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‘THEY SAY THAT WE ARE WOUND WITH
MERCY ROUND AND ROUND’

The Mystical Ground of Compassion*

SUMMARY – In the context of spiritual direction, spiritual directors can more effectively promote healing and reconciliation in their directees when they themselves are able to mediate God’s compassion to them. In both the Jewish and Christian tradition, God reveals Godself as characterized by compassion. Participating in God’s compassion is transformative and healing for directees whose directors experience themselves as participating in God’s compassion and who can encourage them to welcome the grace to heal and forgive from the same place of compassion. These dynamics are illustrated by a case study.

INTRODUCTION

Those who serve in the ministry of spiritual direction are in a privileged place to experience and mediate God’s compassion to their directees. They participate in God’s compassion, the mystical ground of compassion as well as express their personal empathy and concern for a suffering or wounded directee. The director’s sensitivity to this phenomenon within them may enable them to help their directees experience God’s compassion within their own mystical experience, and so experience deep healing of their wounds.

In a story from Babylonian Talmud, the saintly Rabbi Joshua ben Levi questions the prophet Elijah on how to find the messiah when he arrives. ‘Where’, Rabbi Joshua asked, ‘shall I find the Messiah?’ ‘At the gate of the city’, Elijah replied. ‘How shall I recognize him?’ ‘He sits among the lepers’. ‘Among the lepers!’ cried Rabbi Joshua: ‘What is he doing there?’ ‘He changes their bandages’, Elijah answered. ‘He changes them one by one’.¹

* This essay was originally given as the third keynote address at the Spiritual Directors International Conference: Cultivating Compassion, Atlanta, GA, May 1, 2011, and presented subsequently at three additional local in-service workshops for spiritual directors in the Midwest and on the East Coast.

¹ Cited by James Michael Lee, ‘Compassion in religious instruction’, in: Gary L. Sapp (Ed.), *Compassionate ministry*, Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1993, 215-216.

This intuition about the importance of compassion to human flourishing and to right relationship with one another and with God is omnipresent in religious texts. This story about how Jews in exile might recognize the Messiah, poignantly portrays the hidden and concrete signs of a compassionate God. The messiah God sends sits among the lepers, changing their bandages, one by one. Such tenderness and such hiddenness at once! God, who is truly the compassionate one, continuously reveals that compassion is the primary and universal divine attribute. Wherever people experience or witness compassion they discover God or God's messenger in their midst.

A prayer from the Jewish Siddur calls on God as the Merciful One. This prayer points to the interrelatedness of God as the Merciful One and the link between compassion and justice – a compassion and a justice that is manifested in the world often through persons.

The Merciful One will rule over us forever. May the Merciful One be blessed in heaven and on earth! May the Merciful One be praised from generation to generation, and may the Merciful One be glorified through us forever and ever. May the Merciful One be honored through us eternally! May the Merciful One grant us an honorable livelihood. May the Merciful One break the yoke from our neck and lead us upright to our land. May the Merciful One send a plentiful blessing on this house and on this table at which we have eaten! May the Merciful One send us Elijah the prophet – who is remembered for good – who will bring us good tidings of salvation and comfort.²

God, the Compassionate and Merciful One, is worthy of praise and worship – worthy of reverence and the willingness to be governed and led, worthy to be served through work and ministry. But the Compassionate God is not merely the object of reverence; the Compassionate God cares about the conditions of human lives. Work must be honorable, and those who pray this prayer long for liberation and justice, a plenitude of blessing, and the good news of salvation and comfort for themselves and others.

MEISTER ECKHART'S TEACHING ON COMPASSION

Within the Christian mystical tradition, Meister Eckhart, wrote several sermons on compassion, making a number of stunning assertions. In his sermon on Luke 6:35-42, 'Be compassionate as your heavenly Parent is compassionate...', he makes four main points:

² Nosson Scherman, *The complete artscroll siddur* (ed. Meir Zlotowitz), London: Mesorah, 1985, 71.

