

COMPASSION  
IN THE PRACTICE OF  
SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Susan K. Sherman

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## Abstract

## COMPASSION IN THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

by Susan K. Sherman

This thesis explores the nature and cultivation of compassion, and its role in the practice of spiritual direction. The author first describes compassion as an inherent human capacity, as well as a quality which can be fostered and developed, and subsequently describes the role of compassion as a foundational component within the discipline of spiritual direction. Applications of compassion are explored on behalf of both spiritual directors and directees.

The thesis illustrates various applications of compassion within spiritual direction, and comments on future possibilities of compassion practices in general.

Heuristic research and investigation in the practice of spiritual direction, a review of the literature, personal life experience and the thesis process itself support the development of this work.

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## CHAPTER I

### FOUNDATIONS OF COMPASSION

#### Introduction

What are the significant elements of compassion, and how is compassion demonstrated through the human experience? Chapter I sets forth fundamental definitions and early meanings of compassion, and refers to archetypical representations of compassion. Also considered are the relationship of love and compassion, self-compassion, compassion toward others, and measures that can be taken toward the cultivation of compassion.

Compassion is frequently associated with feelings of sympathy, pity, or empathy. While each of these feelings conveys a sense of concern for the feelings of others, there are subtle differences in these meanings. Sympathy is defined as “having a fellow-feeling, affected by like feelings” (Barnhart 1105); pity is defined as “sympathetic sorrow for one suffering, distressed, or unhappy” (Webster’s 945); and empathy is defined as “identification with another’s feelings” (Barnhart 326). A familiar definition of compassion is being present with others in their suffering: from “*compati* suffer together with . . . (com-with + pati-suffer)” (Barnhart 196). In this definition, there is a relational sentiment that is similar to sympathy, pity and empathy. However, compassion also carries a broader meaning.

Compassion inherently bears a deeper spiritual quality that has been celebrated in many spiritual and religious texts as a noble virtue to be sought after and developed. A

more comprehensive definition of com-passion is to be with-passion: “with” generally meaning to be close to, having, or accompanying, and “passion” meaning enthusiasm, energy, spirit, feeling (Merriam-Webster, 906). In this light, compassion can be understood to mean having or expressing a spiritually dynamic capacity. While compassion certainly includes a sensitivity to the suffering of others, it need not only be limited to a responsiveness to those who are suffering. Rather, compassion is inclusive in its capacity to be actively engaged with all of life and with the multitude of experiences and circumstances that come to pass.

In A Call to Compassion, Aura Glaser, Ph.D., psychologist and Buddhist practitioner, defines compassion in this way: “Compassion is the basis of connection, intimacy, openness, kindness, hospitality and joy. It is an expression of human freedom, flowing from a sound intuition of the unity of life and all living things” (11).

In Glaser’s definition, compassion is understood as both the lifeblood of connection and warm-heartedness, and a demonstration of the liberation inherent within the interconnectedness of all of life. The unique and remarkable essence of compassion stands out in this combination of connection and freedom and can be likened to extending a gracious, welcoming and caring hospitality where renewal and rebirth is made possible and fostered.

For the purpose of this thesis, compassion will generally be regarded as a capacity which carries a depth of spiritual awareness and perception, as well as being a quality that can be expressed within each and every situation, and not only in times of distress. Compassion can be understood to mean being fully present, mindful and considerate to

the spirit of the moment no matter the condition or state of life. Compassion meets others where they are, recognizing that all situations or challenges are integral parts of life. Compassion curbs judgment and weighs each circumstance equally as a moment in life to be lived in its fullness. Compassion is not afraid to be fully present, hopeful or lighthearted. Compassion can laugh or cry, joke or commiserate, be curious and inquisitive, talkative or silent. It is never afraid to see beauty, find humor or share in the joys and sorrows of the heart. Compassion does not turn away: it simply says “hello” with kindness and grace. Because of this, compassion is never oppressive. It is not indifferent to life, but is engaged, caring and mindful. Compassion enters to listen, to accompany whatever is taking place without expectation or the need to fix or to try to make things better. Through direct, open, non-judging compassion, the dynamic movement of spirit is nurtured and emergence toward renewed understanding is birthed.

### **Root Meanings of Compassion**

Compassion is referenced in numerous religious and spiritual texts dating back many centuries. Islamic, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu and Christian teachings all offer commentary on the recognized virtues of compassion within the sphere of human spiritual development and maturity, and commonly identify compassion as a sanctified quality of the Creator or God (in this thesis the words God, Allah, Goddess, Sacred, Holy, Universal Soul, Soul, Creator, Divine, and Beloved refer to transpersonal divinity). Although it is not within the scope of this presentation to recite an in depth description of the world’s major religions, a brief overview of the prominent and vital role compassion holds is offered here.

Muslim scholar, Asghar Ali Engineer has written on compassion in his article, “Compassion: Islamic Perspective.” He emphasizes that each chapter of the Qur’an begins with the recitation of “Bismillah al-Rahmân al-Rahîm,” (i.e., in the name of Allah Who is Compassionate and Merciful) thus invoking Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful at every measure. Not only is this verse the most repeated passage in the Qur’an, Muslims repeat these words five times daily in prayer. In particular, Sufism, which is regarded by some as the mystical branch of Islam, places significant importance on the practice of compassion. Indeed, Allah’s own names are Rahmân and Rahîm, or Compassionate and Merciful. Engineer further states:

The Qur’an uses the word ‘rahm’ (mercy, compassion) repeatedly. This word and its various derivatives have been used more than 326 times . . . ‘rahmah’ means softening of heart towards one who deserves our mercy and induces us to do good to him/her. It is interesting to note that the womb of mother is also called rahm. A mother is always very soft towards her children and showers love and affection on them. ([http://www.crescentlife.com/spirituality/compassion\\_Islamic\\_perspective.htm](http://www.crescentlife.com/spirituality/compassion_Islamic_perspective.htm)).

There exists an essential thread of meaning in these definitions. The word for Allah and compassion is the same and Allah is compassionate and merciful; compassion is centered in the heart moving us toward good deeds; and compassion is also the mother’s womb – together suggesting that compassion is the womb in which the Sacred is born within us.

Buddhist tradition stands squarely on the foundations of loving-kindness and compassion. In The Art of Happiness, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama defines compassion in this way: “Compassion can be roughly defined in terms of a state of mind that is nonviolent, nonharming, and nonaggressive. It is a mental attitude based on the wish for others to be free of their suffering and is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility, and respect towards the other” (114). He further spells out, “In developing compassion, perhaps one could begin with the wish that oneself be free of suffering, and then take that natural feeling towards oneself and cultivate it, enhance it, and extend it out to include and embrace others” (114). Buddhist thought stipulates that the suffering of humankind is caused by emotional, mental, material or spiritual attachments that bind in any way. Compassion is considered a vehicle for relieving attachments, thereby enabling freedom from the suffering of humankind.

Joel Federman, Ph.D., social theorist, wrote an article entitled “Hinduism and Compassion” (Topia 2002. 28 Feb 2009. [http://www.topia.net/common\\_understanding.html](http://www.topia.net/common_understanding.html)), asserting that the philosophical foundation of compassion in Hinduism is rooted in the cosmological concept of the Brahman, or Universal Soul which is said to encompass the entirety of existence. Since all aspects of existence are identified as a part of and emanating from this Universal Soul, this recognition of interrelatedness engenders a sense of compassion for all beings. In Hinduism, the attitude of compassion is termed “ahimsa.” Spiritual and political Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, held ahimsa as the core of his political philosophy along with nonviolence, peace and love.

Christianity's perspective of God is a God who is a compassionate and loving Creator, one who is intimately present in the world of human experience. In his book, Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life, priest and teacher, Henri Nouwen describes this intimate relationship of God's loving compassion that is interwoven into our humanness:

“The God-with-us is a close God, a God whom we call our refuge, our stronghold, our wisdom, and even, more intimately, our helper, our shepherd, our love. . . .His compassion is anchored in the most intimate solidarity . . .” (15)

Compassion stirs in the depths of our being. Nouwen further references the Greek verb “splangchnizomai,” (Compassion 16) which generally means to be moved with compassion, and is derived from the noun which means the vital inner organs of a person—the heart, lungs, stomach, spleen and liver—referring to a person's whole inner being in physiological terms, and inferring that compassion is part of the physiology of being human. People today commonly describe experiences of intense feeling by referring to the gut, including sayings such as: having a gut-wrenching experience or a gut-feeling, feeling butterflies or knots or having a fluttery stomach, having feelings in the pit of the stomach. We experience profound feelings in the depths, or viscera, of our physical being.

The belly is a major center of energy and higher consciousness recognized by many mystical and natural healing practices. The tranquil arts of Tai Chi and Qigong emphasize the lower abdomen as a major reservoir for life energy and health. The belly

or gut does more than digest food – it also reacts to and digests our inward and outward realities.

Nouwen remarks on the deeper spiritual meanings of splangchnizomai:

The *splangchna* are. . . the place where our most intimate and intense emotions are located. They are the center from which both passionate love and passionate hate grow. When the Gospels speak about Jesus' compassion as his being moved in the entrails, they are expressing something very deep and mysterious. . . .Indeed, compassion is such a deep, central, and powerful emotion . . . that it can only be described as a movement of the womb of God. There, all the divine tenderness and gentleness lies hidden. There, God is father and mother, brother and sister, son and daughter. There, all feelings, emotions, and passions are one in divine love. (Compassion 16-17)

Nouwen suggests that the movement of compassion, the deepest of all human emotions, can be identified and recognized as an embodied sensation in our instinctual gut-knowing and feeling – a feeling that is physical as much as it is emotional, intellectual and spiritual. This movement indicates a dynamic interplay of heartfelt regard, caring, love and compassion toward others that then transforms into acts of kindness and consideration, forgiveness and healing.

Nouwen proceeds to discuss the ancient Hebraic meaning of compassion as being related to the word, “*rachamim*, which refers to the womb of Yahweh” (16). This reference echoes the earlier Islamic definition of the word “rahm” which also means

compassion, womb and mercy. The womb is also located in the abdomen, the belly, and is the first home—a place of nourishment, containment or holding, gestation and the birthplace of emergent life. The womb metaphor represents an emerging process that both contains and fosters potential life and the birth of spirit into new life. It evokes a sense of holding in a place of deep love, safety, care, nurturing and mystery. Spiritually speaking, it could be said that God's love, mercy and compassion emerges through the ongoing processes of gestation, ripening, and in time, coming into greater fullness and freedom in the authentic expression of being.

