

## Understanding The Art of Compassion

“Yes, but tell me how *are* you,” she said.

It was 10 p.m. and we were sitting in my kitchen eating toast and drinking tea. And I had just finished telling Jude how great things were going.

“Well,” I said, deciding it was safe to answer her question, and then I launched into the stories beneath the stories. The hurts that hide beneath the smile. The fears that curl beneath the brave face.

When I say “well,” my father will often joke, “Now that’s a deep subject.” And I suppose he’s right. Sometimes it’s a really deep well that gushes up all kinds of stuff after the pregnant pause. The whole time I gushed, Jude nodded and smiled and reached for my hand. And then I asked her the same question. “So tell me, how *are* you.”

“Well ...,” she said.

The evening in my kitchen reminded me of a short poem I had read earlier that day by St. Francis of Assisi:

*Can true humility and compassion exist in our words and eyes  
unless we know we too are capable of  
any act?*

Jude was exhibiting for me “true” compassion: a deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it. The word *compassion* comes from the Latin *pati*, to suffer, and means literally, “to suffer with.”

What allowed her to suffer with me, I felt, was her total lack of judgment around the darkneses I told her of. Though you won’t find this in any published dictionary, I thought to myself that lack of judgment is very much part of the soul’s definition of compassion.

And how do we do that act of “suffering with”? I think it’s the old story about being willing to “walk a mile in another man’s shoes.” Whether they’re high heeled or combat boots or flip flops or wing tips. Really, it’s more about trying to make a home for ourselves inside the other person’s soul, not their soles.

I start with this premise. We all like to think we’re good people. Very few of us would admit that we’re just plain bad. We do bad things sometimes, but in our heart and in our minds, we all have good intentions.

Still, we sure do spend a lot of time judging each other. Thinking, “Oh, well, I would never do *that*. How could she do *that*?”

My favorite poem that addresses this is by Lucille Clifton, “Cruelty,” in which she describes her great delight in taking a broom to her kitchen and killing the cockroaches. The poem ends this way:

*And I smiled the whole time I was doing it.  
It was a holocaust of roaches  
there were bodies, parts of bodies,  
red all over the ground.  
I did not ask their names.*

# Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

*Word Woman*

*They had no names worth knowing.  
Now, I watch myself when I walk into a room.  
I never know what I might do.*

Few if any of us believe that we could commit the atrocities of the holocaust. And granted, there is a huge difference between killing a despised bug and killing a person. Still, what haunts the poem is the pleasure that she took in the killing, and in that kernel of feeling, she recognizes how each of us has the potential to commit terrible acts and suspend our morality. That recognition opens the door for true compassion. Until we too see ourselves as capable of any act, even killing, we can't be truly compassionate.

But any act means *any* act, not just the horrible ones. Can you imagine you to could write like Shakespeare? Or compose like Mozart? Or inspire like Tupac? Or give like Mother Theresa? Or even just sit across two cups of tea with another human and say to them, "Tell me, how *are* you," and then really, really listen to the other voice of your self speaking.

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