1. Compassion triumphs over enemies and is shown in two ways: in giving and in forgiving.
2. Compassion divinizes persons because ‘Every work which God works in a creature, compassion goes with it and ahead of it, especially in the inwardness of the creature’. (He develops this theme further: ‘For every work in a creature supposes the work of compassion and is grounded in it as in its root, the power of which preserves all things and works powerfully in them’.³)
3. Compassion directs a person to relationships with others yielding justice, giving each one his or her due.
4. Compassion wins heavenly blessings and brings persons to final salvation or beatitude.

Because Eckhart developed these four aspects of a mystically grounded compassion in God from this Gospel text, it is important to read the fuller text because his themes follow so closely upon it.

But I say this to you who are listening: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly (...) Instead, love your enemies and do good and lend without any hope of return. You will have a great reward, and you will be sons and daughters of the Most High, for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be compassionate as your Parent is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Grant pardon and you will be pardoned. Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap; because the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back. (Lk 6:35-42)

In order to enact or embody this teaching of Jesus in Luke’s gospel as illumined through Eckhart, several things are necessary. To be compassionate is to participate in God’s divinity. If compassion lies at the heart of the created universe, then this divine compassion already exists deep within humanity. When people generously give and forgive, they undo the harm their enemies have done to them and to the world. This giving and forgiving assumes people will have grievances and experience personal suffering. They have a choice. If they are hard-hearted, (not connected to this ocean of compassion that lies in their depths), they may strike back or they may withhold an aggressive response. They may fan the flames of revenge in the way they remember, refuse to forgive, and engage in various forms of violence.

³ ‘Sermon thirty’, in: *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart’s creation spirituality in new translation* (introd. & ed. Matthew Fox), Garden City, NY: Image, 1980, 420.

These descriptions are a bit tricky and very challenging. When people have been deeply wounded or witnessed the wounding of another, they instinctively defend and protect themselves. They tend to lose the connection with Divinity within them at their very core, and find it hard to believe it even exists. Forgiveness and generosity arise when they discover God's compassion is the all encompassing ocean in which they live and move and have their being. They do not so much need to forgive but rather to allow God's forgiveness and mercy to flow through their open wounds to the aggressor. Giving and forgiving heal their own wounds. Giving and forgiving restore their own core self, heart to heart, womb to womb, soul to soul through participating in God's compassion.

Although it is helpful if compassion rises spontaneously from human hearts, compassion is also a deliberate choice and a reasoned decision. People can choose to feed their resentment and maintain their defenses or to flow back into that place where they and God are one. By so doing they release compassion for both themselves and the one who knowingly or unknowingly injured them or someone they love. If the pain is too much, it is important to remain open to the possibility of the mantle of mercy wrapping itself around them until their hearts open again.

In 'Sermon Thirty-One' Eckhart becomes rhapsodic in his description of the bliss and blessing of compassion, fully disclosing its mystical source. Quoting a master, he says, 'The highest work that God has ever worked in all creatures is compassion'.⁴ He personally adds:

The most secret and forbidden work that [God] ever worked on the angels was carrying them up into compassion; this is the work of compassion as it is in itself and as it is in God. Whatever God does, the first outburst is always compassion; and I do not mean that he forgives a person his sins or that a person takes compassion on another. The master means much more. He means that the highest work that God works is compassion.⁵

Citing another master, he says, 'The work of compassion is so close to God that although truth and riches and goodness name God, one of them names him better than the other'.⁶ Eckhart then stunningly says: 'The highest work of God is compassion and this means that God sets the soul in the highest and purest place which it can occupy: in space, in the sea, in a fathomless ocean; and there God works compassion'.⁷

In this sea of compassion, persons are returned to the maternal embrace of God. But as Matthew Fox so poignantly says of swimming in space and in a sea

⁴ Ibid., 'Sermon thirty-one', 441.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

of compassion, 'one consequence is the breakdown of all dualistic thinking. For we are not alone in this divine sea. All creatures have been born in the same holy fluid; we do not swim alone but in a common sea of oneness with others. This means that all beings are interdependent'.⁸ This milieu of a shared oneness in which nothing other or alien exists is the consciousness of compassion. And from it works of justice and mercy meet and embrace.

