***Introduction to Boundless Compassion Retreat Day***

***Center for Contemplative Living, Denver, CO***

January 25, 2020

**Introduction/prayer**

Begin with everyone sitting in a circle doing Centering Prayer. Let everyone know that the prayer period will end when they hear a song being played. Start the prayer period by reading the following poem by William Safford:

***The Way It Is***

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn’t change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can’t get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.  
You don’t ever let go of the thread.

Without announcing it ***again play “The Way It Is” by Bruce Hornsby & the Range*** at the conclusion of the prayer period.

Note that the song and the poem have something in common besides their titles; the commonality resides in the reality of suffering and its link to compassion. Joyce Rupp describes the dual thread of suffering and compassion that binds all of creation:

*Broken, wounded, violent, damaged, divisive – these are some descriptions given to our current global situation. Our world desperately needs the noble, essential quality of compassion to be activated – and will not heal without it. Depending on how we respond, we can increase or decrease the amount of anguish in our world. Only with compassion at the core of humanity’s lived experience will we be able to approach one another with true respect and dwell in peacefulness.*

**Compassion as a Way of Life – Compassion and Suffering**

As Joyce’s words and the two *Way It Is* poems re-enforce compassion and suffering are entwined in our experience. Suffering is the constrictive force that surrounds our lives in a multitude of forms. Compassion is the prescriptive response we are called to as a response to the constrictive force of suffering. As we all know, everyone experiences suffering. But as we also know, not everyone follows a path of compassion in their responses to suffering. ***Suffering is a condition of life, whereas compassion is a way of life.*** As we begin our time together it will be helpful to ask, “What is compassion?”

Paul Gilbert describes compassion as “Being sensitive to the suffering of self and others with a deep commitment to prevent or relive it.”

Christina Feldman writes “Compassion is not a psychosomatic state or emotion but an understanding.”

Finally our primary guide for today Joyce Rupp says that “Compassion is a way of life that requires inner awareness.” Therefore, it is quite appropriate that we began our day with contemplative prayer.

Compassion is an understanding that arises and moves within our bodies. When we see a homeless person on the street corner – I pass them every time I come to Contemplative Outreach – we might feel a stirring in our hearts as we cast our gaze in the opposite direction.

When we listen and respond to these stirrings within our hearts, we take the first steps in creating a compassionate way of life.

Take a moment and reflect on the question “What are you hoping to find today?” What would bring you to a retreat on compassion?

***Tell a personal story of searching.***

What are you looking for today? Perhaps today you will not find the answers, but discover the question(s) that will lead you to that which you seek. If so, this day will be well spent.

Let’s take hold of the thread of compassion described by Safford and begin discovering our questions together.

Joyce describes the place we must begin saying that compassion is an “inside-out movement.”

“You can’t stand in the midst of the world and struggle for change unless, at the same time, you are standing in your own space and looking for change within.”

~ Howard Thurman

Christina Feldman writes that compassion is an “understanding.” She describes that understanding as “rooted in the classroom of our lives and hearts and in a genuine investigation of our own relationship to pain and suffering.”

Therefore, we must begin within ourselves understanding that we are related to everything. As native spirituality teaches, we are the sum of our relationships. It is this relational awareness that is foundational to compassion.

We are united with all of creation at many levels and in various ways.

* Biology / physical aspects/ sharing of genetic material (Rupert Sheldrake)
* Quantum physics / photons / field of energy/ entanglement
* Neuroscience / the brain in the heart

“Nothing exists independently… the closer scientists look, the more they discover how dependent on, and finally indivisible from, everything is with everything else.” - Lynne McTaggart

Recognizing our inter-connectedness, we strive for transformation through the compassionate process of: ***Awareness leading to Intention that then leads to Action***. If this sounds similar to Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths, it’s because it is. If this sounds like the life of Jesus, it’s because it is.

Joyce describes four qualities that color our thread of compassion that we must hold on in order to begin the journey of Boundless Compassion:

1. Non-judgment
2. Non-violence in thought, word, and deed
3. Forgiveness
4. Mindfulness

**Non-judgment**

**Tell a personal story about judging someone unfairly and its negative consequences on relationship.**

**Non-violence**

“Non violence means avoiding injury to anything on earth, in thought word, or deed”

~ Mohandas Gandhi

Christina Feldman reminds us of what we already know so well. “Our brains are wired for both cruelty and compassion” and “Our capacity to be a cause for suffering and our capacity to end suffering live side by side within us.”

It seems that we are hard wired for both violence and non-violence. Why is this so?

