



Compassion as a Spiritual Discipline

| *Indifference is the enemy.*

Introduction

Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel was born a Romanian Jew and witnessed the horrors of the concentration camps and persecution of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe during the Second World War. He has written more than forty books, including best sellers *Night* and *Dawn*. On April 12, 1999, he gave the Millennium Lecture at the White House. In this speech called “The Perils of Indifference,” Wiesel introduced an idea that has remained one of the great themes of his life’s work—namely the dangers of people who do nothing when confronted with situations that demand action.

Wiesel believes that “the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it’s indifference. Indifference is the enemy.”¹

Most people would naturally believe that the opposite of love is hate and the opposite of life is death. But Wiesel challenges the listener to think more deeply about the root problems we find in our world.

The compelling question Wiesel raises is, Why is indifference the great enemy? Surely Wiesel wrote about indifference because he watched thousands of his Jewish friends, neighbors, and family members go to the gas chambers while *good* people did nothing. *Good* people watched with indifference—normal citizens who did not act. So why is an indifferent person so dangerous? The indifferent person is someone who says nothing and does nothing when something wrong or unjust takes place in his or her presence. Wiesel poignantly



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concludes that for the indifferent person, “his or her neighbor are of no consequence.”²

Most Christian adults, if given a choice to save the life of another person, would choose to act in a way reflecting justice and protecting human life. But just because we call ourselves Christian does not guarantee that we will act in ways that reflect courage and compassion. It certainly was not true in Eastern Europe during the Nazi regime. Not only did Christians remain indifferent, but many church-going people actively participated in the genocide of their Jewish brothers and sisters. In recent years we have seen the same phenomenon played out in Rwanda. How is it that Rwanda, the most Christianized country in Africa, witnessed a catastrophic mass slaughter that claimed 850,000 lives in 1994? Where were the Christians—voices of justice and love—during the ethnic cleansing that turned Hutu against Tutsi?

If being Christian does not guarantee a compassionate response to hurting and victimized people, then what can Christians do to move to a place where they will

move beyond indifference? Perhaps one problem with contemporary Christianity is that our traditional spiritual disciplines (such as prayer, fasting, meditation, and the study of Scripture) might enhance our intellectual understanding of faith while neglecting to draw us into a more communal engagement with the world. Engaging in the discipline of compassion can ensure that our spiritual growth program does not lead us toward isolation and detachment from the world—something we never see in the life of Jesus.

“Be Compassionate, as God Is Compassionate”

One critical verse that speaks to this issue of indifference and potential isolation is when Jesus shares with his disciples, “Be compassionate, as God is compassionate” (Luke 6:36, author’s translation).

This verse is both a command and an affirmation. First, the command embedded in the verse challenges followers of Jesus to be compassionate people. To understand the significance of this verse it is critical to first understand the word *compassion*.

Compassion comes from the Latin words *com*, which basically means “with,” and *passion*, which means “to feel.” Simply put, compassion means “to feel with” other people. Some scholars find the word *suffer* a more accurate translation of the Latin word *passion*—which would then imply that followers of Jesus are people who are to suffer with other people. Regardless of how we translate the word *passion*, we are called to be people who somehow seek to walk in the shoes of another human being.

The second section of the verse is an affirmation—it says something significant about the character of God. According to Jesus’ teaching, God is not distant from creation and humanity. In some mysterious way, God has the capacity to feel and suffer with people. The very nature of God is compassionate.

The Command In Context

Now, in order to fully understand the significance of Jesus’ command to “be compassionate,” we need to understand a little of the historical context in which Jesus lived and served. Interestingly, Jesus took a verse from the Levitical code, which calls the people of God to “Be holy, as God is holy” (Lev. 19:2 NIV) and puts a

new spin on the command. Since Jesus’ world was governed by what was called a holiness code, “being right with God” meant living within certain moral and religious boundaries. The Old Testament is full of examples of what it meant to “be holy.” For example, if you ate pork, you would break a holiness code. If you worked on the Sabbath, you would break a holiness code. If you were a woman in her menstrual cycle, you were deemed “unclean” and not holy. A disease such as leprosy would lead to a designation of being “unclean” and exclude you from participation in Temple worship.

Being right with God in Jesus’ day was associated with upholding a list of codes and rules—implying that God was more concerned with correct external behaviors than behaviors of the heart. Jesus’ command to “be compassionate” rather than to “be holy” put a radical new twist on what it meant to live in a way that reflects the heart of God in the world. And we certainly see that Jesus practiced what he preached. Frequently in the Gospels we meet a Jesus who chooses compassion over upholding the holiness codes of his day.