How might this work in spiritual direction? Turning to an actual incidence of spiritual direction, it is possible to note some general characteristics of the effect of a director's compassionate witnessing and deep understanding of the way God's compassion inhabits one's mystical core enables and supports the directee. This is followed by a case description from the directee's perspective.

EFFECTS OF A DIRECTOR'S COMPASSIONATE RESPONSE

Initially, the directee's experience of the director's compassionate response helped the directee realize the extent of wounding already experienced, and so honor her suffering even though she was convinced others had suffered more than she had. The second movement followed from this first realization. The directee's interior defenses required to survive unjust suffering at the hands of another began to dissolve in response to the director's compassionate response and because she no longer had to deal with the situation in which the wounding had occurred.

These dynamics are similar when the aggressor is in the grip of either a totalitarian mindset or is possessed by their own destructive personality dynamics. I refer here to a not uncommon experience today of profoundly narcissistic persons who rise to positions of authority and treat the least display of criticism or independence as intolerable. The presence of the perceived independence or non-conformity then requires the elimination of the offending person from the situation psychologically or physically. Directees working in such settings will struggle mightily to preserve their sense of self and respond in compassion.

In the midst of such a destructive, even psychologically annihilating situation, people necessarily need to marshal sufficient internal and external strength to preserve their sense of themselves. This effort is exhausting psychologically because they consistently confront either attack against themselves or against others about whom they care deeply but whom they are helpless to protect. People in such a situation constantly struggle with their anger and outrage at the dynamics of the situation as well as their own helplessness to change it. Fighting back is one option. But that tends to increase the aggression. At most,

⁸ Fox, *Breakthrough*, 446.

it may stop or limit the attack against oneself temporarily, but may result in intensifying attacks against anyone perceived to be a friend or ally in the situation or anyone else genuinely loved by the person who becomes the object of such treatment.

Choosing to respond non-violently is also exhausting because of the high degree of consciousness and self-monitoring required to forego retaliation and to cope with feeling weak or inadequate in protecting others. As one psychologist describes the situation, survival and self-preservation require living with an internal split between one's ordinary personality and how one is required to behave for the sake of survival.⁹

Full healing and reconciliation may only occur after a person has left this type of situation and has the psychological and spiritual space to heal without anxiety about further attack. If people in such situations espouse both non-violence and desire eventually to forgive the aggressor, the healing process will involve many steps before forgiveness of the aggressor is possible. It is important not to underestimate a person's desire to release the bonds that tie the victimized person to the aggressor. Neil Douglas Klotz' translation from the Syriac of the Our Father related to forgiveness is, 'loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt'.¹⁰ The image here, is that the aggrieved person who has not forgiven another, continues to hold the 'knotted cords' that bind him or her to the victimizer. Freedom and healing are only achieved when the victimized person stops holding onto the knots. How to forgive the injury without condoning the behavior? How to forgive the injury without clinging to the memory of what one has suffered? How to turn from the evil suffered? How to release a victimized person's disappointment about how they coped with the situation? How to release their internal judgments of complicity or cowardice for failure to succeed in changing the situation for others or for themselves?

These dynamics are even more difficult when people have witnessed another suffer physical or psychological abuse that was worse than what they suffered themselves. How does the witnesses' suffering differ from the victim's? And how does that complicate the victimization of the helpless witness?