### **Archetypes of Compassion**

Many saints, sages, gods and goddesses throughout the ages have been assigned spiritual qualities of compassion through their teachings and lives. One such goddess is Kuan Yin (also Quan Yin) who has been celebrated for over a thousand years within the Buddhist religions of Japan, China, Korea and south Asia. In Tibetan culture, her twin or counterpart is Tara, who is also a venerated goddess in her own right. Kuan Yin means “She-Who-Hearkens-to-the-Cries-of-the-World” (Blofeld 17), and has been called the “Bodhisattva of Compassion.” Bodhi refers to an awakened heart and mind, and sattva refers to a courageous mind. “A bodhisattva is one who acts with courage and bravery to accomplish full awakening for the benefit of all beings” (Glaser 19). Thus, bodhisattvas dedicate their life to the attainment of freedom by assisting others in their search along the path to liberation. “The inescapable connection with, and compassion for, the suffering of all living beings in all universes is an inexhaustible wellspring of inspiration of the journey. It is also the source of infinite joy” (Glaser 20). In the Buddhist tradition,

the shining example of Kuan Yin embodies a willingness to abide with human kind until all beings are ultimately liberated. In One River, Many Wells, mystic and Episcopal priest, Matthew Fox, invites readers to meditate on Kuan Yin's attributes of compassion so that we, too, can bring compassion into our lives of service. Contemplation on the following passage speaks to the omnipresence of Kuan Yin and her infinite compassion for the world:

In the lands of the universe there is no place  
Where She does not manifest herself . . .  
Compassion wondrous as a great cloud,  
Pouring spiritual rain like nectar,  
Quenching the flames of distress! (123)

Christianity also bears out the significance of loving compassion in the teachings of Jesus who preached that the first rule of life was to love God, and secondly, to love our neighbors as ourselves. Love is the foundation, *prima facie*, and love and compassion toward others is the expression of that love. Jesus' merciful deeds of healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, comforting the masses and raising the dead are examples of a deep compassion and caring for others. Many within the Christian faith look to Jesus' examples of deep love and compassion as guidance for their personal lives in order to live their faith more completely, and to deepen their own capacities for loving and compassionate action.

Throughout history, there have been those who exemplify the qualities of loving-kindness and compassion for God and human kind who stand as beacons of spiritual

aspiration. St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Mary, Guadalupe, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, Mother Theresa and scores of other saints, sages and spiritual beings can be called upon through prayer and meditation as resources and allies as inspiration to help foster and strengthen our own capacity for compassion.

### **Compassion as an Aspect of Love**

It is generally acknowledged that love emanates from the Creator; in whatever way “Creator” may be defined and named within each tradition and for each person. In his landmark book titled, The Mystic Heart, Wayne Teasdale, interreligious monk and mystic, beautifully describes the ethos of divine love as:

. . . ineffable, ungraspable, nameless and formless, perfect, and free of all limitations. Divine love reveals itself to us by its care for the natural world, the cosmos, all creatures, and ourselves, principally by its close attention to the vast details of the universe. It mothers us, encourages us, challenges us, and consoles us in times of trial. Divine love is personal and intimate. It gives itself to us in complete freedom. It is what makes us whole, or complete, what heals us from the scars or wounds of the human condition.

The divine calls us all into being out of itself. We are meant for it: That is the point of the spiritual journey. The journey puts us on the road to realizing and actualizing who we really are in our ultimate being.

Enlightenment is the awakening to our identity as boundless awareness, but it is incomplete unless our compassion, sensitivity, and love are

similarly awakened and actualized in our lives and relationships.

Awakening to and developing compassion, sensitivity, and love is thus also part of the spiritual journey. (77)

Within this framework, the essence of divine love expresses as an infinite affinity with all beings, with both living and non-living forms in creation. Emerging from this primary identification and core recognition of the interconnectedness within all of life, love and compassion take shape and become known. We also experience love and compassion arising from within our human hearts in our personal relationships and affections and share in the fruits of this divine love.

Author and spiritual mentor, David Spangler, adds another element toward understanding the relationship of love and compassion. In Crafting Relationships, he states that “love as a spiritual force has many forms and manifests as a continuum” (81), and that furthermore:

The expression of caring and compassion is probably the first manifestation along this spectrum that a person would recognizably call “loving.” It’s the rope attached to the thread of allowing, the twine of honoring, the string of discernment, and the cord of communion, the first real sign that a definite bridge is being made across a chasm. (93)

In Spangler’s view, love is the bridge and is comprised of many stages and degrees of manifestation. Along the continuum of love, most people may well recognize compassion as the first expression of love (94).

Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, writes extensively on the relationship between love and compassion. His book, Teachings on Love describes the Four Immeasurables, or the Four Radiant Abodes of love, compassion, joy and equanimity. These lay the foundation from which true or authentic love and wholeness spring. Hanh breaks down these qualities in this way: love's intention and capacity to offer joy and happiness meet together with compassion's intention to relieve and transform suffering (4-9). Love leads to compassion and compassion leads to joy and spacious equanimity. Compassion is the connecting link between the primary principle of love and the subsequent expressions of joy and mindful equanimity.

The very essence of life is itself a miraculous occurrence that summons a capacity within us for love and compassion. From the perspective as a parent, compassion and love emerge in the earliest stages of human life. Newborn babies seek nourishment from their mothers, and later seek to engage, interact and connect with their family of caregivers. As infants are the recipients of loving care from attentive caregivers, love grows. As loving parents or caregivers seek to soothe and comfort new life, compassion grows. Bonding and connection through love and compassion are vital to the earliest beginnings and the sustaining of human life, and are central to what it means to become fully human.

Aura Glaser offers this account of love and compassion:

Love and compassion are not, as sometimes imagined, a fanciful escape from life's harsh reality. In fact, the opposite is true. Together, love and

compassion give us the flexibility, resilience, and courage, to embrace life, in all of its splendor and sorrow. (25)

There is a certain resilient spontaneity and a spiritedness in both love and compassion that invite the wholeness of whatever challenges we encounter to be lived in integrity and authenticity. The intimate relationship of life, love and compassion coalesce in synchrony at the heart of the divine mystery. Our focus here is on the role of compassion in this divine interplay. Chapter II develops themes relative to the cultivation of compassion in one's self and for others, and emphasizes compassion as an expression of the essence of divine life.

## CHAPTER II

### CULTIVATING COMPASSION

#### Compassion for Self

Buddha is alleged to have said, “If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete” (<http://www.dailycelebrations.com/compassion.htm>). Compassion, as a fundamental principle within Buddhism, can be directly related to the process of relieving suffering and thereby enabling the fulfillment of enlightenment. Jack Kornfield, Buddhist monk and western pioneer in Buddhist psychology, describes compassion as “the capacity to see our struggles with ‘kindly eyes.’ We need compassion, not anger, to help us be tender with our difficulties and not close off to them in fear” (23). He continues:

In Buddhist psychology compassion is a circle that encompasses all beings, *including ourselves*. Compassion blossoms only when we remember ourself and others, when the two sides are in harmony. (32)

In Buddhist thought, the interconnectedness of all of life begins with a compassionate regard for the self. Following Buddhist thought further, Pema Chödrön, American Buddhist nun, suggests in her book, Comfortable with Uncertainty, that nurturing compassion does not arise from a sentimental bleeding heart, but rather “requires the training of a warrior” because of the needed willingness to feel into pain (71). Often people deny or repress their own pain and the pain of others because it is difficult and can trigger their own fear of pain.

She continues describing the path of the courageous warrior in this excerpt:

Without justifying or condemning ourselves, we do the courageous work of opening to suffering. This can be the pain that comes when we put up barriers or the pain of opening our hearts to our own sorrow or that of another being. . . . In cultivating compassion we draw from the wholeness of our experience—our suffering, our empathy, as well as our cruelty and terror. It has to be this way. Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It’s a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity. (73)

Holding personal success and failure, joy and suffering, in equal measure, in wholeness, helps to build a coherent inner structure of integrity, and strengthens the ability to be present to ourselves with an open and courageous compassionate heart.

Marshall Rosenberg, founder of the Center for Non-Violent Communication, asserts that the process of internal communication, what one thinks about one’s self in the privacy of one’s own mind, bears great consequence. In his book Non-Violent Communication, A Language of Love, Dr. Rosenberg states that developing self-compassion is the main objective of non-violent communication (129). In his view, non-violence refers to the “natural state of compassion when violence has subsided from the heart” (2). Violence begins to fade from the heart by first familiarizing one’s self with communication patterns and self-images that are carried internally, sometimes unconsciously, and to shine the light of compassion on these habits of mind. Just as self-

violence diminishes personal integrity, so too, “when critical self-concepts prevent us from seeing the beauty in ourselves, we lose connection with the divine energy that is our source” (130). In an effort to develop non-violent self-compassion and a sustaining connection to the Source of all, Rosenberg invites this consideration toward conscious change and transformation:

Our challenge then, when we are doing something that is not enriching life, is to evaluate ourselves moment by moment in a way that inspires change both:

- (1) in the direction of where we would like to go, and
- (2) out of respect and compassion for ourselves, rather than out of self-hatred, guilt or shame. (132)

We are called upon to make conscious choices to hold difficulties, distress or suffering in mindful awareness, with kindness and compassion. By then connecting to our deeper soulful nature, our Source, the alchemical process of changing habits of self-violence into habits of self-compassion may begin.

Spiritual director, author and retreat leader Peggy Bernecker, similarly comments that as we “choose to lovingly listen to our own story in all its beauty and squalor . . . We create spaciousness for truth, healing, and authenticity to breathe” (1). The practice of choosing to notice and listen while centered in respect, love and compassion helps to foster a greater harmony among the disparate or seemingly incompatible elements within. In compassion, we learn to hold the paradox of being. Inner energies combine in new ways allowing that which is life-giving to move toward transformation and new birth.

Meister Eckhart, (1260-1329) Christian mystic and philosopher, shaped a rich spiritual tradition by setting forth heart-centered principles for meditation and living. In Meditations with Meister Eckhart, Matthew Fox quotes Eckhart's primary belief in the importance to first lay down the foundations of compassion toward oneself:

How can anyone be compassionate toward her neighbor who is not compassionate toward herself? . . . 'Be compassionate!' . . . begin at home, . . . be compassionate toward our own body and soul. (105)

Eckhart's spiritual philosophy focused on the concept of the incarnation of soul and body, and he attributed great value to that relationship. His request to others was to ". . . meditate on how it is that the soul loves the body. And consider how it is that the body is more in the soul than the soul is in the body" (105). Beginning at home in ourselves, Eckhart bids individuals to embrace this great and compassionate love of the soul for the body and self, and to allow compassion to then arise and move outward toward others.

### **Compassion for Others**

In her article titled, "Birthing Compassion," author and Christian mystic, Sue Monk Kidd, describes the compassion which grows within ourselves and the natural progression of developing an expanded compassion for others as a birthing process which proceeds from living in separation, to experiencing authentic personal connection, and finally emerging into relationship with the compassionate other. She states:

The stages and movements in this birthing process entail a gradual shifting of spiritual consciousness. We move from a false and separated way of

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relating to the world, which I call being in the *Collective They*, to a union with our True Self, which means realizing the *Authentic I*, and finally to a sense of interconnectedness with all that is, which brings us to the birth of the *Compassionate We*. (21)

Through the process of entering into an intimate relationship with our authentic self and expressing compassion toward the inner self, we are also able to more wholly be present with others in the depths of life's experiences. Developing compassion not only helps to mend together the separated places in ourselves. It allows us to recognize and have compassion for the separated places in others—a resonant mutuality develops as “we recognize our shared humanity” (Chödrön, Comfortable 73).