Putting the Command into Practice

The late Thomas Merton, a Catholic writer and mystic, expands on this notion of compassion when he adds that compassion is “a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another.”³ If we embrace the notion that all of life is interdependent, then we must believe that everyone is our neighbor—regardless of race, social status, or geography. As Christians we cannot choose to ignore certain kinds of people or isolate ourselves from the lives of people outside our social circles. The Samaritan, for example, allows his heart to be moved by the wounded man on the side of the road, demonstrating that despite the animosity existing between Samaritans and Jews, he could still feel compassion. The Samaritan stopped for a stranger because he *felt* the stranger’s pain as his own. And because he could empathize with the stranger’s pain, he could not remain indifferent. He was compelled to act.

But how do adults, in the twenty-first century, cultivate hearts that resist the tendency toward indifference and place themselves in situations where they make a difference? In an important book called *Common Fire: Living Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, Sharon Parks and her colleagues set out to study numerous adults

who, now in their fourth decade of life, continue to live lives intentionally committed to the common good—a good broader than simply looking after their own needs. Whether these individuals work on environmental issues, have developed socially conscious companies, or seek to advocate on behalf of oppressed people, the writers of the book comment, “the single most important pattern we have found in the lives of people committed to the common good is what we have come to call a constructive, enlarging engagement with the other.” The writers continue, “We had not anticipated this finding, but early in the study as people told us their stories, we began to hear about important encounters with others significantly different from themselves.”⁴

Intrigued with this emerging pattern, the group looked more closely at how this “engagement with the other” actually influenced patterns of commitment and response. Realizing that the concept of “tribe” is a critical aspect in human evolution and at the core of our social identity, the research team noticed that those who lived extraordinary lives of commitment were somehow able to move beyond tribal bonds. “They are able to engage with people of other tribes as full human beings, enlarging rather than relinquishing their networks of belonging. Having practiced compassion across tribal boundaries, sometimes nourished by the circumstances of marginality, they have come to a deeply held conviction that everyone counts.”⁵ We can learn from these insights. To have the ability to expand networks of belonging and to embody the ability to practice compassion across tribal boundaries are certainly characteristics important for someone who has matured in his or her faith.

It is important to realize, however, that mere engagement with people of other tribes does not guarantee that lives will be transformed. Every day we have contact with all kinds of people who represent other “tribes.” These interactions may take place at the gas station, in the shopping mall, or on the bus traveling to work. Yet most of those interactions fail to produce increased empathy and commitment to the greater good. Moreover, these experiences can often be negative and even lead people to build bigger and thicker tribal walls. For the encounters to take on the status of what some social scientists would call a constructive engagement, the quality of those encounters must be examined.

Parks and her colleagues continue by providing further insight into how border crossing can take on a deeper



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meaning. “As we sifted through dozens of accounts, it became apparent that what distinguished a simple encounter from a constructive engagement was that some threshold had been crossed, and people had come to *feel* a connection with the other.”⁶ Other researchers, such as Mary Watkins, refer to this feeling of connection as a “sympathetic identification.”⁷ In order for growth to occur in the individual, there must be a deeper connection made between the individuals involved in the encounter.

Is Compassion Innate or Learned?

Do some people innately have the ability to feel with others, while others must learn to feel with others? Can compassion be learned? Samuel and Pearl Oliner did extensive research on rescuers of Jewish Holocaust victims and can shed light on this issue. Sam Oliner was a young Jewish boy growing up in Eastern Europe during the Nazi regime; his life was saved because of the courageous act of a Christian. His family members were murdered, but Oliner was spared because a Christian woman lied and risked her life so he could live. This single act of compassion left an indelible mark on the young boy, and he has spent his life trying to understand why some people act altruistically while others do not.

When the Oliners compared the empathy scores of rescuers with those of nonrescuers, they found no particular differences between the two groups on such measures as shared feelings, affection, anxiety, pleasure, humor, or a susceptibility to the moods of others. There was one item, however, that stood out. The rescuers had the tendency to be moved by pain. “Sadness and helplessness aroused their empathy.”⁸ Somewhere in their lives, rescuers had developed the capacity to connect with, and

to be moved by, another person's pain. These rescuers also knew that they had a responsibility to others and the wherewithal to act on that sense of responsibility.⁹

In the Oliners' study, eight social processes are proposed that help move encounters to levels that are ultimately life changing and lead to some kind of responsible action. Four of these processes focus on means to promote attachments with those in our immediate settings, and four focus on promoting caring relationships with those outside our immediate settings and groups. These processes provide a kind of framework that can help people move their encounters with otherness from a level of superficiality to levels that are life altering.