Directors today are often working with directees who are trying to heal and recover from various levels of victimization or who may not recognize why they are stuck in a place of knotted unforgiveness. Such knots, of course, include the

⁹ Christopher Bollas, 'The Fascist mind' in: Idem, *Being a character: Psychoanalysis and self-experience*, New York: Hill-Wang, 1992, 193-217.

¹⁰ Neil Douglas Klotz, *The prayers of the cosmos*, San Francisco: Harper, 1990, 30. Pope Francis has brought new attention to Our Lady, Undoer of Knots, a German devotion he discovered when he was writing his dissertation. See Pope Francis' October 12, 2013, *Catechesis*, and Marge Fenelon's *Our Lady, undoer of knots: A living novena*, Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2015, for a similar sense of the need for help to untie the knots of sin or injuries that keep people bound.

victims of sex abuse with its own complicated dynamics. But they also include those who are victimized by various forms of discrimination on a daily basis, and by various forms of social stigmatization, social marginalization, character assassination, verbal and physical bullying, abuse of power, and those who are left unprotected. How does our compassionate God experientially come alive in the core of such directees? Even in these stuck and painful places, directors can trust in God’s compassion.

At the end of Thomas Merton’s book, *The Sign of Jonas*, a passage appears as an epilogue that arises from deep questioning at an existential level. In the face, of his disappointment in himself, in whatever forms of coping he had resorted to, he discovers the Mercy of God in his core.

I have prayed to You in the daytime with thoughts and reasons, and in the night-time You have confronted me, scattering thought and reason. I have come to You in the morning light and with desire, and You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence, in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire. I have explained to You a hundred times my motives. You have listened and said nothing, and I have turned away and wept with shame. Is it true that all my motives have meant nothing? Is it true that all my desires were illusion? While I am asking questions which You do not answer, You ask me a question which is so simple that I cannot answer. I do not even understand the question.¹¹

Eventually, Merton receives an answer to his questioning about himself, his failures, and his incomprehension. He says: ‘The Voice of God is heard in Paradise’:

What was vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile. I have always known the vile as precious: for what is vile I know not at all.

What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of me, Jonas, My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin.¹²

The ‘answer’ Merton receives from God is that he has already received ‘Mercy within mercy with mercy’. There is nothing that can separate him or anyone from this merciful embrace of God. But for those who have suffered deeply, it is God’s forgiveness of themselves and their aggressors, and it is God’s mercy that embraces both.

Although the process of recovery and deep healing is unique for each directee and many will benefit from or need professional therapy to progress from mute suffering, to expression, to healing, the focus of this reflection is on the spiritual

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *The sign of Jonas*, New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1953, 362.

¹² *Ibidem*.

process that accompanies and follows a gradual healing process. The following is a partial case study that demonstrates in concrete ways what such a process of healing might look like as it reaches deeply into both the director and directee's mystical core of compassion.

Case Study

Directors facilitate the directee's taking their own suffering seriously regardless of whether it was more or less than anyone else's suffering by receiving it and responding to it.

When a director, known to have accompanied many through the journey of recovery from abuse, registers shock at a description of subtle and persistent psychological suffering that lasted for many years, her directee began to acknowledge the depth of her own wounding although she minimized it. The director's affective resonance resisted the directee's discounting of her suffering and noted the directee's 'resonance with God' which had not been obscured in this case. In fact, this directee's suffering had compelled a certain sinking into God in her own depths in order to sustain herself. The director suggested that on her retreat she might have been passing through layers of fatigue that held the energy of despair that these events could not really be revisited. But in the revisiting, the directee found release in God by discovering how profoundly she was held in God's compassionate embrace.

The director supported her further in reflecting back to her the courage she exhibited in her willingness to probe this experience so deeply without protective blinders. The exploration included both the victimization in its particularity but also the way God was present and offering healing. She suggested to her directee that she was perhaps an innocent victim and advised her to be faithful to that innocence. At the same time, she noticed a movement, a willingness, in the directee to recognize the suffering of her aggressor and bear witness to his suffering. She described it as 'standing at the foot of his cross' as a compassionate witness.