Gestalt therapist and Lou Gehrig's Disease survivor, Mariah Fenton Gladis, wrote an article titled “Relationship of Compassion,” and observes that “every time you express gratitude or compassion for any aspect of yourself or someone else, you breathe life in.” Just as our breath is our life connection, compassion also connects us to a spaciousness that is open to receiving greater life. As our capacity for compassion strengthens, we are less prone to judge or condemn others, or ourselves, and more ready to console and open our hearts to an infinite compassion. Consequently, through an interconnected mutuality of relationship, in a continual breathing in and breathing out, compassion prepares us for a birthing of spirit within us and within others.

Aura Glasser asserts that there can be confusion over what comprises genuine compassion, and that care must be taken to identify three areas of misconception (47).

She describes the first of these and includes a quote by Buddhist teacher, Chögyam

Trungpa:

Whereas genuine compassion is intelligent and discriminating, ‘idiot compassion is a compassion with neurosis, a slimy way of trying to fulfill your desires secretly. This is your aim, but you give the appearance of being generous and impersonal.’ Idiot compassion in the guise of compassion may harm rather than help. Genuine compassion is at times gentle and at other times forceful, whereas idiot compassion is constantly trying to appear kind. Sometimes the kindest response may not appear kind. . . . Compassion helps others help themselves. It does not foster conditions of self-serving dependency. It puts the responsibility where it belongs: on the individual. Compassion fearlessly pierces to the heart, whereas ‘superficial kindness lacks courage and intelligence.’ Compassion manifests in whatever way is needed to wake someone up, and this can feel somewhat sharp or painful at times. There are times when reassurance and comfort are not the most compassionate response. (47)

It is important to recognize this false compassion that originates from a personal need to be seen as kind or be liked, or used as a shield against experiencing the pain of others.

Glaser also describes a second important discernment of compassion, that of an impartial or unbiased compassion without attachment, by stating:

Great compassion perceives other beings with an impartial closeness, not an impartial distance. Great compassion raises our concern for all beings to the level we now have for those who are nearest and dearest. Such compassion is both enduring and impassioned. (48-49)

This generous compassion of impartial closeness extends to all people, to all beings, equally and without favor.

Third, Glaser emphasizes, “compassion is both a way of being and a way of doing. It is both heart and hands” (49). She adds a further quotation from Sogyal Rinpoche, Tibetan Buddhist teacher and author of the highly acclaimed spiritual classic on Tibetan Buddhism, The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying. He describes compassion as both “the source and essence of enlightenment, and the heart of enlightened activity” (49).

Such movement, activity and doing culminate in the full birthing and life of compassion. Here the analogy of the womb-like nature of the essence of compassion is presented in terms of being both the source or womb, and the resulting life that is born into the world.

Tilden Edwards of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation also offers an opinion on discerning the difference between a filtered form of compassion and a spontaneous, authentic compassion. In Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion, he states:

Spontaneous compassion is different from a calculated attempt to love, be nice, be good, which is what we’re left with when our souls are more filtered through our conditioned psyches. Spirit-inspired soul is showing

itself most directly when it suddenly comes through as an uncalculated, sudden feeling or act of compassion in the moment. Our whole being flows into that compassion without calculation or hesitation. These pure moments of soulfulness carry with them a sense of simple confidence and of nonpossession. That is, we don't take credit for the feeling or act, because it is coming from that core of our souls. . . . In that beautiful moment the Spirit is living *through* us, indeed, at its purest, we might say the Spirit is living *as* us. (37)

Indeed, Spirit living *as* us affirms the inherent divinity of our humanity.

### **Cultivating Compassion**

How can one cultivate the compassion of a “spirit-inspired soul?” As previously noted, compassion plays an integral role in Buddhist spirituality. In his book, *The Wise Heart*, Jack Kornfield asserts that compassion is inherent to our innermost being, and cites the notable principle of Buddhist psychology that “Compassion is our deepest nature. It arises from our interconnection with all things” (23). He expands on the effect this deep interconnectivity has on our awareness:

In spaciousness and clarity, we can understand that every one of us participates in the loss and suffering of life, as well as its marvels and beauty. This awakens our compassion instead of judgment or denial. Compassion and spaciousness arise together. When delusion goes, we are no longer so frightened or worried about ourself (sic). . . .Whenever delusion is dispelled, there comes a tremendous sense of freedom. (236)

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Kornfield describes an intentional Buddhist practice that is designed to assist in the cultivation of compassion. The “compassion practice” begins with attuning to the inner awareness of our body and our personal feelings for our own self, visualization and recitation of compassionate intentions for others and for ourselves. Just as we can develop greater lung capacity through the practice of deep breathing, with compassion practice we slowly expand our capacity of compassion both for self and others, and become a vessel of compassion to hold all that we are and experience with love. This practice is described more fully in Appendix A.

Sue Monk Kidd also comments on the process of developing compassion:

*You can't force the heart.* Genuine compassion cannot be imposed from without. . . .you don't arbitrarily make up your mind to be compassionate so much as you choose to follow a journey that transforms your heart into a compassionate space. (20)

The heart is the true seat of the will that chooses to listen, which heeds the sacred call to service to others and that leads toward transformation. Although the heart cannot be forced to feel compassion, there does exist the inherent freedom to choose a reorientation of our lives and to set us upon a path in the direction of compassion.

Cultivating compassion is also a path of expressing our spiritual nature or inherent sacredness. In Crafting Home, David Spangler asserts, “one way to explore sacredness is through action and effect” (25). In suggesting an exploration of sacredness, he notes:

. . . I can engage in processes that are sacred—and I believe incarnation is one of them—and I can produce effects in the world through acts of

mindfulness, compassion, love, and will that nurture life, enhance creation, and act as blessings. When I do, am I not being a sacred agent? Am I not acting in the likeness of God? (25)

When we engage life through the lens of compassion and with compassionate action, we bring the essence of spirit and sacredness alive in the world. As we orient ourselves to our deeper spirituality, we are invited to:

. . . explore our capacity to perform sacred processes and create sacred effects. . . . have an experience of sacredness that is personal, liberating, and empowering, but more importantly, an experience that gives us a practical way of being a blessing in our world. (25)

Building upon the basics of cultivating a compassionate nature and acting as sacred agents in the world, a second framework began to grow out of my understanding of compassion and may be helpful in considering additional insights into the inherent qualities of compassion itself. Compassion has previously been referenced as God’s womb—as being both a container and a potent movement or birthing of life force itself. This birthing metaphor can also be applied to the development of a greater capacity of compassion and broken down into four stages: intention, noticing, holding, and transformation or birth. A description of this exercise is in Appendix B. The development of compassion is a process—a process of learning new ways of being with our self, being with others and being with God, and can eventually include the breadth and depth of our experiences and all that is present in creation. Compassion is the fertile “womb of God” – that which gestates and births anew. Compassion gives birth to itself. Meister Eckhart’s

writings offer poetic descriptions of God's love and compassion. "The fullest work that God ever worked in any creature is compassion . . . Whatever God does, the first outburst is always compassion" (Meditations 109). This birthing of God in us through compassion ushers in renewal and transformation wherein we stitch and knit ourselves into an integrated wholeness. Inner connection is enhanced and strengthened, and we are invited to live both our joys and sufferings directly with love and compassion.

### **Summary and Bridge**

Compassion is a human capacity which is both inherent and which can be fostered and developed. Aura Glaser sums up the vital significance of cultivating a life of compassion in the following account:

Engaging the possibility of and aspiring to actualize a vast, limitless compassion is a powerful source of inspiration that can have a significant impact on our outlook and actions, day to day. It is immensely beneficial to plant the seeds of this aspiration in our mind and let them slowly take root in our lives. Over time, as these seeds mature, they will help us to cut through ancient patterns of aggression and self-deception and awaken our courage and love. And if we are inclined, as many of us are, to be hard on ourselves when we see our lack of impartial compassion for others, or our lack of compassion at all, we can use that situation to generate compassion for ourselves and our own difficulties along the way. Our hindrances, our heartbreak and pain, can soften us. The limits of our compassion can themselves become a doorway to greater compassion. (52)

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Compassion opens a portal to greater acceptance, understanding, respect, honor, and love, and is a welcome companion on the spiritual path. The next section of this thesis explores the practice of spiritual direction, the gift compassion holds in spiritual direction, and the application of various capacities of compassion within the spiritual direction setting.

## CHAPTER III

### THE ART OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

#### Introduction to Spiritual Direction

The art of spiritual direction has been practiced within many religious and spiritual traditions for thousands of years, and in the broadest terms some form of spiritual guidance or counsel has always been interwoven into the human soul's search for the divine. Spiritual companions, elders, priests and priestesses, ministers, gurus, rabbis and mentors have historically offered support, encouragement and wisdom to individuals in their search for the Divine Mystery and the deeper meanings borne within spiritual or transcendent experiences. Dedication to the yearnings of the human soul to explore its deeper recesses and to forge a more intimate relationship with the heart of the Sacred are the foundations of this spiritual art. It is the exploration of this yearning that defines spiritual direction.

Spiritual Directors International (SDI) is an international learning community that advocates and supports the art and practice of spiritual direction. SDI's stated mission is to raise awareness of the value of spiritual direction as a way to cultivate compassion and describes the practice of spiritual direction as follows:

Spiritual direction is the process of accompanying people on a spiritual journey. Spiritual direction helps people tell their sacred stories everyday. Spiritual direction exists in a context that emphasizes growing closer to God (or the holy or a higher power). Spiritual direction invites a deeper relationship with the spiritual aspect of being human. Spiritual direction is

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not psychotherapy, counseling, or financial planning.

(<http://www.sdiworld.org/home.html>)

At the core of spiritual direction is the presence of the Sacred. A familiar quote from the Bible describes well the soul friending relationship: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Matt 18:20). Looking at each of these statements from the SDI website more closely, a clearer understanding of spiritual direction may be reached.

“Spiritual direction is a process of accompanying others on a spiritual journey.” Spiritual directors (throughout this paper the terms spiritual director, soul friend, or spiritual companion may be used interchangeably), and directees meet together in the presence of one another, and in the presence of the Sacred. A monthly invitation is extended for hospitable, confidential and intimate exploration of the spiritual essence flowing through everyday life experiences.

“Spiritual direction helps people tell their sacred stories everyday.” Soul friending is a dedicated practice wherein one is invited to notice and attend to the subtle movements of Spirit through the unfolding of one’s life. It is here that fresh awareness and appreciation, new understanding, and deepened meaning of sacredness and the presence of Spirit in everyday life are generated. It is through compassionate inquiry into and contemplative reflection upon the depth and breadth of life experiences that one is brought into closer connection with the Sacred.

“Spiritual direction exists in a context that emphasizes growing closer to God.”

