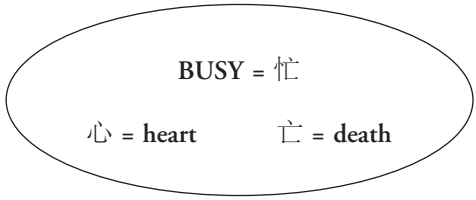

Figure 2: Chinese Characters for Busy

She says, being too busy results in the death of one's heart because busy people may be too harried to have a peaceful and life-giving heart'. If our busyness kills our hearts, then resisting an interior attitude of busyness by countering it with 'contemplative spaciousness,' to use Gerald May's language, is another way to cultivate compassion.[16]

Yi-Fen's second rendering of busyness in Chinese characters implies a second reason to resist our perpetual sense of busyness. This one combines the characters for heart and death with the character for forgetfulness.

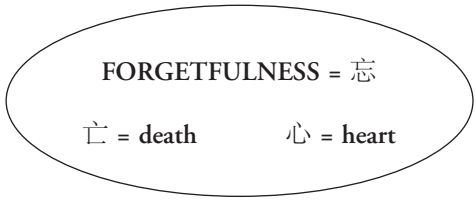

Figure 3: Chinese Characters for Forgetfulness

You can see that the characters comprising this word are aligned slightly differently. Yi-Fen said, 'When people are not attentive, they are apt to forget. Forgetfulness is also a kind of death of heart'.

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[16] G. May, *The awakened heart: Opening to the love of God*, New York: Harper, 1999, 93-100.

Conclusion

We might conclude that as we contemplate through Julian's teaching how our compassion as spiritual directors is deeply rooted in divine compassion, and consequently a fruit of our contemplative prayer, we also recognize that we actively need to resist the busyness of Western culture which can and does impair our compassion. There is no doubt that cultivating compassion leads us right into the depths of suffering in us, our directees, and our world. But God's nature is not only compassion, rahamim, mercy, and hesed, God is also bliss and blessing. From the biblical tradition and from Julian, we can expect bliss and blessing when we trust that God is endless compassion and love.