The directors' tentative interpretation of the narrative of grace she was hearing from her directee, supported the directee's expression of both challenge and grace that was almost mute yet palpably felt by the director. This attribution of 'innocence' is not easily claimed since most people are only too aware of their own sinfulness and deficiencies. This interpretation opened a new experience for the directee as she assimilated it.

A further movement in the directee was helped by the director's experience with other directees who had been physically abused. From this experience, the director noted that the experience was different for the one abused and that it was yet another thing to witness the abuse of another. She felt the latter was

harder. The witness sees but is helpless, exposed to the effects yet can't fix it, but even so this situation can open a mystical relating within, accompanying, understanding, being willing to be there, even as others are undergoing their particular suffering.

She wondered if in the process of the retreat, her directee was penetrating into the loving experience of God as compassion. She noted the importance of needing to absorb and abide in this place of compassion that includes the aggressor, the witness, and the victims. Was this directee being drawn into a greater involvement with the energy of compassion as a power where one is no longer helpless, but being drawn into a depth of identity that includes God's compassion? Is this compassion that could not be expressed at the time effectively opening the door to a newer power, a deeper communion with a compassionate God that is now ripe and meant to have external fruit? The director's ability to connect her directee's experience on retreat with her prior frustration and pain to the very nature of the compassionate God and her directee's communion with God in this place of gradually transforming compassion supported her directee's healing within her mystical core. The director also pointed her to a graced future emerging from this experience. This was a movement of hope based on the experience of God the directee was having but could not yet express.

While there were many other movements in this directee's retreat, two are of particular significance in the context of this reflections on compassion. A portion of a poem from Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Mary Compared to the Air We Breathe', returned in memory to the directee.¹³ It included for this directee, a visual image of the 'Misericordia', a representation of Mary, with her cloak open and extended, embracing those seeking mercy under her mantle. The directee had a felt sense of being wound with mercy round and round, and she saw or felt Mary's mantle embracing the 'green' globe. First, the endangered and suffering earth appeared wrapped wound by mercy round and round under Mary's mantle. After that, she had spent some time absorbing portions of Miroslav Volf's reconciling suggestions in the *End of Memory*.¹⁴ She began to wrestle with the duty to 'remember rightly' and to be willing to forget.

Volf, who had been interrogated by the Croatian military and held in confinement for several months, found himself many years later unable to forgive injuries. He, nevertheless, advocates a willingness to 'forget injuries that wronged him'. As he put it, 'letting [the memories] recede', engaging in 'non-remembrance' as he phrased it in some kind of anticipatory forgiveness and reconciliation.

¹³ 'The Blessed Virgin compared to the air we breathe', in: W.H. Gardner (Ed.), *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (3rd ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, 1948, 99-103.

¹⁴ Miroslav Volf, *The end of memory: Remembering rightly in a violent world*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

The Hebrew Scriptures in Psalm 51 and elsewhere suggest that when God forgives, God forgets. Volf builds on this process and describes that letting memories recede is neither repression nor keeping the memories vivid, but anticipates the transformed life of the blessed, letting the memories of injuries wronging one go.¹⁵

After this reflective reading, the directee recognized that her slights and injuries experienced directly as well as witnessing the suffering of others were real and not something she had imagined or exaggerated. At the same time, the more deeply she moved into her experience of God and God's compassion dwelling within her, a spontaneous image emerged that confirmed that there was nothing more she was called to do in the outer world related to her own particular situation of suffering and that of others. As the image of the great *Misericordia* arose in her consciousness, she felt drawn to place her aggressor and all he had done over several years under the mantle of Mercy on one side. And she saw the great crowd of the injured, known and unknown as well as herself under Mary's Mantle of Mercy on the other side. She entrusted her aggressor to Mary's maternal encompassing Mercy – this man whom she felt had to have been injured somehow very deeply from some kind of maternal neglect or something else. She understood that by so doing, she could remember rightly. By placing her victimizer under Mary's mantle of mercy she could let go of him, wishing him eventual healing despite the harm she had witnessed and experienced. If the Mother of Mercy encompassed all who were under her mantle, as each needed it, she could free all of them for the graced life that awaited all in the future.

