



## THREE MOVEMENTS TOWARDS DEVELOPING A COMPASSIONATE HEART

*From Reaction to Contemplation, Judgementalism  
to Generosity  
and Brokenness to Tenderness*

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### INTRODUCTION

This article expands on Days 20-22 in our 'Principles'. For many of us the way to compassion will begin by beholding the world without judgementalism and nurturing tenderness in our hearts. For contemplation of His creation nurtured God's own tenderness and brought about the Incarnation of His Word.

And God held in his hand  
A small globe. Look he said.  
The son looked. Far off,  
As through water, he saw  
A scorched land of fierce  
Colour. The light burned  
There; crusted buildings  
Cast their shadows: a bright  
Serpent, A river  
Uncoiled itself, radiant  
With slime.

On a bare  
Hill a bare tree saddened  
The sky. many People  
Held out their thin arms  
To it, as though waiting  
For a vanished April  
To return to its crossed  
Boughs. The son watched  
Them. Let me go there, he said.

*(R. S. Thomas. The Coming.)*

### FROM REACTION TO CONTEMPLATION – the silence of God

The first awareness of God that scripture presents us with begins in silence, a silence from which emerges a creative 'Word' (*Gen.1*). That same silence enfolded the One who spoke to Elijah as he sat at the entrance to his cave after fleeing the wrath of Jezebel (*1 Kgs.19*) *'It was in the midst of such terrible phenomena that the Lord had once come down upon Sinai, to inspire the people who were assembled at the foot of the mountain with a salutary dread of His terrible majesty, of the fiery zeal of His wrath and love, which consumes whatever opposes it (see at Exodus 19:16.). But now the lord was not in these terrible phenomena; to signify to the prophet that He did not work in His earthly kingdom with the destroying zeal of wrath, or with the pitiless severity of judgment. It was in a soft, gentle rustling that He revealed Himself to him .<sup>1</sup> Our 'First Gaze' is seldom compassionate and often reactive but our 'Second Gaze' can be contemplative. Only after God has taught us how to live "undefended," can we immediately stand with and for the other. <sup>2</sup>*

It is only when we become still and silent that we can properly contemplate the other and begin to know them and, in knowing the other, to realise a tenderness for them. For the danger of beholding and not keeping silence (unless immediate action is required) is that we react from our primal emotions.

Finding God in the depths of silence we come to share in that Divine silence which is more than the absence of noise. Richard Rohr observes that *'... silence has a life of its own, in which we are invited into its living presence, wholeness of being, and the peace it brings. This silence can absorb paradoxes, contradictions, and the challenges of life, connecting us with the great chain of being.'*<sup>3</sup> Rohr adds that while different faiths use different languages and different words, all major religions have come at the mystery of God as a dynamic flow—God as communion, God as relationships. Silence then becomes that common place for all.

There are, of course, different types of silence: the pause between conversations; the response where nothing more can be said and that contemplative silence that demands a deep presence and attention to the present moment; being 'present to the present'. There is, of course, that silence which can greet injustice which leads to the continuation of pain and suffering. But what is needed is that *contemplative* silence whereby we give complete attention to that which we seek to gaze upon and allow it to speak to the heart.

## FROM JUDGMENTALISM TO GENEROSITY

The path towards compassion will also reveal the problem of judgementalism, that response which too easily criticises the actions and behaviour of others and condemns them as wrong and which can lead to a hatred of the other and a desire to eliminate them. Rejection of the 'other' is one of the constant problems of this an every age and the place of religion can either give energy to this movement or work against it. To differentiate between self and other is an early developmental stage but unless we are to become stuck in isolation we need to move through the different stages of growth to ever-deepening integrity and inter-connectedness.<sup>4</sup> Yet that early need to create a split between self and other is always present and, where not addressed, can drive us towards judgementalism – *I'm right and he's wrong!* In an article on 'Barriers to Spiritual Growth', Robert Sessions writes: *'A particularly pernicious aspect of constantly judging ourselves and others () is comparing and ranking aspects of my life. You know the drill: I am more (good looking, well off, healthier, pious...) than x ; thus I (my ego) can feel good about myself. ... Thus, for example, not only is so-and-so not as fast (pick your characteristic) as me, but he is morally less upright. And, of course, the flip side to this false sense of superiority is the envy that grows out of not winning the competition. Judgmentalism spawns both superiority and envy, the two major ways we bolster our egos. Pernicious indeed!'*<sup>5</sup>

There are various steps we can take to overcome judgementalism.

