

# The Spirituality of Compassion

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I would like to speak about the spirituality of compassion. For me, compassion needs to be extended in two directions, humanity and nature. It is telling that when we talk about compassion we generally only think in human terms, about compassion for humans. Nature is often left out of the equation, and that is the reason why we find ourselves in an environmental catastrophe. Indeed, if we rarely fulfil our obligations to other humans and the world community, when it comes to nature we are often unaware that we have a duty of care. We think that it can look after itself, but today we need to help repair the damage. This blindness is part of our crisis, which could be called the anthropocentric bias of humanity. Scientists speak of the present age as the Anthropocene, that is, an epoch in geological history in which our duties toward nature are ignored because we are too busy looking after ourselves.

Suddenly we face the awful realisation that we are dependent on nature, and if we do not look after nature, we are at the same time failing to look after ourselves. The two domains, nature and humanity, are interdependent and related, and we are only made aware of this in recent times. The problem is a lack of care, kindness and concern for each other and for the natural world. These are two sides of the same coin.

If we explore the meaning of compassion in dictionaries, we become aware of our anthropocentric bias. Compassion literally means to feel with others, or suffer with others. 'Com' means 'with' and 'passion' means suffer, so compassion means 'to suffer together'. In the scientific study of emotions, compassion is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassion is not the same as empathy or altruism, we are told, though the concepts are related. While empathy refers to our ability to feel the emotions of another person or society, compassion is when those feelings and thoughts include the desire to help. Altruism, in turn, is the selfless behaviour often prompted by feelings of compassion, though one can feel compassion without acting on it, and altruism isn't always motivated by compassion. Compassion is not just about feeling, but about being obliged to do something about our feeling.

So far so good, but where is nature in all of this? Nature is suffering as a result of our ignorance of its reality and lack of regard for its needs. If we failed to realise before that nature should be designated as a key player in need of our compassion, we are on a steep learning curve today. As nature suffers from our neglect and mistreatment, we are obliged to suffer with it. As the entire globe has recently discovered, we are now at the mercy of nature disrupted by human excess and neglect. Some children and adults are now suffering from eco-trauma and eco-anxiety, given the turmoil and strife inflicted on the globe from extreme weather

events, droughts, floods, fires, famine, rising sea levels, oceans choked with plastic and rubbish, toxic air burdened with pollutants, the loss of thousands of species of animals, birds and fish, the loss of countless species of grass, trees and plants, the destruction of coral reefs, and the loss of human livelihood from the changes taking place in every direction.

Everywhere there is suffering due to the lack of human care and thoughtfulness. Empathy is not enough, we are called to show compassion toward the sufferings of the planet. It's not enough to notice these problems; we are called to do something about them, to relieve and alleviate the sufferings of the world. In the world today, humanity and nature are suffering together, whether we like it or not, whether we want it or not.

Ultimately, however, compassion for land and people is the same issue deep down. Both kinds of compassion can only result if we break the spell of our selfishness and move beyond the envelop of personal wants and desires. How to do this? Religion is meant to be the force that breaks the envelop of selfishness and opens us to the fellowship of other people and all creation. Jesus taught that we must love our neighbour as we love ourselves. But the Christian idea of love has too often been purely anthropocentric and theocentric: love of fellow man and love of God.

St Francis of Assisi filled in the missing ecological dimension, by instructing us by his example to live with the animals and plants, and stars and planets, as with brothers and sisters. St Francis was not welcomed at first; the Church thought many of his ideas were pagan, and in fact some of his followers were murdered by the Vatican army. Ironically, a recent Pope made him the patron saint of ecology. But this story indicates that the inclusion of nature has always been problematical for Christianity and the West.

Buddhism has been more open to the ecological dimension than Christianity. The Buddhist monk prays and meditates for the liberation of all beings, and all beings include animals, plants and creation. If Christianity preached the gospel of Love, it was Buddhism that preached the gospel of Compassion which is inclusive and ecological. As the Western world becomes more secular and godless, the great danger facing us is that nothing is left to pry open the closed mind and limited self.