After this vision, the directee looked up the poem, and found the following lines:

I say that we are wound
 With mercy round and round
 As if with air. The same
 Is Mary, more by name.
 She, wild web, wondrous robe,
 Mantles the guilty globe.

The previous day, the directee had seen Mary mantle the planet earth in its ecological devastation, this day, she saw her mantling the unresolved wounding of others in which all participate on a global scale – the guilty globe.

What is the lesson from this partial example of a process that included many more steps than can be described here? The case may illustrate what it means to

¹⁵ Volf, *The end of memory*, 145-151. This remembering rightly presupposes a gift of Divine Love that focuses the person toward Christ, God, Love. It is this experience that allows memories to recede because they are altered by this new experience.

be caught up in what Judy Cannato describes as the energy *Field of Compassion*.¹⁶ This director was particularly attuned to this kind of energetic resonance that often guided her responses to her directee. She sensed and felt the energy field of compassion emerging in the directee's experience even before her directee could speak about it. She tentatively described it to her directee. In her experience with other directees, this director had discovered that many were unable to heal from various forms of abuse until they discovered their own mystical core and began to live out of that. Once this happened, healing progressed more rapidly. The director also observed that her directee's energy field was so different from that of her victimizer that he might have perhaps been fearful of it, and so put himself outside of it.

This directee had not been separated from her mystical core and God's compassionate resonance which was expressing itself in a very active feminine form. The director simultaneously noticed this emergent field of Divine compassion as the directee brought both mystical consciousness and critical thought to her situation. Her directee wanted to release these knotted cords binding her, but had to resolve what if anything she could do in relationship to addressing the on-going injustices others suffered, and learn how to be willing to let the memories recede as she met God coming toward her from the future. Both the director's compassionate and frank 'horror' at what she heard and her cognitive frame for mystical healing were very helpful to her directee.

A final coda to this particular retreat experience as well as to many other situations that may be helpful to spiritual directors, is the teaching of John of the Cross in 'Living Flame of Love'. In stanza 2, the Poet says:

O sweet cautery,
 O delightful wound!
 O gentle hand! O delicate touch
 that tastes of eternal life
 and pays every debt!
 in killing you changed death to life.

John says in his commentary that the sweet cautery is a cautery of love. John boldly asserts that 'this cautery of love immediately effects a wound of love in the one it touches, and those wounds deriving from other causes become wounds of love'.¹⁷ This loving mystical touch from God has the effect of transforming

¹⁶ Judy Cannato, *Field of compassion: How the new cosmology is transforming spiritual life*, Notre Dame: Sorin, 2010. See especially Chapter 11, where she emphasizes spaciousness, contemplation, commitment, and imagination as the consequence of receiving Love and resonating with it.

¹⁷ John of the Cross, 'Living Flame of Love', in: Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez (Eds.), *The collected works of John of the Cross*, Washington, D.C., Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991, 2.7-8.

everything a person has suffered from whatever cause into one wound of love, now made completely healthy in this divine love. Here we find clear testimony from the mystical tradition of this possibility of a fullness of healing through mystical experience. This teaching is very hopeful and affirms the direction of this particular case. Spiritual directors, who are graced to compassionately accompany directees in places of great suffering, can utterly trust that God is at work far more than the director and that God is compassionate and will and can transform any suffering into love and draw directees into God's own self. Directors who live deeply in this mystical core of themselves, can trust that this, more than anything else they say or do, will touch and potentially awaken that in the other so that they truly believe and know: 'that we are wound with mercy round and round as if with air'.