Engaging in spiritual direction offers a portal through which directees choose to strengthen the connection to the divinity within, and to align more closely with the life of the soul. A personal and intimate relationship with God, Spirit, the Sacred, however one may identify a divine source, is nurtured and strengthened. This happens through exploring inner self-wisdom, the realm of human relationships, nature, being of service in the world, and through universal, cosmic or transcendent experience.

“Spiritual direction invites a deeper relationship with the spiritual aspect of being human.” In spiritual direction one attends to the sacredness of being, the tender care of the soul, and the transformative, whole-making nature of the Sacred within the life of the directee. Spiritual direction catalyzes the emergence of core human capacities of love, wisdom and compassion.

“Spiritual direction is not psychotherapy, counseling, or financial planning.” Spiritual direction is not intended for fixing problems or offering advice.

Director Katherine Howard comments on the sacred invitation of spirit that is always present and accessible through the circumstances of our lives, and impacts both directees and directors. One intention of spiritual direction is to allow for the freer movement of spirit within both directee and director. She states:

There are moments in each of our lives when this invitation of the transcendent breaks through—moments of love, of joy, of beauty; moments of sorrow, of suffering, of sin, of death. . . .In all our activities and passivities, it is as if God is watching for any possible place to break into our awareness, to coax us to turn and see, to stop and feel the divine

touch. This is true for ourselves as spiritual directors and for those who come to us for spiritual direction. (Howard, Seeking 117)

Spiritual direction offers the simple gift of being present to and with another in the presence of sacredness. David Benner, professor and spiritual director, describes spiritual direction as a way of being, not of doing:

Spiritual friendship is not primarily a matter of doing certain things. Often, in, fact, it is precisely the opposite of doing: it is a gift of not doing—not interrupting, not attempting to solve problems, not prematurely or inappropriately advising, not assuming that what has worked for us will work for others. Stated positively: spiritual friendship is a gift of hospitality, presence and dialogue. While all of these have a component of doing—that is, they have to be lived out—they are grounded in ways of being. (46)

Pegge Bernecker, asks of those who participate in spiritual direction: “Will you join me . . . and choose to traverse the dangerous territory of honest authenticity, tempered with forgiveness and loving compassion?” (1). In my experience as both directee and director, the heart of spiritual direction is woven through with a genuine heart-felt sincerity, acceptance and integrity creating an atmosphere of confidentiality, openness, intimacy, trust and loving compassion. As directees, we are invited to share our life stories and our unique spiritual perspectives and understanding, as well as attend to the moment-to-moment experiential flow of thoughts, feelings, metaphorical imagery, and subjective bodily sensations that may be encountered during a spiritual direction

session. In offering compassionate support to this alchemical flow and process of unveiling the inner self, directors are able to affirm and reflect the spiritual nature of a directee's everyday life experience.

Spiritual direction answers the yearning and desire to consciously realize God's compassionate and abiding presence and our divine nature more fully. Tilden Edwards states, "In spiritual direction the focus is on that divine force, on God, as the integral core of our being and purpose. . . . Spiritual direction is about healing our relationship with God . . ." (Spiritual Director 24). Compassion is an intrinsic element within the practice of spiritual direction.

### **Spiritual Direction as a Chalice of Compassion**

The chalice, or grail-like cup, vessel or container is an appropriate metaphor as we explore the deeper elements of compassion in spiritual direction. A chalice is a container that is open to receive and also contains its contents until the appropriate time of release or emptying. As such, similar to the womb, it is both the holder and a place of ripening until what has been held is let loose. This metaphor is relevant in spiritual direction where directors receive directees with gracious regard in the light of spiritual understanding, witnessing together what may surface in the course of sometimes challenging sessions. In this way, directees are nurtured, supported and encouraged in their exploration into the deeper, sometimes incongruous, meanings within life's experiences. As directors develop a growing capacity of compassion, and enter wholly into a soul friending relationship, their loving and compassionate presence functions on a

human level similar to the love and compassion inherent within God, mirrored in the presence of the Sacred.

Spiritual director Margaret Guenther writes in her book, Holy Listening, about the misadventures of Parzival, and of his redemption as he tells his story to an old hermit. Parzival fails time and again: “Most seriously, he has let social convention stand in the way of true compassion, for when he saw the excruciating suffering of the Grail King, his mistaken understanding of chivalric behavior prevented his asking the saving question: ‘What’s wrong? What hurts?’” (28) The hermit, as spiritual director, hospitably tends to the young knight’s comfort, lovingly and mercifully listens to his experiences, and through an attentive and compassionate love, helps Parzival toward liberation, freedom and a recovery of harmony and wholeness. We each carry a Parzival and a Grail King within us. We each hold our life’s story and carry our suffering. Healing into greater wholeness is encouraged when a director compassionately asks of another, “What are you experiencing in your life?” and attending together in the presence of the Sacred to the sufferings and joys of life’s journey. Guenther observes that caring for the Soul is the true work of spiritual direction, and that the true director is God. “The fact of being entrusted with someone’s soul, of being allowed to enter the story, however layered and convoluted it might be, is staggering . . . when all is said and done, the Holy Spirit is the true director” (38-39).

Compassion, metaphorically, offers a chalice womb—a partially open container in which new life lovingly comes into being. What is birthed in this chalice, is birthed into freedom, and moves outward into its unique expression. In a sense, as seeds of

wholeness are held in a grail of compassion, sacredness is birthed and its fruits find meaning and expression in the world. Correspondingly, in the presence of the sacred “womb” of God, compassion also emerges. The often hidden and mysterious experience of spiritual birthing and growth within the everyday ordinary vessel of life is alluded to in Brenda Morris’ poem, “Theotokos:”

Think of those moments of strange harmony  
 when light within you kindles and the real  
 sun, like an answer, floods your room and rounds  
 every common vessel — jug, jar, and basket,  
 the clay pot with its crimson bloom. Think how that bloom,  
 soil-bound and blind, twists toward light, how we  
 likewise need light to flower, but being free  
 have to say yes in order to receive,  
 how yes can never be informed consent  
 but always something like a pregnancy –  
 A risky state which nurtures the unknown  
 and lets it grow, which knits up flesh and bone  
 then lets them go, to stand erect and free.  
 Does even God know what the end will be? (19)

If God does not even know what the outcome might be, clearly neither does the spiritual director. The life of the directee is wholly in his or her and God’s hands. The

director humbly acts as a familiar and trusted soul friend along the lighted way. Such a stance is not possible without the quality of compassion.

### **The Spiritual Director**

Gerald Fagin, PhD, professor of theology and spirituality at Loyola University, offers some important counsel for spiritual directors. He reflects that the very heart of spiritual direction “flows from out of our own spirituality, our own lived and prayed relationship with God. It results from our noticing and responding to a unique call to serve God’s people by helping them notice and respond to God’s call in their lives” (7). Spiritual directors uphold a reverent dedication to living a life centered in the Sacred, and foster the underlying sacredness in all beings. Soul friends serve as agents of God’s compassionate nature by embracing qualities of the heart such as empathy, loving attention, care and concern, acceptance and understanding, which informs their alignment of spiritual purpose within the director - directee relationship. It is important that spiritual directors are grounded in personal self-knowledge and self-compassion; are present to their own inner processes; are able to connect to, embrace and hold their spiritual center or source; and can allow the grace inherent in self-love and self-compassion to emerge. How directors relate to and experience their personal spiritual landscape significantly impacts their interactions with directees. Directors attend to and cultivate a deepened capacity of compassion for self while also holding compassion for the people with whom they meet. Self-compassion nourishes a healing presence, and offers an example of compassion that directees may then model in their own lives (Fagin 7-18).

Tilden Edward concurs with Fagin in stating, “. . . (T)he director’s passionate givenness to God in trust, together with a sense of call to spiritual companionship, are much more crucial for an authentic spiritual direction relationship than any particular learned knowledge and skills” (Spiritual Director x). The director’s presence and actions emerge out of his or her unique incarnation, personhood and spirituality, which can also be described as an energetic signature. An intriguing experience of energetic signature was demonstrated by what was said of Helen Keller. Although both blind and deaf, having once met someone, she could subsequently recognize that particular person through her subtle perceptions of his or her individual, energetic essence. Emerson similarly revealed the impact of energetic presence or signature in his familiar quote: “Who you are speaks so loudly I can’t hear what you’re saying” (<http://quotations.about.com/od/stillmorefamouspeople/a/RalphWaldoEmer8.htm>). Mindfulness in cultivating qualities that support a compassionate presence of being is a fundamental consideration in the life of the spiritual director. Here the primary emphasis is on “being” rather than on developing specific techniques of “doing.” My own experience as a director supports this perspective that being a compassionate companion is without doubt a vital component in the spiritual direction setting.

In addition to a deep love for divinity and a calling to the practice of spiritual direction, it is important that spiritual directors embrace “. . .humility, and an active discipline of prayer / meditation. The capacity to be caring, sensitive, open, and flexible with another person, not projecting one’s own needs or fostering long-term dependency” (Edwards, Spiritual Friend 126). Allowing directees the freedom to discover and explore

their personal spirituality is an act of compassion. It is essential for directors to set aside their personal projections and any attachment to outcomes in order to maintain a compassionate open-hearted companionship with directees.

The yearning toward God, a calling to serve and cultivating spiritual qualities stand together as a rule of life or orientation toward the Sacred in the life of directors. Secondly, this orientation is reflected and provides spiritual support and encouragement to the directees with whom they meet. A director's capacity for love and compassion provides an unspoken strength within the art of spiritual direction and helps create a trusting environment in space and time – a sanctuary steeped in compassion where directees are invited to explore and express their innermost spiritual concerns and yearnings in safety and freedom, and to gently discern the sacred overtones of life's events.

Guenther offers this description of the director's place in spiritual direction:

Spiritual direction, as a work of love, is also a work of freedom. The director is willing to let be, to love with an open hand. Hers is a contemplative love, immune from temptation to devour, possess, or manipulate. Always seeing the other as a child of God, she is filled with respect, even awe in the presence of the person sitting across the sacred space. (141)

### **Self-Care for the Director**

It is of primary importance for directors to attend to the clarity and hygiene of their spiritual nature or individuated energetic signature. Practices in self-awareness are

appropriate and a significant undertaking for spiritual directors. Guenther refers to this as “creating our own inner order . . . spiritual housecleaning,” and likens this to readying our inner self just as a good host would ready his or her home in order to hospitably receive a guest (10-11). She stresses the value of directors being in spiritual direction themselves in order to attend to the course of their own spiritual path. Other essential pursuits include participating in healthful and nurturing resources such as meditation, prayer, journal-keeping, enjoying nature, going on retreat, seeking out music, art and other pleasing hobbies, work activities or other “ordinary gifts of creation” (13-14). Directors who take part in activities that inspire and calm, de-clutter hearts, minds and homes, add humor and enjoyment, and bring an appreciation of nature and beauty all act as resources toward self-care and strengthen the inner life of the soul.