* Reptilian (early) part of brain – fight or flee, feed, reproduce
* Limbic system – emotional responses
* Neo-cortex, outer, newer part of brain(particularly the frontal lobe) - think, discern, choose, decide, act. The Neo-Cortex, the outer layer of the brain, the newest part, latest developed, wired for relationship, for empathy, “Gandhi neurons”
* Neuroplasticity – the ability of the brain to change, “Neurons that fire together, wire together,” messages to the brain strengthen neurons, neurons become more efficient

“You cannot solve any problem in the same state of awareness in which it was created.”

~ Albert Einstein

Barbara Brown Taylor “Pain originates in the body, suffering happens in the mind.”

“The words your mind thinks become the house your heart lives in.”

~ Ann Voskamp

**Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is not:

* Forgetting
* Excusing
* Accepting
* Denying
* Or numbing yourself to pain.

“Forgiveness is letting go. Letting go means that you do not cling to memories and feelings.”

~ Rabbi Rami Shapiro

**Mindfulness**

“How we focus our attention is the key to promoting integrative changes in the brain.”

~ Daniel Siegel

“Kindness, gentleness, warmth and compassion are like vitamins for our minds.”

~ Paul Gilbert

“What we repeatedly think shapes our world. Out of compassion, substitute healthy thoughts for unhealthy ones.”

~ Jack Kornfield

To grow into the person that your deepest longing desires is a great blessing.

If you can find a creative harmony

between your soul and your life,

you will have found something infinitely precious. …

If you can awaken the eternal beauty and light of your soul, then you will bring light wherever you go.

The gift of life is given to us for ourselves and also to bring peace, courage and compassion to others. – John O’Donohue

***Break***

**Our Journey of Boundless Compassion begins within – Self Compassion**

The Golden Rule, to love your neighbor as yourself seems to be paradoxical in our present age when so many people appear unable to love themselves. Is it any wonder we live in a world that seems lacking in compassion?

Joyce tells us “The more we know ourselves, the more compassionate we can be.”

Self compassion is innate, but we forget. We cover our beautiful inner selves like the golden Buddha.

***Tell story by Jack Kornfield about the Golden Buddha.***

Self care is the essential foundation of self compassion

Self compassion is not:

* self centered
* self pity
* self gratification
* self esteem (based on comparing ourselves to others)

Paul Gilbert gives the following common reasons for a lack of self compassion:

* Taught to always put others first
* Childhood messages
* Western culture messages
* Fear of pride
* Indicates weakness
* Past failures and mistakes
* Being too easy on ourselves might limit growth
* Inability to receive

Self compassion is accepting our true self now matter how beautiful it is.

Our minds are like Velcro for negative experiences (give Velcro samples) and Teflon for positive experiences (give Teflon samples)

We must savor the positive experiences for at least 15 seconds in order that they stick and begin to transform us.

***Tell Larry David story in Yankee stadium***.

Joyce reminds us to:

* Listen deeply and clearly to the self
* Approach the self with non-judgment
* Know the self well
* Let go of perfectionism (Brene Brown – worthy guilt)
* Learn to forgive self
* Reconnect to our common humanity

Brene Brown tells us to let go of

* Shame
* Scarcity
* Exhaustion as a status symbol
* Anxiety as a lifestyle
* Self doubt and supposed to be’s
* Being cool and always in control (use TV commercial about doctor being just okay)

Joyce reminds us that “vulnerability connects us and acknowledges our shared experience of reality.”

Impediments to living a compassionate life:

* Compassion fatigue
* Burnout
* Empathetic distress too much news and the need to disconnect

Rami Shapiro reminds us, “We accompany others in their pain but don’t take on their pain.”

***Play” Gentle with Myself” by Karen Drucker***

***Lunch in silence***

**Expanding Boundless Compassion to the Margins and Beyond**

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or die; and you suffer and get old.  
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Without announcing it again ***play “None of Us Are Free” by Solomon Burke*** at the conclusion of the prayer period.

**Tell personal story of an old man at the grocery store buying day old bread and cheap dog food.**

I was 16 and working in a grocery store. It was a Saturday morning and I was stocking shelves in the pet food isle and working the check out. An elderly man came into the store. He slowly walked by me as I left the pet food aisle to go and check people out. When he finally made his way to my checkout line his basket contained a dozen cans of cheap dog food and half a dozen loaves of day old white bread. The dog food was 10 cents a can and the bread was 25 cents a loaf. The total cost was just a couple of dollars. Even though I was only 16, I recognized right away what was happening. This cheap dog food and day old bread weren’t meant for any animal, they were going to be his food for the next week. I looked at his tired eyes and knew that life had been difficult for him. It was the only time I ever saw him, but I have never forgotten him and the feelings of sadness that came over me that day. He could only afford to eat the food meant for dogs.

How might we express a boundless compassion for all people at the margins of society?