Today, governments, local councils and official voices plead with citizens to care more about the environment, to be responsible about waste and sensitive to ecological issues. Many efforts are made to change our behaviour, activate our conscience and make us more aware of the environment. But when we look at the indigenous cultures of the world, we see clearly that they were environmentally aware not because they had to appeal to the *conscience* of their fellows, but because they had a different *consciousness* about their place in the world.

It seems to me that we will never achieve compassion for nature or people unless we work at the level of consciousness, rather than trying to appeal to a guilty conscience. Without religion, I do not know how we in the West are going to achieve this transformation. The West and even North America is in the process of casting

aside religion, which was formerly the mainstay of social good and transformation. How will we experience an ecological conversion, without having something more powerful than ourselves to break open our lives and call us to a greater wisdom? Without religion, we are more likely to fall under the spell of consumerism and the market economy, which work to shut down our spiritual lives and keep us in a mental prison.

Now in this regard, indigenous people are ahead of us. They understand that having something greater than ourselves is not only a religious duty or a matter of faith, but a vital life-sustaining act that prevents us from falling into egotism and isolation. The link to the sacred is what keeps them intact, balanced and connected to community and creation. We lost this wisdom a long time ago, it would seem. As we in the West gained in knowledge and science, we lost touch with wisdom and with compassion.

A life-changing experience for me was meeting a *ngangkari* or traditional healer<sup>1</sup> of the Arrernte clan of central Australia. One day an elder named Warren stopped to talk to me about his culture and mine. He said:

You whitefellas are a curious people to us. It seems to us blackfellas that you are not initiated.

I was only 17, but always keen to discuss culture and spirituality with Aboriginal people, often in random encounters like this. Warren was perplexed by white culture and its secular society – or perhaps he just feigned perplexity for dramatic effect. I felt he knew all too well the problems of white society but was presenting them to me as if they were new to him. In other words, he was in teaching or instruction mode.

Initiation was a term often used by Aboriginal people, but it remained shrouded in mystery. I knew there were age-related initiations to induct adolescents into adulthood, but that's all. I asked what he meant by my people not being initiated, and he said white people seemed to live like children, in an infantile manner. He found it strange that we did not grow up and make something more of our lives. That seemed ironic to me because my father used to say the same thing about Aboriginal people. He claimed that they were like children who had not grown up to become responsible members of society.

Anyway, Warren said we lacked 'culture', but he was not talking about art or music – the way 'culture' is used in white societies. He was speaking of spiritual culture. He continued:

You whitefellas put a lot of effort into gathering material goods and items, to make yourselves comfortable. But you don't seem to us to be happy; you are always striving for more. You grasp at things like children but it doesn't make you happy. For Aboriginal people, the important things are not bought or sold.

He explained that the initiation ceremony is designed to terminate the natural state and induct young people into adulthood. I thought this was also ironic because white people think of Aboriginal people as inhabiting a 'natural' state, whereas he was saying the natural condition is egocentric and has to be outgrown. He said when the natural is overcome, the person comes out of a purely personal life and embraces

their ancestral core, and feels connected to tribe or community. This connects the individual to a higher authority, one that is experienced individually as a source of new identity and as a new affinity with the tribe and country. Warren said when people reach this state they realise for the first time who they are.

Warren then asked if Europeans had initiation ceremonies. I should point out that in central Australia, people like me are referred to as Europeans, not Australians. Or at least, this was the case back in the days I am remembering. The category of 'Australian' was still problematical. Again, I felt this healer was feigning ignorance of whites for dramatic effect, to bring me to a realisation of what my society lacked. I tried to answer him from my Christian background. I said we did have ceremonies of baptism, confirmation and first communion. These were intended to break open the egotistical condition and devote ourselves to a higher purpose. Warren looked concerned, and turning his head to one side, said:

Those ceremonies must not work anymore; otherwise you people would act different.