It is worthwhile for directors to regularly examine their underlying intentions, current attitudes and challenges regarding the practice of soul friending and their interactions with directees. Director Leslie Hay suggests the following areas for introspective inquiry:

- \* Am I truly accepting?
- \* Do I create an atmosphere that is warm and free of anxiety?
- \* Is my heart a spacious womb for another to enter and discover more fully who he or she is?
- \* Can I let each directee freely explore all avenues of his or her life without imposing advice or judgment?

- \* Do I possess the internal space, the emptiness, to listen without prejudice, worry, or expectation?
- \* Can I receive each directee as a divine presence who reflects some aspect of God's likeness and image?
- \* Do I comprehend that each person is on a unique path and will be transformed in his or her own way and, therefore, not according to some preset schedule, structure, process, or program? (13)

Intentional inquiry of this nature speaks to the practice of compassion in the workings of the inner life of the director and in his or her practice of spiritual direction. In this regard, a director's warm-hearted and non-judgmental attitude toward his or her own self both begins to clarify attitudes, address challenges, expand self-awareness, and also assists in preparing him or her as a vessel of compassion, generous and hospitable and able to receive directees with greater love and compassion.

The Buddhist notion of "kindly eyes" or gentle and compassionate eyes applies to a spiritual director's practice of self-awareness. Compassionate "seeing" of one's many selves, both through times of personal difficulties as well as in times of abundant spiritual fulfillment, strengthens the capacity of compassionate caring for others. Relating to others through kind, loving and compassionate ways influences how we view the world before us, as well as how we respond when we receive feedback from the deep mystery of life. Omraam Mikhael Aivanhiov expresses this giving and receiving in a line of poetry: "Don't be content with looking at a rose as a beautiful flower. Look at her with Love, so that she enters into your heart and awakens other forces in your heart and soul."

Directors have faith in the processes of inner change, as well as trust in the presence of God's love and compassion. In spiritual direction, the forces of love and compassion within the heart of the director are correspondingly evoked as he or she interacts with the directee.

### **Director as Midwife for the Soul**

Guenther remarks on the similarities between the role of a mid-wife and that of a spiritual director. Mid-wife translates as “‘with-woman,’ that is, the person who is with the birthgiver” (86). “The midwife is present to another in a time of vulnerability, working in areas that are deep and intimate. It is a relationship of trust and mutual respect. . . . She does things *with*, not *to*, the person giving birth” (87). In similar fashion, spiritual directors sit with others and attentively attend to those who seek the God within by offering a “ministry of compassionate presence” (126). Sitting together in this way, an outer womb, or lap, meaning, “swathed, enfolded, wrapped” (Webster’s 700) is metaphorically created and serves as a place of gestation and rebirth. In this context, when compassion is understood as the “womb of God,” the director serves as mid-wife to the soul, to the birthing of God’s spirit where God is invited to move toward and between directee and director, and where both are equally invited to move toward God. In the process of co-creating a sacred space together with the directee and with God, each meeting of soul friends is a new beginning where the unexpected, the ineffable mystery of the Sacred which is present in all aspects of life, may surface.

A personal story illustrates the metaphors of mid-wife and womb. I met with a young woman for a soul friending session and after a brief welcoming, centering ritual

and conversation, we sat in listening silence. The quiet was noticeably deep, rich and encompassing with the sense of a loving and compassionate presence filling the room. Surrounded in spaciousness, a sensation of being cradled in a womb-like embrace held the presence of the room, held each of us, and our meeting of hearts.

In this quiet I was intuitively moved to ask if she would be willing to explore a vulnerability she had earlier expressed, and she replied that she was open to further inquiry. With love and a gentle curiosity, I asked, “What are you noticing? What sensations in your body are you noticing?” After a short dialogue, followed by silence, a palpable sense of softening compassion flowed into the space around us. After several minutes she opened her eyes and shared that the vulnerability and need for protection she first felt at the beginning of the session had lessened as she “stood in a bubble of compassion” which surrounded her. This “bubble of compassion” emerged as a mutually shared blessing, a blessing of shared sacred space.

This occurrence helped to ground the felt sense of the essence of compassion and generated a deep gratitude for the mysterious workings of spirit through contemplative spiritual direction. As we departed, I quickly picked up a booklet from the table, and leafing through it at home, Sue Monk Kidd’s article “Birthing Compassion,” caught my attention. She wrote:

*A Womb for Compassion*

When we seek compassion, we must remember that ultimately the heart cannot be forced. But it can become a womb where compassion is gestated and birthed. . . . According the Meister Eckhart we are called to the

“divine maternity bed” in the core and ground of the soul. There we birth God. There we birth the name We. And with this holy name we will look with the eyes of the heart at all creatures, great and small, and walk gently upon God’s bruised planet. (30)

Meister Eckhart’s imagery compares the human processes of conception, gestation and birth as equivalent to the intrinsic life of the divine within us, and its process of development and emergence. It is from within the cave of the heart – from the womb of our entire being – that compassion emerges. Kidd quotes Eckhart’s statement that “We are each meant to be mothers of God” (21). Interestingly, the accepted symbol for female or feminine (mother) is a circle (or womb) with a cross (+) below, anchoring the circle into the earth.

Kidd further describes Eckhart’s worldview:

For Eckhart, birthing God essentially meant birthing compassion. He believed compassion to be the ultimate fruit of our birthing, a slow breaking out of divinity from within us. God *is* compassion, he insisted; therefore, as God is born more deeply in the soul, so too is the compassionate life. (21)

Spiritual directors build upon the essential framework of love and compassion and co-create a solid foundation with the Holy Spirit from which to fully meet and engage others with reverence and due respect. Spiritual directors provide a spacious vessel, that is both womb and chalice, where the gestation of the qualities of compassion: non-judgment, acceptance, trust and open-heartedness, deep listening, empathy as well as

birthing the divine nature of our God-ness can carry forward. Directees are supported and encouraged by the spiritual director/mid-wife at their side, open to unknown possibilities and to embodying the spiritual wholeness of their lives. In the presence of sacred nurturing presence the heart opens and transforms to reveal its exquisite inner beauty of love and compassion. This sacred flowering is captured in the poem, “How Did the Rose?” by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet, Hafiz:

How  
did the rose  
ever open its heart  
and give to this world all of its beauty?  
It felt the encouragement of light against its being,  
otherwise we all remain too  
frightened.  
(Ladinsky 161)



(Photo credit: <http://www.spirithealonline.com/default.php>)

## CHAPTER IV

### COMPASSION IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The intimate and confidential nature of spiritual direction invites an inner soul-focused and compassionate exploration into the depth and breadth of life's varied experiences, and as such can help breathe new life, possibility and sacred meaning into the life of the directee as well as into the life of the director. This all-embracing inquiry is centered in the realm of spirit. In spiritual direction directors may be drawn to incorporate specific practices as a way of generating greater love and compassion in the lives of directees. Intentional practices may include: being present, listening, non-violent communication, invitational inquiry, discernment, prayer and meditation, sovereignty, blessing and felt sense. In turn, as directees experience increased compassion, complementary qualities such as acceptance of self and others, interior freedom and a deepened relationship with the Sacred are also fostered and expressed in their own lives.

#### **Being Present**

A primary role of a spiritual director is to be a welcoming and compassionate presence—to receive the directee into a warm and inviting space, to be a confidential and hospitable companion, to be as fully present and available to the directee as possible by setting aside any personal agendas, to listen deeply with respect and caring attention to what arises during a session. Holding the greatest good and possibility for the directee at heart prepares the way for a compassionate exchange between director and directee.

Ann Kline, spiritual director, author and retreat leader, suggests that spiritual direction is a contemplative awareness practice comprised of listening to the subtle and sometimes paradoxical voices of body sensations, heart-felt emotions, thoughts, ideas, and the wholeness of Spirit, the breath of life. She describes deepened awareness as sensing, recognizing, discerning and balancing the multiplicity of our wholeness, which also embraces the movement of the Holy Living Spirit (17). A director not only listens to the words spoken, but also develops a sensitive awareness to the subtle undercurrents of body language, facial expressions, feelings, thoughts and overall energy—in a word, the wholeness or gestalt of the person. Kline expounds on the essence of an expanded awareness:

Our awareness is rooted in our bodies. . . . It is the experience of being present in this moment, without the filters of our ideas or judgments. We are not ruminating about the past or anticipating the future. We are aware of directly touching and being touched by whatever is happening, right now. (18)

As with awareness, compassion is also rooted in our bodies, and arises in spontaneous moments of being “with” others. Receiving directees with a deepened awareness of their wholeness, acceptance and non-judgment in-the-moment is a gift of compassionate presence.

### **Listening**

A vital part of practicing presence in spiritual direction is listening with sincerity and compassion. Margaret Guenther affirms this in her book on spiritual direction. In

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Holy Listening, she states:

Above all, the holy listener is open to anything the directee might bring. She is willing to hear about darkness and desolation, the times of God's seeming absence and neglect. She is not frightened by another's anger, doubt, or fear, and she is comfortable with tears. (146)

The director's willingness to meet others where they are with heart-felt regard and the ability to embrace others without judgment or need to solve problems demonstrate qualities of compassion. Guenther further notes that both director and directee are together involved in the intimate act of listening, "each to his truest self, to the other, and ultimately to God" (144). Central to this joint act is attentiveness to God, remembering and refining that capacity to listen for God's compassionate voice.

Tilden Edwards illustrates that the role of directors is formed upon the capacity for reverent listening:

When we gather in a spiritual direction session we are called to recognize the holy ground upon which all life stands. Together we probe what God is growing in that ground. We seek for our unique place among the growing shoots of life we see. We listen for how the Spirit is loosening, planting, pruning, healing, and enjoying us. When we put our ear to this ground in direction, we are hearing something of God's work and delight not only in ourselves, but echoing in the rest of creation as well. . . . We stand on the meeting ground of heaven and earth, willingly exposed to the divine breath's murmurings. (Spiritual Director 194)

God's breath is constantly creating and fostering potential growth. As we experience the close proximity of God's love, directors and directees alike are vitalized by a deep reverence and regard for the one life coursing through us all. Our interconnectedness gives rise to the very essence of compassion that honors the divinity of our own lives as well as the lives of all living beings.

The heart of deep listening requires attuning to the voice of Spirit and being open and receptive to what of Spirit is seeking expression. When we are curious, we are open and engaged, and unfettered by preconceived opinions and habitual thought patterns. Our listening skills are enhanced. In this non-judging spaciousness, we are better able to listen with our whole being and receive the spontaneous grace of compassion present in the moment. Edwards speaks to this grace within spiritual direction:

The spiritual direction session offers a space where both directee and director can claim their desire for the larger Love that invites our trust and not our fearful forcing of things. In the presence of the director's desire for that creative Love to live as fully as possible in the directee, the directee may relax enough so that s/he sinks back more easily into that Presence in their souls where they realize they are not on their own. From that place, shared by director and directee, listening can lead to surprising glimpses of grace and sometimes of clearer direction. (Spiritual Director, 66)

God's love and compassion is received more wholly as we listen into the stillness that invites us to come ever closer in contact with the Divine – “Be still, and know that I

am God” (Oxford, Ps. 46.10). Compassion becomes authentic through the human experience and through the divine grace of God.