*I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can only love one person at a time. I can only feed one person at a time. The whole work is only a drop in the ocean, but if I didn’t put that drop in the ocean, the ocean would be one drop less. It’s the same for you.* – Mother Teresa

**Use morphic fields and quantum mechanics as the focus of the afternoon session**

This morning we explored compassion through the lens of self compassion. This afternoon, we’ll journey beyond the self to the margins – margins of humanity, margins of the earth, and margins of the universe. This afternoon I would like to explore the concept of compassion as a form of energy that connects all of us to people at the margins and to all of creation. It will be helpful to begin our afternoon’s exploration with a lesson from quantum physics.

**Show Brian Greene video – “Beyond the two slit experiment.”**

Please raise your hand if you own a cell phone. Now raise your hand if, in reality, it is your cell phone that has you. Please raise your hand if you believe in quantum physics. Finally, do you believe your cell phone exists? If you answer is “Yes,” then you believe, at least implicitly, in quantum physics.

The main point of the two slit experiment, the foundational experiment behind the mathematics of quantum physics, is that the answer to the question “Is an individual electron a wave or a particle?” is YES. It is both. How about you, are you a wave or a particle? The answer is “Yes” and it gives us great insight into the mystery of compassion.

The mathematics of quantum physics concerns **probability.** What is the probability that we will find the electron at any location in space-time?

The mathematics of compassion concerns **potentiality.** What is the potential that we will find compassion at any location in our communities? Our towns and cities? Our earth? Our universe?

Self compassion can be understood as compassion for the particle that is me, my finite body that fills the chair I am currently sitting in. Self compassion is the flow of the compassion wave into my body creating a particle of compassion.

Compassion for others is the flow of the compassion wave from my body into the world, into the universe.

**Hand out the wave-particle of compassion**

The movement of compassion from self compassion to compassion for others at the margins of our society and further to the earth and all of creation can be likened to breathing. We breath in self compassion from the Grace of creation and we breath out compassion for others and creation. There is no breathing in without breathing out.

***Tell a personal story of having your breath knocked out***.

Compassion, like breathing, is the most essential ingredient of life.

What is the first act of compassion each of us takes? Breathing in.

What is the last act of compassion each of us takes? Breathing out.

Boundless compassion is the countless acts of receiving and giving of forgiveness, presence, and hope that we share with each breath.

Let’s look at a few quotes on our common journey of suffering and compassion:

*I saw the river over which every soul must pass to reach the kingdom of heaven, and the name of that river was suffering… and I saw the boat which carries souls across the river and the name of that boat was love.**–* John of the Cross

Christina Feldman “Not always a solution to suffering, but always a response to suffering.”

*Developing the nectar of compassion in our own heart is the only effective spiritual response to hatred and violence*. – Thich Nhat Hanh

*Physical degradation of the natural world is also the degradation of the interior world of the human.* – Thomas Berry

Through compassion our inner self connects with the outer self, the other and all of creation. It is a reminder that I humans are not the center over the universe. The 15th century mystic Nicholas of Cusa described this Many in Oneness:

*One might say, [Creation’s] center is everywhere and its circumference is nowhere, for its circumference and center is God, who is everywhere and nowhere.*

– Nicholas of Cusa

**Conclusion – Becoming a Compassionate Presence**

Close with a meditation/ritual. Place a plant(s) in the middle of a circle formed by the retreat participants and speak of the vital exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide that occurs between people and plants. While speaking of the exchange of compassion between ourselves and the plants (representing all of creation) weave a thread through the hands of each person and end with the thread touching the plants. Close our eyes and breathe, exhaling life (carbon dioxide) to the plant, inhaling life (oxygen) from the plant. After several minutes ***play “Holy Now” by Peter Maher***. After the song, cut the thread between each person so that they might take the portion that touched them as a reminder of our connectedness to everything. While cutting the thread, place a balloon (not blown up) in their hands to remind them of the inhalation and exhalation flow of breathing. Encourage them to blow up the balloon when they get home and tie the string to it as a compassionate reminder of the retreat. When cutting the thread say to each person:

***“(person’s name) May you always hold the thread of Boundless Compassion.”***

A final blessing by Judy Cannato:

*Compassion changes everything. Compassion heals. Compassion mends the broken and restores what has been lost. Compassion draws together those who have been estranged or never even dreamed they were connected. Compassion pulls us out of ourselves and into the heart of another, placing us on holy ground where we instinctively take our shoes off and walk in reverence. Compassion springs out of vulnerability and triumphs in unity.* – Judy Cannato

Close with the following poem to accompany Safford’s poem:

***Holding the Thread***

Time’s unfolding fabric

through which we weave our threads of compassion.

Never releasing our fingers from the thread

Holding the past with the compassionate grasp

of forgiveness.

Holding the present with the compassionate grasp

of presence.

Holding the future with the compassionate grasp

of hope.

**We** don’t ever let go of the thread.

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