First, to recall the ancient spiritual aphorism: *Know thyself*. Such self-knowledge leads to a certain humility for we realise that our own lives are full of contradictions, even when we are set upon the path of redemption. I, like thou, am a sinner.

Secondly, we need to actively *work against* our tendency to judge others. S. Ignatius Loyola taught the important of *agere contra*, the principle of 'acting against' behaviours that are not life-giving and hold us back from freedom. To do so we need to remember Jesus' teaching: *"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye."*<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, it's been suggested that we might learn to *take ourselves less seriously* – to 'laugh at our ego'!<sup>7</sup>

Fourthly, to cultivate *thanksgiving and generosity* towards others. The development of these attitudes will help undermine the critical gaze. A prayer associated with S. Ignatius Loyola can assist in this growth by focusing attention on others rather than self:

*Lord, teach me to be generous,  
to serve you as you deserve,  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labor and not to look for any reward,  
save that of knowing that I do your holy will.*

Lastly, *don't generalise from the specific*. Whilst a might exhibit selfishness, meanness, cruelty and violence that does not mean that all those of his/her religion, politics, class etc... are the same. Don't tar everyone with the same brush. Look, rather, for the good in others. '*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*' (Philippians 2:3-4)

## FROM BROKENNESS TO TENDERNESS

As we learn to be less judgmental our hearts begin to soften. The development of compassion may require the heart to be bruised and broken, for a heart that is broken can develop tenderness. The priest-poet John Donne (1572–1631) knew this and wrote in *Holy Sonnet 14*:

*Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,  
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,  
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;  
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.*

The movement to living with compassion needs to involve our heart – the centre of who we are – being converted to loving tenderness. Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, recognises the importance of developing a heart of tenderness, tenderness towards others and tenderness towards ourselves. "*And what is tenderness?*" he asked. "*It is the love that comes close and becomes real. It is a movement that starts from our heart and reaches the eyes, the ears and the hands.*"<sup>8</sup> So he speaks of the need for a "*revolution of tenderness*"<sup>9</sup> and of how, in prayer, we experience our need and capacity for tenderness: "*The Gospel tells us constantly to risk a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction.*

*True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.”*<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say: “... the way to relate to others which truly heals instead of debilitating us is a mystical fraternity, a contemplative fraternity. It is a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does.’<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In an article he wrote concerning compassion Robert Schreiter wrote:

*‘God sees division in our world. Difference becomes a source of division in the world when it is perceived as a threat rather than enrichment. The profound inequalities in our world, especially those caused by the acute poverty from which so much of the world suffers, stand out most starkly. ... God () responds to the world in mercy. The woundedness of our world is painfully evident. God’s mercy is difficult for us to grasp because it so surpasses our own efforts at mercy. It is born out of that infinite love which is in the heart of God. It is a mercy which sees the world as it is, but also sees the world as what it can become. The ever-flowing font of mercy is also the source of forgiveness about which Jesus testified so eloquently. That mercy is nowhere more present than in the wounds Jesus suffered to bring all things together. That forgiveness speaks nowhere so movingly as in Jesus’ gentle and tender compassion with which he treats his disciples after his resurrection.*

*It is that compassion, that tenderness which we are called upon to participate in. It is a compassion that indeed “suffers with,” as the very word means in its root. It is a compassion which walks with those who suffer, who are confused and disheartened, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is the tenderness which can see all sides of the dispute in situations of division. It is a tenderness which is a healing touch to broken hearts and disappointed dreams.’*<sup>12</sup>

With tenderness compassion can take root and flourish.

*‘In the tender compassion of our God  
The dawn from on high will break upon us.’ (Luke 1:78)*

*-John-Francis Friendship 2017*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr: *Contemplation in Action*. The Crossroad Publishing Company 2006. ISBN. 0824523881

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr: *Silent Compassion: Finding God in Contemplation*. St Anthony Messenger Press. 2014. ISBN 10: 1616367571

<sup>4</sup> Erik Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial development.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Sessions: *Barriers to Spiritual Growth*. Patheos. July 2013

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7: 1-5

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/wgc1x/how\\_can\\_i\\_overcome\\_my\\_own\\_intolerance\\_and/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/wgc1x/how_can_i_overcome_my_own_intolerance_and/)

<sup>8</sup> Video speech by Pope Francis to TED 2017

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* 72

<sup>11</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* 92

<sup>12</sup> Robert Schreiter C.P.P.S. (Missionaries of the Precious Blood) *Many Cultures—One Heart: A Spirituality of Tenderness and Compassion in a Multicultural World*. Newsman University. 2002