### **Non-Violent Communication**

Non-violent communication is an important aspect of expressing compassion in spiritual direction. In addition to listening, the style with which one communicates has great consequences in personal and social interactions, and is significant to the practice of spiritual direction. Just as it is important to listen with greater sensitivity into the deeper nature of spiritual reality, it is equally important to be aware of our inner and outer communication skills and habits. As previously discussed in Chapter II, non-violent communication encourages connection with our divine energy, our source. In his research on the nature of compassionate communication, Marshall Rosenberg discovered a heart-centered approach “. . .connecting us with ourselves and with each other in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish” (2).

Rosenberg suggests strategies that reach toward the enrichment and fullness of life, giving rise to loving, empathic and compassionate ways to respond to feelings and experiences, and interactions with one’s self and others. This process also relates to soul friending. Directors align, attune and engage with directees in the spirit of the moment, free from judgment, right/wrong thinking, or habits of conditioned thinking and responses, enhancing the capacity for engaging the fertile ground of possibility, spontaneous discovery and revelation. These qualities speak to the movement and expression of compassion. Rosenberg comments:

So Nonviolent Communication helps me stay connected with that beautiful Divine Energy within myself and to connect with it in others. And certainly when I connect that Divine Energy within myself with the Divine Energy in others, what happens then is the closest I know of what it is to be connected to God. (Spiritual Basis)

### **Invitational Inquiry**

Compassion is expressed in the way a director asks questions of a directee. Communication with a directee in the spiritual direction relationship is enhanced by the use of a language of invitation. This style of communication generates feelings of ease and calm one might feel when hospitably welcomed into another's home. It invites an openness to explore, ponder and contemplate experiences that prompt new insights, potentialities, and shifts in perception and consciousness. Open-ended questions put forward with loving compassion "open doors, invite the directee to stretch and grow" (Guenther 65) and also invite mutual respect and trust, both virtues of compassion.

Fruitful invitational questions used in spiritual direction might include: "What meaning or feeling does this hold for you?" "How does this (event, experience) affect you now?" "What images come to mind?" "Where do you sense the sacred in this situation?" "What else?" "Is there more?" Questions of an open-ended nature focus on "what," "when," "where," and "how" allow greater leeway for a non-judgmental and compassionate exploratory inquiry, and help to draw directees deeper into their present moment experience and understanding. Questioning "why" however, can generally close down an inquiry and often leads into areas of no return. We cannot easily know the

“why” of things. We can, however, ask our heart of hearts, “what meaning does this have for me *now*?” Invitational questions carry the power to generate greater freedom of movement within the mind, emotions and soul, and work toward shaping and affirming the unique sovereignty of both directors and directees. An example of this is conveyed in Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet:

. . . to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (27)

Patience is an example of self-compassion that benefits both participants in spiritual direction. Directors also express compassion for directees in the process of asking sincere, respectful and considerate questions. Directees are gently invited to go deeper within to discover something new, something as yet unknown, a new perspective, and an inner knowing at the edge of consciousness ready to be revealed. Portals can open, veils can be lifted and new horizons revealed when directee’s consider the question, “What will help me taste and listen to my life, offering me the capacity to stand still without judgment, with compassionate attention?” (Bernecker, 1). Directors invite directees into a compassionate inquiry bringing light to that which is yearning to express.

In my director experience, directees sometimes share descriptive narratives about past events, feelings or experiences. Often by asking questions through the voice of compassion, in Spirit's presence and focusing on what is present for directees *now*, directees enter into processes of revelatory understanding, deep change and growth. When directors and directees consciously engage with the wonder and wisdom of the Great Mystery as it lives in us, the meaning of our lives is deepened, as is our capacity for self-compassion and compassion for others.

It is important that directors are sensitive to directees' use of language, to first check in with directees as to what words or phrases hold spiritual meaning and resonance for them especially when referring to God, the Sacred, Spirit, Divine, Soul, etc. In repeating particular phraseology back to directees, a language bridge of commonality is constructed between soul friends. Directees begin to relax and unwind when they are compassionately heard, understood and their particular language style is reflected to them. It is also helpful for directors to notice patterns of speech that move directees toward growth in God and to support and affirm that growth. Here, directors honor directees by standing in compassionate solidarity alongside them.

It is probable there may be occasions in soul friending sessions when directees express resistance to further inquiry into certain areas. It is important that directors recognize resistance and welcome and hold it within the grail of compassionate presence with kindness, understanding, patience and equanimity. Often resistance surfaces as an unconscious protection of an inner treasure. When resistance is understood in this way, it is always a friend, a guide along the path, and will naturally be revisited over time.

In invitational dialogue, the focus of spiritual direction lovingly constellates around the sacred life of the directee. Directees are encouraged to search within, to contemplate their own spiritual experiences and processes, to reflect on inner spiritual truths, to steep in their particularized expression of the sacred, and to live and move and have their being from that sacred place. Through this caring interaction the directee's self-compassion is enriched and strengthened.

### **Discernment**

Practicing discernment in the spiritual direction setting helps one to experience life, not as a puzzle to be solved, but as a mystery to be lived and embraced in the wholeness of one's being. In spiritual direction one is invited to allow, honor and hold the paradox of opposites with deep compassion. One is also called to sort and discern the presence, voice and activity of the Sacred which thread their way through our particular life stream, as well as to discern the illusions and resistance that impede one's soul's calling. Compassionate discernment allows one to hold the tension between seemingly incompatible viewpoints with no judgment and much spaciousness, to see all viewpoints from a witness stance without criticism.

Rumi's poem, "The Guest House," urges both directors and directees to greet and receive each and every human feeling, thought, awareness, concern or difficulty, whether expected or not, that enters our lives. The poem describes this welcoming and open approach:

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

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A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.

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 whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond. (Rumi 109)

As Rumi says, all experience is welcome and received graciously: sadness, happiness, despair, joy, grief or ecstasy. The travails and joys of life are grist for the mill in evoking the movement of the spirit within. Invite them in, honor them, and be grateful for their presence for it is in meeting life's experiences with gratitude that one's compassion is awakened. Like the director in her or his own interior discernment process, the director welcomes, invites and holds the soul friend in a compassionate space where the process of discerning the intricacies of life's mysteries and choosing forward

movement can emerge. It is particularly important that directors listen with care to the underlying spiritual yearnings and concerns of directees. In a discernment process, it is of value not only to have a sense of who directees are, but also to learn what dreams and hopes they carry in their hearts, what inspires and moves within them, what is their sense of calling. Asking directees, in the gentleness of compassion, to listen and reflect on their own personal sense of the presence of Spirit, or God in their current concern or dilemma expands their lens of vision, encourages them to seek within and assists in opening their way forward. Directors become a mirror, a model of compassionate self-acceptance and non-judgment as they lovingly listen and reflect directees' concerns. This interplay assists directees in creating a safe container, a sacred chalice or womb, where they, too, are encouraged to explore, listen and respond to their authentic true self, to their holy inner world. It is in this still place of compassionate listening that the process of discernment takes place and unfolds.

The discernment process is relevant both to directors and directees in cultivating compassionate awareness. The invitation is not only to seek being in God's compassionate presence, but also to choose to act in God's loving and compassionate ways in the world.

Tilden Edwards sees discernment as a process of living out of our sacredness:

Our unique path is formed with each step we take. God does not seem to have a blueprint for our lives. Divine guidance is more of an always-emerging, spontaneous happening, full of divine freedom and love, fully attuned to our loved nature and situation. . . .we become free for a focus

on an ongoing divine/human dance together that is less concentrated on right answers than on a right inner orientation, one that keeps us living out of our deep souls no matter how vague our sense of what decision to make. Then we are living more by steady trust. . . .(Spiritual Director, 65)

Both directees and directors engage this trust in the sacred by orienting themselves to a path of love and compassion. Directors are able to hold directees with compassion and love by trusting that the divine source will serve as a guide for directees in the particularities of their lives. Directees learn to trust their own inner process and listen to whisperings of the spirit with the compassionate support of both the director and of God.

Discernment is a process that summons authentic openness, trust and freedom, and encourages a God-inspired engagement in shaping lives of sacred service. As one discerns inwardly, the inquiry will bear fruit in the world. Any discernment about spiritual work in the world will surely include an element of compassion, both in the doing of it and in being a representative of the Sacred. Spiritual director, Suzanne Fageol, explains discernment as follows:

The dance of discernment is an interactive, dynamic dance of possibility and accountability in which we foster our capacity to generate a sacred life out of our own creative imagination, learn to recognize it and bear it forth to serve in the world around us. (“Some Perspectives on Discernment,” Lorian, *Spiritual Capacities II*, 2002)

In spiritual direction the discernment process encourages us to come into closer relationship with our divine source, to live into love and compassion and co-create our lives in the presence of a compassionate and loving God.

### **Prayer and Meditation**

Prayer and meditation are contemplative and compassionate practices that are intrinsic to the practice of spiritual direction and serve to draw us nearer to the true Self, to know God in our heart of hearts, and to enliven the presence of sacred holiness in all things. Henri Nouwen calls this the “discipline of the Heart” (Spiritual Direction *xvi*):

Interior prayer is a careful attentiveness to the One who dwells in the center of our being. Through prayer we awaken ourselves to God within us. With practice, we allow God to enter into our heartbeat and our breathing, into our thoughts and emotions, into our hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting, and into every membrane of our body. It is by being awake to God in us that we can increasingly see God in the world around us. . . .praying is not only listening *to* but listening *with* the heart. Prayer helps us stand in the presence of God with all we have and are: our fears and anxieties; our guilt and shame; our sexual fantasies; our greed and anger; our joys, successes, aspirations, and hopes; our reflections, dreams, and mental wandering; and most of all our family, friends, and enemies—in short, all that makes us who we are. With all this we have to listen to God’s voice and allow God to speak to us in every corner of our being.

*(xvi-xvii)*

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Nouwen sets out three stages of prayer. The first stage of prayer is to ask for God's help. In the second stage, we have intimate and conversational dialogues with God. Third, "We listen for God in an attitude of openness of heart, humility of spirit, and quietness of soul. We let our mind descend into our heart and there stand in the presence of God" (63). He suggests asking directees: "How is your prayer life? How are you making space in your life for God to speak?" (xvii). As previously noted, it is also important that directors attend to their spiritual lives—to their "own lived and prayed relationship with God" (Fagin 7). Nouwen recommends choosing a definite time and place for daily prayer and to focus on a particular theme or issue (64). Directors offer directees compassionate support, encouragement and the freedom to explore an integrated prayer life as an important element in the process of spiritual unfoldment. In prayer both directors and directees are encouraged to accept themselves in the fullness of who they are and show up for God. God's presence becomes a grail cup that holds prayers in deep love and compassion, and reflects that compassion back by encouraging greater love, kindness, forgiveness and acceptance.

