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Preface to the Craft of Compassion: The Thread of Empathy

As I thought about tapering this book for those in the helping professions—doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, chaplains, psychotherapists—I found myself recasting a J.C. Duffy New Yorker cartoon.

In the original cartoon, the doctor gazes at his clipboard and tells a despondent patient sitting on his hospital bed, “I am afraid you’ve had a paradigm shift.” It would require a few micrograms of ink to erase the speaking mouth of the doctor and have the open mouth patient say “Well, doc—I’m afraid you’ve had a paradigm shift.” Or perhaps a mutual thought bubble, “I’m afraid we’ve had a paradigm shift.”

That is in essence what this book is about and why it has been received enthusiastically by lay people and those in the helping professions. The four steps of the craft of compassion are the way of shedding a self-centered paradigm to a compassion-centered paradigm.

The catalyst for this is empathy.

In the appendix of this edition William Carlos Williams reflects on being a poet and a medical doctor: “I lost myself in the very properties of their minds; for the moment at least I actually became them, whoever they should be, so that when I detached myself from them at the end of a half-hour of intense concentration over some illness which was affecting them, it was as though I were reawakening from a sleep. For the moment I myself did not exist, nothing in myself affected me. As a consequence I came back to myself, as from any other sleep, rested.”

Paradigm shift: “for the moment, I myself did not exist.” In the craft of compassion I call this the *mysterium*—living compassion, step four.

When I gave Dr. Saleh a copy of the first edition I felt a little self-conscious. Very much my father’s son, I am, like him, a scholar of different religious traditions and made sure that several were represented in the text. I knew Dr. Saleh to be radiantly secular and what he might say about practicing compassion as an MD would not be religious. In a time when fundamentalism is the disease of religions, Dr. Saleh clarified, “I am spiritual, not religious.” He invoked mirror neurons, the cognitive neurological hardwiring of the empathic response.

Mirror neurons were discovered quite by accident in Parma, Italy. A macaque monkey was attached to a MRI brain scanning machine. Neurons lit up when the monkey grabbed a nut. Serendipity had it that a hungry lab tech grabbed a nut in the monkey’s presence; the same neurons lit up on the animal’s MRI when the person ate the nut.

Say what you might about communication between humans and non-human animals but this level of communication is preconscious and automatic. Empathy is the neurological default mechanism, as Saleh put it.

Spiritual, not religious.

“For the moment at least I actually became them.”

Paradigm shift.

Physiologically, mirror neurons fire in the premotor cortex of the brain, supplementary motor areas, primary somatosensory cortex, and inferior parietal cortex. It is here we live in another’s body, another’s mind.

To translate this into Buddhism, the tradition I inherited from my father, compassion is one's original nature, untainted, simply present. One doesn't *become* compassionate, but we are forever distracted from who we are.

To translate this into the Judeo-Christian language I inherited from my mother, we are made in the image of a compassionate God.

Empathy is the catalyst of transformation and is the thread that connects these four steps to each other and makes them fluent.

Step one is self-compassion and it rests on being empathic toward oneself. "Do unto yourself as you would have others do unto you."

When I teach self-compassion I work with two related exercises.

Drawing on the work of John McCransky, I have participants list those who let them know they were beloved, their "benefactors." A grandmother, a child, a pet, Jesus. Then they choose who will accompany them throughout the workshop.

Finally, they are to choose something about themselves that they just don't care for and write a letter in the voice of the benefactor's wisdom and generosity to oneself.

Self-compassion is self-empathy and its object is to walk on the ground knowing that you are beloved.

Step two is compassion for others. This is "mirror neurons" proper.

The Buddha's definition of compassion is sympathetic joy—joy over another's joy. And sympathetic sorrow—sorrow over another's sorrow. This is again in the hardwiring, one's original (neurological) nature.

Step three is radical empathy—to see through another's eyes. This is the fulcrum point that leads to the *mysterium* of living compassion. Again, Dr. Williams says it

precisely, ‘but in general it is the peace of mind that comes from adopting the patient’s condition as one’s own to be struggled with toward a solution during those few minutes or that hour or those trying days when we are searching for causes. . .’ And, ‘so, for me, the practice of medicine has become the pursuit of a rare element which may appear at any time, at any place, at a glance. It can be most embarrassing. Mutual recognition is likely to flare up, at a moment’s notice.’”

In radical empathy there is the implicit or explicit reciprocity as my redoing of the New Yorker cartoon: “I’m afraid we’ve had a paradigm shift.”

In African medicine, *any* true healing is likely to heal the medicine man or woman.

The fourth step of the craft of compassion—the *mysterium* of living compassion—is the fulfillment of the way of transformation that began with self-empathy. “There’s no use trying to multiply cases, it is there, it is magnificent, it fills my thoughts, it reaches to the limits of our lives, “ writes Williams.

In living compassion, you concede to the primary and fundamental impulse of the mirror neurons. The firing of the neurons is preconscious and uncontrived but here it is made fully conscious, still uncontrived.

People called to the helping professions know the burnout and the lack of freedom of the status quo. When the gift nature of compassion is realized so is unmeasurable freedom.