The processes outlined by the Oliners are as follows:

1. **Bonding:** forming positive connections and a sense of communion with others
2. **Empathizing:** understanding others' feelings and emotions, sometimes even feeling what they feel
3. **Learning caring norms:** acquiring caring rules and values
4. **Practicing care and assuming personal responsibility:** participating in caring activities and developing a sense of personal obligation for doing so
5. **Diversifying:** interacting in a collegial way with different types of people for the purpose of getting to know and understand them
6. **Networking:** working together with multiple diverse others for the purpose of developing and implementing shared objectives
7. **Resolving conflicts:** learning the strategies for using and resolving conflicts for mutually beneficial purposes
8. **Establishing global connections:** linking the here-and-now with people and places far-and-wide throughout the planet in the service of care¹⁰

The conclusion that the Oliners draw is that people who participate in institutions and communities that provide for these opportunities to occur are more likely to feel cared for and are more likely to care for others. "They are also more likely, we believe, to resist the excesses of ideological dogma and exclusivity."¹¹

Practicing Compassion

In his wonderful book titled *Compassion*, the late Catholic writer Henri Nouwen says, "Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears."¹²

So what does it mean to "go where it hurts," "share in brokenness," and "mourn with those who are lonely"? I believe this is where the word *discipline* must be evoked. Most of us live busy lives. We value productivity. We cherish our free time. There is little left in our emotional gas tanks at the end of each day to "go where it hurts." To follow Nouwen's challenge of entering into the suffering and pain of another person takes intentional effort and thoughtfulness. But it can be done. Here are some examples.

For Families

- Parents are the best example for their children. Do you have friends from other economic, racial/ethnic, and religious groups? Whatever group you belong to, think of ways to meet and expose your family to other people's realities.
- Volunteer to help an elderly person in your neighborhood on a regular basis, but make sure the relationship includes some social time of talking with the person and getting to know her or him.
- Consider an alternative Christmas some year where the entire family recognizes they have enough and can take one year to share gifts with others who are in need. There are many programs to help you do this, and you can do it in variations, depending on your family.
- Listen to a coworker who is hurting. Take that person to lunch and really listen.
- Serve at a homeless shelter, or find a way to use your skills as a volunteer once or twice a month.

For Church Groups or Community Groups

- The Lunch Club is a program we began in the inner city where I work with at-risk teenagers. Once each month business professionals come into the city and

have lunch with one of our teenagers. It is about a two-hour commitment of time—not much in the grand scheme of things. The remarkable aspect of this program is the dialogue that takes place between two people who often have completely different histories and stories. Differences of ethnicity, socioeconomics, age, education—the list continues. But these unlikely pairs have begun to bridge the differences and form friendships. People who were once afraid to come to the inner city now cannot wait to lunch with their partner. Students who were once fearful of people dressed in suits and ties now talk about them as their close friends. One medical professional recently told me, “This is the highlight of my month.” People enter into the lives of another, radically different person, which has increased the participants’ capacity to *feel with another* human being.

- Take a youth group to the mall, and have them place popcorn kernels in their shoes and put on thick reading glasses. Set them loose for thirty minutes and then regroup to talk about how it felt. Inform the kids that this is how many elderly whose eyesight is poor and who face various physical ailments feel. The idea is to help kids step into the shoes of another. If we truly attempt to suffer with another person, our capacity for compassion will grow. See the teen Thoughtful Christian study “Learning Compassion: Why Indifference Is the Enemy” for similar activities.
- Work with your youth group and a local group that works with special-needs children. Have your youth volunteer in some activity with other, less-fortunate kids. While it may initially be intimidating for your kids, many groups find it life altering, as they learn to love others who are so different from themselves and find the many gifts others have to share.
- As we have learned through recent studies, compassion, the heart of Jesus’ good news, is not something that comes easily for many people. Yet the practice is essential for Christians to put their actions where their beliefs are. Learning to feel others’ pain and

helping others to learn the art of compassion is an ongoing challenge for all of us. If we have learned anything from the tragedies of the past and present, if we are to be a witness to the world, we must refine this spiritual and faith practice.

About the Writer

Bruce Main has been president of UrbanPromise Ministries, an inner-city ministry to youth in Camden, New Jersey, since 1988. Bruce’s published books include If Jesus Were a Sophomore: Discipleship for College Students and If Jesus Were a Senior: Last-Minute Preparations for Postcollege Life (Westminster John Knox Press), Spotting the Sacred: Noticing God in the Most Unlikely Places and Holy Hunches: Responding to the Promptings of God (Baker Books). He is married with three children.

Endnotes

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2. Elie Wiesel, “The Peril of Indifference,” <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ewieselperilsofindifference.html>.
3. Thomas Merton, “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,” in John Moffitt, ed., *A New Charter of Monasticism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 80.
4. Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 63.
5. *Ibid.*, 77.
6. *Ibid.*, 67.
7. Mary Watkins, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities: Moral Imagination and Action,” in Valerie Andrews, Robert Bosnak, and Karen Walter Goodwin, eds., *Facing Apocalypse* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1987).
8. Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 174–75.
9. Daloz, *Common Fire*, 69.
10. Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *Toward a Caring Society: Ideas into Action* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 7.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Henri Nouwen in Donald P. McNeill, ed., *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Image Books, 2005), 4.