The Dalai Lama has written extensively on meditation as a practice of mindful awareness and the cultivation of compassion, and comments that regardless of the style of meditation we choose, it is important that "it directs our actions as we live our everyday lives. By our doing so, everything we do outside our formal sessions becomes part of our training in compassion" (Open Heart 104). Experiences between direction sessions inform the directee where the rubber meets the road and helps identify where the presence of spirit is noticed in daily life. Here the manifestation of compassion is

regarded in much the same way Meister Eckhart understood it: as a movement outward, a birthing of activity into the world.

In The Places That Scare You, Pema Chödrön describes the basis of Buddhist sitting meditation in this way:

Sitting meditation cultivates loving-kindness and compassion. . . . It gives us a way to move closer to our thoughts and emotions and to get in touch with our bodies. It is a method of cultivating unconditional friendliness toward ourselves and for parting the curtain of indifference that distances us from the suffering of others. It is our vehicle for learning to be a truly loving person. (25)

Meditation connects us to our deeper spiritual nature where the threads of our senses, feelings, beliefs and thoughts are woven together in an intimate tapestry. Both directors and directees are invited to come to know themselves more wholly in the spaciousness, love and compassion of the sacred. Meditation, as compassion, softens judgment and self-criticism and builds connections so that we are freer to connect with the joys and sorrows of others. Meditation opens us and connects us to God's loving radiance present in the living world.

Drawing on The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, who developed one formal structure of spiritual direction within the Roman Catholic tradition, Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon suggest a prayer practice of using imaginative contemplation for internalizing the love of God. God's sacred love is imbued with compassion and in coming closer to knowing God's love, a reservoir of deep

connectedness to that compassionate love is forged. This connection opens their hearts and frees them to compassionately love others as God loves them. They know this love from a “‘felt-knowledge’ (*sentir*) of God’s love for us, . . . we know ‘in our bones’ that God loves us with unconditional and unwavering love” (55).

Lectio divina is an ancient four-step approach centered on the contemplation of scripture or inspirational writings. Both directors and directees can incorporate lectio divina in their spiritual practice by slowly reading a passage through three times; each time noticing a word or two that captures attention; then with gentle curiosity, simply pondering and meditating on the word or words, listening for spirit’s voice. In this practice we allow and accept what arises to guide our way. Compassion is fostered as we notice, accept and embrace whatever presents itself to our awareness.

Contemplation practices can also be applied to our senses of sight and hearing: as in visio divina (seeing) God, or audio divina (hearing) God. In these practices a statue or other representation of a divine figure is observed, or a piece of sacred music is listened to, and contemplated in a similar fashion to lectio divina. For example, in contemplating Quan Yin one would bring a prayerful attention to the qualities of her great compassion, and prayerfully invite a greater experience and knowing of compassion into one’s own life.

A profound prayerful meditation to contemplate is the phrase, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Encouraging directees to set aside time in the busyness of their lives to consciously breathe the breath that is life’s source, to re-member themselves to that sacred Source, to say to God, “Here I am,” nurtures a personal rhythm of attunement to

the presence of Spirit in every moment. Slowing down, paying attention to the sacredness within and being patient and loving toward the self foster compassion in directees. They are strengthened in love, compassion and joy as they attend (from the Latin tendere, to hold) their practice of this holy discipline of the heart.

### **Sovereignty**

In the practice of spiritual direction the sovereignty of directors and directees are held in the deepest compassion. Sovereignty is the unique quality of our particularized, or individualized, embodied divinity expressing through the Self. As we embrace sovereignty as an inherently sacred quality that applies to all beings, acceptance of our Self and others and of our inseparable interconnectedness begins to permeate our consciousness. This acceptance leads to greater compassion for both our individual Self and for the wider community.

David Spangler's seminal work on Incarnational Spirituality focuses first and foremost on the sacredness and power of incarnation, and the process of becoming more whole as incarnate beings. Central to this emerging spirituality is the concept of sovereignty which he describes as “. . .the ‘line of sacredness and being’ that is our link with the Generative Mystery. It is the essence, sum or presence of our sacredness, Identity, Self, Individuality, and Soul as manifested in our physical incarnation” (Incarnational Spirituality 47).

Spiritual direction is rooted in the premise that as spiritual beings we arise in goodness, that divinity resides within each of us and that our life's destiny is in endeavoring to release that flow of divinity through our personal selves and into the

greater community and world. Instead of focusing on our inadequacy, our attention is turned toward the infinite love and compassion God holds for us all, magnifying our personal sense of human-divine sovereignty, love and compassion.

“Sovereignty. . . is the capacity and function within us that enables us to express our unique ‘isness’ or being, our will and ‘I’-ness” (Spangler, *Incarnational Spirituality*, 47). Sovereignty relates to the unique manifestation of selfhood and sacredness that lies within each human being. Spiritual directors learn to see each person with whom they meet as a sovereign expression of the Sacred. Through this lens, directees are held and embraced as one might behold the Creator, with love, reverence and wonderment, embracing their loveliness through the heart of compassion.

### **Blessing**

In many ways the art of spiritual direction resembles the compassionate art of blessing. David Spangler has written extensively on blessing and describes this accessible practice simply as: “Where two or more are gathered in the name of that which loves, that which is compassionate, that which liberates, there blessing is also” (*Blessing* 9).

Spangler offers an additional definition of blessing as follows:

Blessing is the art of being spiritually present to another in a manner that draws out and supports the spiritual resources and energies within that person. The same is true if blessing is directed towards a situation, that it draws out the spiritual potentials that are present to achieve the highest good for everyone in that situation. (<http://lorian.org/pr-blessing.html>)

Including a simple blessing in a soul friending session is appropriate because the act of blessing is an expression of compassion. Spangler says, “Any act of blessing, born of compassion and love, is neither shallow nor deep, trivial nor dramatic. It manifests in ways appropriate to see the need and spirit of the situation” (Blessing 276). A favorite blessing that I have used in spiritual direction follows:

Bless this place in which I am, with honor and gratitude for its presence and its gifts of space.

Bless my self, with honor and gratitude for the uniqueness of spirit, life, insight, and creativity which I bring to the world.

Bless others around me, seen and unseen, with honor and gratitude for the gifts we bring to each other, for the creativity and energy that can emerge from our collaboration.

Bless the activity I undertake, that it may prosper and be a blessing to all my world. (Lorian Association, “The Four Fold Blessing” brochure)

Our blessings of love and compassion for ourselves flow outward to others and to God as a source of goodness and wholeness. In Urgings of the Heart, Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon observe this cascade of blessing:

. . . our compassionate love of others can be the graceful occasion when they are given an ‘I-am’ experience, awaking in them an awareness of their radical acceptability. As the gracefulness of their own being dawns on them, they grow in self-love and gratefully extend this love to others,

now handing over their being to God and neighbor, giving as they have received. (155)

Au and Cannon include a poem in Urgings. Lines from Galway Kinnel's poem, "St. Francis and the Sow" convey the essence of the grace inherent in spiritual direction through the emergence of self-love, self-compassion and self-blessing:

The bud  
stands for all things  
even for those things that don't flower,  
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;  
though sometimes it is necessary  
to reteach a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on its brow  
of the flower  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely  
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing. . . (155)

This poem speaks to the nature of self-blessing as an expression of self-compassion, and of times when we lean into the light of spirit to remember our beauty.

### **Healthy Boundaries**

Maintaining healthy boundaries in spiritual direction is an act of compassion for both the director and the directee. Occasionally directors may slip into forms of judgment or evaluative opinions of directees, or attempt to offer advice creating a momentary

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disconnect to the true work of spiritual direction. Should this occur, it is important that directors take a few moments, requesting a brief silent time together, breathing into realignment and reconnection with their own inner sacredness, their directees, and God's presence. It is important that directors attend to their own integrity and to safeguard the essence of honor, respect and spiritual freedom within the soul-friending relationship. A brief reorientation to the Sacred maintains healthy boundaries, sustains connections, and allows the session to proceed unobstructed by assumptive thinking or tumbling into critical viewpoints or intellectual entanglements. Healthy boundaries assist the director in standing with, coming alongside and companioning the directee through his or her sometimes flourishing and sometimes barren landscape without becoming lost in the experience. This speaks to the director's self-compassion, as well as a deep regard and compassion for the directee. Spiritual direction requires that directors hold a subtle balance of reverent and compassionate attunement and awareness of the self (director), the soul friend and the Sacred—seeing each as equal and distinct, yet interconnected participants in the divine web of wholeness.

### **Felt Sense**

Attending to the felt sense of the body fosters compassion in the spiritual direction setting. Broadening the exploration of what it means to draw our spirituality into our incarnate embodiment, we can look to the body as the ground of being, the vehicle through which we live and move and experience the inner awareness of our deepest selves. Eugene Gendlin has written a detailed manual in his book Focusing on

accessing inner body wisdom by paying attention to impressions and internal shifts of the body's often vague and nebulous micro-movements (43-64).

Felt sense is a somatic awareness of the body/spirit connection, and can be an effective tool for developing a more intimate and compassionate relationship with the self by tapping into the wisdom of the incarnate body. Focusing allows us to notice, allow and attend to feelings and sensations that arise in the body, still the active reasoning mind, bridge the intuitive body-mind connection, and leads toward increased clarity and meaning. Setting “kindly eyes” upon the felt sense aids in honoring and connecting us to body awareness and the intimate interplay of the various facets of our being. A sense of wholeness is generated thereby enhancing self-compassion.

While spiritual direction traditionally focuses on the directee's relationship to God, often the dis-ease of the body, mind, emotions or soul can obstruct this organic and sacred relationship. One of the goals of spiritual direction is to elicit greater freedom in the whole life of the directee. As Rumi describes in his poem “The Guest House,” God embraces all areas of life, and the gift of compassion is to accept and welcome whatever is happening in one's life. Somatic awareness is an effective transformational tool for both directors and directees. For directors, utilizing somatic awareness of their own bodily sensations gives clues to inner activity happening below surface awareness. Fostering this awareness practice supports directors in their ability to stay present, focused and connected to their inner source—in their body—while at the same time being focused and attentive to directees and to the movement of Spirit. It is a practice of becoming familiar with and functioning within more than one level of awareness at a

time. Spiritual direction assists directors and directees alike in cultivating a compassionate presence to their own process of drawing together the varied experiences of body, mind, emotion and spirit into a greater fullness and radiance of being.

