

COMPASSION: BINDING THE WOUNDS OF TIME

The struggle we all have with the Other World is amazing and fascinating when you think about the ways we have to avoid acknowledging what we really know about it. It has come to me, this quarter especially, that 20th Century man's struggle to recapture the Other World, since he has lost it in dealing with this world, is the struggle which will transform our lives.

It seems to me that there is nothing else to do really except to recover our ability to articulate the Other World: to articulate it, live it, be it. That is all that the Uptown 5 project is, finally. All that my liberal imagination has imagined social change to be about is not even social change. None of the kind of structures we envisioned will ever happen.

Finally it is the Other World that is significant. I always had a struggle with the Other World. It has been a struggle with all kinds of demons. I struggle with the demon of abstraction. That is, if I could just get my mind around what it is my colleague was talking about this morning, then I would be able to do community reformulation. Or if I could just study long enough, then I would be able to do it. Sometimes I slip over into the demon of being sure that I create the kind of happening with the kind of humor my colleagues approve of. If I can work on the kind of fellowship I want, then I will be able to appropriate my life.

Whatever the demons are, the only way we will be able to talk about the Other World is right in the midst of the mundanity. This whole last quarter has been a struggle of trying to reconstruct the Research Centrum. What is research now that the research job as we have known it is over. We have gone through all kinds of struggles with that issue. We have come in one day and everybody knows exactly what it means to supply the movement with practical instruments, doing something that is directly productive. By the end of the day we are all under the table because it is so practical. It is so nitty-gritty, so mundane that intellectual titillation is not happening.

Have you noticed in dealing with a practical model, that you probably do not have one new idea the whole time you work on it. It is rather dull in some ways. In other ways it is not dull, for the mundane has its excitement; it depends on what you come looking for, I suppose.

One day, as we were working on a practical model, it got to be mid-afternoon and I started recalling all of the shopping around I needed to do. I recalled that I did not have enough blue shirts. Christmas was coming soon and I had better at least be thinking about what presents I was going to buy. My shaving cream was out. My shopping list kept growing. Finally, as the list got overwhelming, I felt I could not live another day without going shopping. I rushed out to the street. I have taken to the practice of not going all the way over to the El stop, which is the faster way of going downtown, but taking the bus out front. It is much easier just to stop there. I am

a little shrewd about that, for I go up the street at least two or three bus stops, and that way none of my colleagues will know that I have gone out. So, I went up the street a ways and I took the bus. It is really something to take that bus ride downtown. It goes right straight down Michigan Avenue. You can get off at almost any place you want. You go down to the Million Dollar Mile, a fascinating place.

You may have noticed as you drive along Lake Shore Drive, there are hundreds of large apartment buildings. Ninety-five percent of those seem to be filled with elders. When you ride the bus downtown, you get the fellowship with the elders. On this particular day, there seemed to be twenty-seven seats--twenty-six elders, and me. They were all old people, chattering away. The topic of the conversation, in every situation I could hear, was the same: "bitch, bitch, bitch" about all kinds of things. They bitched about their allergies, the way their building is operated, the city, the way the bus driver greeted them or did not greet them when they got on. I was sitting there full of my own bitcher--so to sit and listen to all that bitching made me want to get off that bus immediately. Anyway, I was sitting there and suddenly, I discovered that, in fact, I do care about the aged. Beneath all of my revulsion about the old people, which is a part of me, and beneath all of the antagonism that takes place between me and the past, and those caught in the old traditions, I care about those old people.