Ann Weiser Cornell expands upon Gendlin's work. In her book, The Radical Acceptance of Everything, she describes a form of focused listening as a powerful agent of change, which is equally important in the spiritual direction setting. Cornell reflects:

My role had been to hear her, and even more, to facilitate her hearing herself. The essence of the state of Presence is that *in Presence, we are listeners*. In Presence, we can listen with interest and acceptance to whatever arises. We don't take sides, we don't try to make an outcome happen, we just listen. The result is that every part of us feels deeply heard, and the process that has been waiting to happen, can happen. (54)

Cornell highlights the importance of "*the therapeutic use of language* – when language is used to facilitate a process in another person," (173) as a foundational goal in therapy. Again, this can also be applied to spiritual direction, and is similar to invitational inquiry discussed previously – "how" we speak is significant to other's ability to stay focused within their own process. For instance, as directors and directees together explore feelings that surface in relation to a particular experience, if directors ask them to describe the quality of a feeling (i.e. "What's the quality of that?"), it would possibly cause directees to shift into cognitive thinking in search of the appropriate words. This evaluative process moves directees further away from the actual feeling and out of their inner process. Cornell suggests instead inviting directees to deepen into the feeling, for

example saying, “You might take some time to sense the quality of that” (174). In this instance, directees are honored, valued and allowed the freedom to explore the feeling in a certain spaciousness, and in their own timing, to sense more deeply into what is gestating within – without exiting too quickly into the thinking mind. Cornell describes this as “a time when everything in your body / mind, in your whole organism, is rearranging itself to accommodate the new understanding you have received” (Power of Focusing 45). The director is patient and allows the directee to be in process in an open and compassionate present moment awareness.

Another expression of compassion in the arena of felt sense is that while in session, directors may experience personal feelings of fatigue, irritability or discomfort, signaling disconnection or dissociation, and should feel free to request a momentary silence to re-center, reconnect and reorient their alignment and attunement with the Sacred. Taking the time to attune to the body – feeling one’s feet solidly on the ground and touching the big toes to the floor, sitting squarely on the sit bones, and following the breath – aids directors in realigning to the Self and being present to the moment (Stanley, “Somatic Transformation” class notes, January 2009). For the director, this self-care is a conscious act of self-compassion. Likewise, if directors notice a similar dissociative state within directee, gently inviting them into a quiet meditation time can help directees reorient and connect to a greater sense of compassion and sacred presence.

Noticing and attending to the subtle perceptions of bodily sensation and movement helps us to listen in new ways to our temple of Spirit, and to attune our bodily ear to the subtle messages of Spirit. The wisdom of the body is an immediate and

available source for connecting to the wholeness of our being. Drawing on Eckhart's illustration of the body being held within the soul, this interconnection breathes through the body into the realm of Spirit's compassion.

In summary, the practices covered in Chapter IV help directors and directees discover the deep well of compassion that resides within them as it resides in God. Compassion for one's self and for others enriches lives, awakens capacities to love more completely and to be blessings in the world. Spiritual direction is the practice of shaping a life attuned to the essence and presence of God – the sacred source of love and compassion. Our inherent sacredness is affirmed in the compassionate domain of spiritual direction.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The practice of spiritual direction is a practice of compassion. It is an invitation into a co-creative partnership with the Sacred and an exploration into the infinite and ineffable realities underlying life's experience. Principal elements of spiritual direction include explorations into the depth and breadth of our incarnation and the interrelatedness of all of life, uncovering and gaining greater understanding of the spiritual essence woven through the activities of our everyday incarnate lives. Spiritual direction deepens our spiritual practice, enhances our compassion for self and others, enriches our integrity, strengthens our cohesive wholeness and supports living a life in the presence of the Sacred. Spiritual direction provides a hallowed vessel "where two or more are gathered" as they journey along life's spiraling path. Spiritual direction is a sacred practice steeped in compassion and love and offers nurturing support to all who choose to enter.

There are today many people who seek to find their purpose in life. Metaphysical teacher and spiritual companion, William Bloom, offers a broad description of this quest, noting:

Everyone's life purpose is the same. Our purpose is to develop our compassion and consciousness until finally, in every single cell, we are completely and totally loving, awake and of benefit to all living beings. . . . One hundred per cent compassionate and conscious in every fibre of our being. ("the purpose of our lives." E-mail to the author. 21 January 2009.)

Engaging spiritual direction does not guarantee reaching a certain destination in heart, mind or soul, or that we will someday arrive at the end of our journey. This is not a linear pilgrimage, but a circular or spiral dance—a journeying through life itself. It is along the way, in the garden of the universe and in the company of all our soul friends, that we meet face-to-face with the Divine countenance of all beings and non-beings, and experience the sacredness in our relational world. As we live our days, it is through relationships that we encounter compassion: through authentic relationship with Self, with Others and with the Sacred. We begin to “live and move and have our being” in God and recognize that same movement within all of creation.

Spiritual direction offers that intimate and sacred space in which to contemplate and discern the movement of the Divine Mystery. It is a collaborative and dedicated process of both shaping and being shaped by our divine holiness, our divine humanness and our world – recognizing, appreciating and embodying who we are in our wholeness; liberating and freeing ourselves from habits which restrict our fullness of being; and opening to the ever present God, Spirit, the Divine Sacred everywhere, always. We are invited to taste the divine nectars, to feel the Divine as closer than our breath, to touch the Sacred in all that we do, to embrace the sacredness of others, both seen and unseen, to celebrate nature and the world of being in the simple ordinary practices of our everyday life. As with hope and love, compassion engages our human and divine selves, which in turn generates renewal. And, as we deepen into our own experience of the Sacred, the world within and around us is nurtured into greater expressions of compassion and love—just as God nurtures us, we, too, are nurturers of God. Compassion is the mother of

the world and we each carry the seeds of compassion within us. This divine relationship shapes the sacred practice of spiritual direction.

The practice of spiritual direction is infused with compassion. Compassion is a guide and companion to directors as they meet, engage and connect with directees with loving-kindness, honor and respect, non-judgment and hospitable caring through deep listening and invitational inquiry to what is present in the spirit of the moment.

Compassion is also developed as a capacity in both directors and directees through discernment and the sacred practices of meditation and prayer. Self-compassion, in both director and directee, is the touchstone for developing a growing compassion toward others and all creation.

Throughout the ages lines of prose, poetry and song have captured the subtle and distinctive qualities of the divine sacred life and imparted revelatory insight into the commonplace and transcendent mysteries of this world. The holy elements of love and compassion, so essential in the practice of spiritual direction, serve as a threshold between the microcosmic personal inner mysteries and the larger macrocosmic mysteries of the world and cosmos. Spiritual direction is limited if it only directs people inward. It is important to integrate our deep yearning and contemplative experiences with our social conscience in order to co-create fruitful action toward a spiritual globalization of our world. Just as the womb is the place of inner gestation, it also gives birth into the outer world. As previously stated, along the continuum of love, compassion is recognized as the first expression of love. Love becomes real when we recognize, through compassion, our shared humanity. Spiritual direction offers a sacred container in which to experience,

cultivate, strengthen and expand the very heart of compassion in and for our world.

Antoinette Voûte Roeder's evocative poem gives blessing to the sacred work of spiritual direction and to the compassionate love that unites us together as one.

### **Companioning the World**

When we sit together,  
carefully parting varied strands  
of our lives, passing them  
through wondering fingers  
with amazement and a heart  
that's hushed and leaning ever  
towards Spirit, listening,  
we are learning how  
to be and let be, how  
to honor our experience  
and to recognize the Holy in it.

Then it is no leap, no  
effort at all to love and  
honor and support all  
creation's right to be, to  
revel in its multi-colored  
strands and praise the One

whose nimble fingers weave us

all together.

Wondrous Love.

Wondrous world. (3)

We need this expansive dimension of spiritual direction if we are to be of service in these momentous times. Compassion is the thread that will link our interior lives with the interconnectedness of all life. Compassion is the path from wondrous love to a wondrous world.

## Appendix A

### Compassion Practice by Jack Kornfield

In his book The Wise Heart, Jack Kornfield presents the following exercise for cultivating compassion for ourselves and for others.

- Sit quietly and centered with an inner attention to the body, an awareness of the breath, the heartbeat and the life energy coursing within. Bring awareness to the personal feelings for the self, and the ways in which you attend to the preciousness of self in caring ways: “Feel how you treasure your own life, how you guard yourself in the face of your sorrows” (33). Stay with this awareness and feeling for a time.
- The next step is to visualize someone you love and care for, noticing your inner heart feelings as you become aware of any suffering they may carry: “Feel how your heart opens to wish them well, to extend comfort, to share in their pain and meet it with compassion. This is the natural response of the heart” (34). Centered in an open, comforting heart, reach out to others repeating inwardly:

*May you be held in compassion.*

*May your pain and sorrow be eased.*

*May you be at peace. (34)*

- Continue by turning compassionately toward one’s self and to any sorrows carried within, reciting the following, or similar words that are genuine and real:

*May I be held in compassion.*

*May my pain and sorrow be eased.*

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*May I be held in peace. (34)*

Kornfield suggests that over time one can freely offer this same compassionate holding to friends, neighbors, co-workers, communities, enemies, and eventually extend this deep compassion to all beings and life with which we are connected through our gentle and tender heart (33-34). And finally, he encourages practitioners to:

Work with compassion practice intuitively. At times it may feel difficult, as though you might be overwhelmed by the pain. Remember, you are not trying to “fix” the pain of the world, only to hold it with a compassionate heart. As you practice again and again, relax and be gentle. Breathe. Let your breath and heart rest naturally, as a center of compassion in the midst of the world. (34)

## Appendix B

### Exercise for Birthing Compassion by Susan Sherman

The birthing metaphor applies to the development of the capacity of compassion and can be broken down into the following four stages:

**1. Identification and intention.** As in all endeavors, the first stage is identifying and affirming what we desire to co-create, design, build and nurture. In keeping with the womb analogy, we are the container in which the intention to cultivate compassion for our individual self is implanted. We may choose to intentionally plant the seeds of compassion, or in some instances, the circumstances of life cause the seeds of compassion to take root in us. It is of benefit to supplement this intention with self-respect, honor and care.

**2. Notice and observe.** Secondly, we gently notice (with “kindly eyes”) what is occurring in our inner life. What is happening in the fecund earth of our being? Noticing implies relationship, and here we work toward cultivating a compassionate relationship with our own self by observing what energies, sensations, thoughts, feelings, and awarenesses are present at this time, in this moment. With soft eyes and kind heart, we are openly curious and receptive to what is present in the inner depths of our being.

**3. Hold and listen.** In the third stage we practice holding our awareness in spaciousness, in the full presence of our being, without judgment, criticism or a desire to make things different. We focus on our humanity, our personhood, our wholeness, and without rejecting any qualities we may find distasteful, listen for the quiet inner voice, the voice of spirit, which accompanies us toward greater understanding and wholeness. The

practice of stillness – when thoughts, emotions and intentions become relatively quiescent – opens the portal to the sacred connection. Being in stillness, we begin to recognize the interconnection we share with all of life, and coupled with this connection, compassion expands. This is the gestation time, the time of sweet ripening.

**4. Acceptance, transformation and re-birth.** In the fourth stage we see ourselves through Sacred eyes bringing acceptance, wholeness-making and true friendship with the self. When birthing is near, there is movement and turning: we move toward greater acceptance of ourselves as we are, drop inner objections and resistance, and embrace ourselves in renewed understanding. Acceptance and compassionate understanding shepherd a transformation of the self and a spontaneous movement of re-birth into greater wholeness and freedom, and a renewed faith and trust in our being and in the world. The container has fulfilled its purpose and a new life emerges.

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