That does not often occur to me, because I also know a lot of old people with whom I am very irritated. We have one in the Houston Region, who is probably the epitome of the aged. She has been around for a long, long time. I remember, when we were in Austin, she used to come to the week-night school in Austin way back in the fifties. She has had RS-I now at least ninety-nine times. And she does not know yet that she has had the same course. She is not a very practical lady--she is just an old lady. You get in the car with her, and have a conversation. She is bitching all the time, especially if anyone in the car smokes. She cannot stand smoke. She has all of her medical reasons why she cannot stand smoking. So, you just better not smoke if you want to ride in a car with her. We talk a lot about "spins" these days. Well, she has no problem with spinning. In fact you do not even have to ask her a question to get her started. My relationship with her went through several metamorphoses last year. She seemed to keep showing up in all these meetings: Regional Councils, courses, and Odysseys. Then she would get on the phone and ask you to come do this and that for her. She's just a great human being, requiring of you a great deal of outgoingness. Well, for me that state of being calls for passion. You hit the globe at the point of dealing with the other.

This wholeness was going on, while several stops on that bus took place. Finally, a little black kid got on the bus with his mother; he was only six or seven years old. One more stop later a middle-aged business man got on and sat down by this little black kid. And I said to myself, "This is going to be an interesting conversation to watch". So I began to watch. Sure enough, this businessman was liberal do-gooder. He made the first mark in getting the conversation started, patting him on the back, saying he was going to go buy him a pair of shoes. That whole situation began to unfold. In the middle of it, I caught that kid's eye, and we just looked at each other for a moment. I didn't say anything, we just looked each other in the eye, and he saw that I had the attitude and he had the attitude that all of that was "a pile."

That began to relate me to the kinds of communitys of people we relate to; and I discovered that I care about a lot of things. A little later on, I caught the eye of the liberal, and you should have seen the shock on his face. I wasn't frowning or anything, I was just looking him in the eye, just a solid eye-stare. The guy started fidgeting, buttoning up his coat. I didn't know what that guy was going to do before he got off the bus.

That kind of human compassion has got to be there; yet what I am trying to talk about, the state of Being, is not that. It is not ostensibly Care. The state of Being is also care about yourself. You would not even dare raise your eye to the eye of the other person, or dare to get in the car with that old lady, or dare to smile at another person, if you did not, in fact, care for yourself. That Divine love for oneself is utterly crucial in order to appropriate that compassion.

I guess, for me, the struggle with the Other World, at this point, is to get beyond my moralism about what it means to show love for another—what it means to care for another. One of our biggest temptations in the area of Care or of Love is to want to do something for somebody—to want to go hold their hand. At the moral level, we let ourselves into all kinds of traps because we have forgotten that care or compassion is not simply a moral category, it is an ontological category.

I care deeply in spite of myself. Even when I do not know I am caring, I care. Still, that compassion is a state of Being, beneath all my moral values, or yours. Or our criteria for what it means to care, is one that pushes you over against the mystery of life itself. If you ride that bus, you will begin to be present in the dimension of the Other World to that bus ride; somehow the wrinkles on those faces become antipathy itself. Or, the way I ride along looking at the elders, or looking through them, always reminds me to watch around somewhere else. I look out at that lake and it's always different: Somedays grey, somedays blue, somedays the sun is shining, somedays it is not .

That kind of relationship to just wonder of creation itself takes place because I, in fact, do exist in love, in compassion, in being received. Therefore, no one should ever fool with me about saying that he does not care, for it is far beyond any criteria by which you can measure care. It's not even my own demands about what it means to care. I am trying to talk about the compassion that endures. You may remember that Sartre talks about the young bourgeois who gives himself to change, to revolution, until his benevolence runs out. The cruciality about recovering the ontology of compassion is that of recovering the awareness of living out of the fact that I care. I don't know that I care, no one else knows that I care—I just care, because compassion, care, love is sustaining me within that.

This all came back again later on when the elders we were working with in Uptown came over to sing for us at the Open House. Again, I found myself in the midst of one of my revulsions against the elders. The songs they sang seemed to come from decades ago, and I was sitting there nauseated. But suddenly, I began to hear something in one of the songs they sang: patriotism. That is one of the great things elders profess to, and in this instance, particularly so because they are not people who have been Americans a long time. Though they were immigrants fifty or sixty years ago, in their imaginations, they are recent immigrants. They genuinely believe America is

the land of the free. They were singing one of those songs about the "land of the free," and suddenly I got caught up in it where it says something about "America, the Land of the free. What are you going to do about it?"

You never know, when that other dimension of life is going to come out. There is a kind of freedom in just being sustained in being, cared for, in being in a state of compassion that is beyond all that. Trying to relate to all that is an amazing phenomenon. How do you begin to embody it? It is not that I ought to care more, therefore you always see me doing "x" things. That would mean to live by some external criteria. Caring more is somewhere on the moral level.

How is it that I can, in fact, embody the care that I am? How can I, in fact, manifest it, live out, because that is what changes history. It is living out my own compassion, whatever that happens to be. The way that healing takes place, the way that transformation takes place, the way that salvation of the world takes place is through that kind of living. The sustained compassion which obviously issues from that life says at times I hold back my acts, at other times I give my acts, at times I am reserved, and at other times I am giving myself. Only in that kind of understanding can you finally recover that which binds the wounds of time. That is what holds Being. It issues in a deed that is The Deed.

In working in community reformulation and church renewal, whether teaching a course, or holding a conversation, one thing you notice is that the mood of the course or the transformation of lives does not seem to take place exactly when you want it to take place. So, you cultivate images to use. Mine is the "adder", always waiting and watching to see where it is that striking needs to happen. Well, we have touched on something in our working here this week in which the Guild in community reformulation does the Parish. That is touching on something; that is engaging people. What is it, in the midst of each situation you run into, that is the deed which operates out of Compassionate Joy?

Somewhere in that is recalling the feeling of a sense of oneness that I have suddenly got myself in tune with that elder; that old lady and I can have a great time together. She does all the talking and I do all the listening, and that's fantastic! Once, I discovered I could direct her spin. All I had to do was throw in a comment or question every now and then and I'd suddenly get her wisdom on how to recruit the next course. Why that's fascinating! There is not a oneness except with the reality of the way things really are with your relationships. If you are whole and your neighbor is whole, then you can, in fact, look the other in the eye.

Well, I do not know when that kind of wonder is going to happen to us, but here is a friend you all know, Kierkegaard, who talks about the kind of prayer that needs to be said:

Father in Heaven, thy grace and mercy change not with the changing time; they grow not older with the course of years, as if, like a man, Thou wast more gracious one day than another, more gracious at first than at the last: Thy grace remains unchanged as thou art unchangeable, it is ever the same, eternally young, new every day for every day Thou sayest "yet today."

Oh; but when one gives heed to this word, is impressed by it, and with a holy resolution says to himself, "yet today." Then for him this means that this very day he desires to be changed, desires that this very day might become important to him above all other days, important because of renewed confirmation in the good he once chose, or perhaps even because of his first choosing the good. It is an expression of Thy grace and mercy that every day Thou dost pray "yet today." But it would be to forfeit Thy grace and mercy and the season of grace if a man were to say unchangeably from day to day, "yet today"; For it is Thou that bestowest the season of grace "yet today," but it is man that must grasp the season of grace "yet today." Thus it is we talk with Thee, O God; between us there is a difference of language, and yet we strive to make ourselves understood of Thee, and Thou dost not blush to be called our God. That word which when Thou, O God, dost utter it is the eternal expression of Thy unchangeable grace, that same word when a man repeats it with due understanding is the strongest expression of the deepest change and decision—yea, as if all were lost if this change and decision did not come to pass "yet today." So do Thou grant to them that today are here assembled to them that without external prompting, and hence the more inwardly, have resolved "yet today," to seek reconciliation with Thee by the confession of their sins, to them do Thou grant that this day may be truly Blessed to them, that they may hear His voice whom Thou didst send to the world, the voice of the Good Shepherd, that He may know them, and that they may follow Him. Amen.

-David McClesky-