This was a shock to me. I was still following my religious tradition but what he said was right. The Christian ceremonies don't work the way they are supposed to. These ceremonies do not terminate the egotistical state but seem to have little or no effect. Perhaps they worked once, I reflected, but are no longer effective because too much in society is designed to reinforce the ego, not overcome it. What chance do religious ceremonies have if the whole weight and emphasis of society is on building up and consolidating the ego? Perhaps they still worked for some, but I wasn't aware of too many in this category.

After this encounter I began to look critically at my upbringing and conditioning. Years later, I realised that to turn our environmental crisis around we needed something similar to what Aboriginal cultures refer to as initiation, that is, an unseating of the ego and an induction into a new consciousness that sees the whole instead of the part. It was not that we had something that they lacked, but on the contrary, they had something that we lacked.

At secondary school in Alice Springs I often found that my Aboriginal mates were missing suddenly for a week or two at a time. Nothing much was said about this, but it got around that they had been taken by elders to be initiated. They would depart the school as an ordinary boy with boyish interests, and come back as dramatically transformed. They saw the world through different eyes: they were different, more concerned with others, and more concerned with nature. Normal egotism was replaced with compassion for others and country. I was shocked by the transformation; this was a sign that their religion worked, but mine did not. And yet here we were trying to convert them to ours?

The move from egotism to compassion requires initiation. At the heart of initiation is spirituality. It is the induction into the spiritual dimension of life that shifts us in the direction of compassion. Westerners see Aboriginals as living in a 'natural' state, but nothing could be further from the truth. They are intensely cultural. For them, the natural state has to be broken. The natural person cares for him

or herself, and only what impinges on their self-interest. The first self, the ego, has to be dislodged so a second self can be awoken. When this takes place, not only is the individual reborn, but the tribe experiences a renewal.

We in the West are content with the natural state, and don't see anything wrong with it. But this is part of our crisis. Goethe put it well when he said: 'And if you don't know this dying and rebirth, you are merely a dreary guest on earth'.<sup>2</sup> In every wisdom culture there are two states, predicated on the need to be twice-born. This idea of being 'reborn' has been cheapened by fundamentalism, and it's difficult to understand in its true meaning. In a context in which tradition is respected and nature revered, indigenous cultures cannot countenance a selfish life. Young people enter the initiation process with their birth-name, but are given a new name at the end to symbolise the transformation that has taken place. They are subject to trials and tests, many of which are painful. Young members enter the initiation ceremony as children and emerge as adults. Adolescence as we know it hardly exists.

The key feature of initiation, as I found in later study, is that elders reveal to the young men<sup>3</sup> that they are reincarnations of ancestral spirits. Individuality is something of an illusion, at best a variation on an ancestral theme. In rituals of the Arrernte tribe of central Australia, elders hand the novice a sacred stone or alcheringa, and say, 'Here is your body, here is your second self'.<sup>4</sup> The idea is that they live henceforth from this new centre of authority. Identity shifts from ego to spirit, and this shatters the narcissism of the child. True identity is a gift from the tribe, acting on behalf of the ancestors. Poet and essayist Les Murray gets it right when he says:

Some of the immense dignity of traditional Aboriginals, when seen outside of degrading circumstances, obviously comes from their sense of being the present forms of eternally existing beings. A man who owns a certain ceremony or set of verses belonging to a sacred site does so because he is the supernatural being who indwells in that site.<sup>5</sup>

I witnessed this 'immense dignity' as school mates would return from the initiation fields as different people. They had a new sense of happiness, stability and contentment that they did not have before. It is little wonder that detribalised youth experience enormous disorientation as they try to assimilate to Western society, because their ancestral experience is about being reconstituted as the 'present forms of eternally existing beings'. This might seem a bizarre worldview to outsiders, but it is a serious attempt to express the idea that there is something eternal and ancient in human beings, which propels and urges us to do good rather than evil.

Western society has no concept of this transformation and sees no need for it. Because initiation necessitates the death of the former self and rebirth of a new self, this is considered so much mumbo jumbo that a modern society does not need. We have rejected ancestral ways to such an extent that everything has gone into reverse. Now prolonging the egoic state is the norm, and it is counter-cultural to overcome the ego in a bid to forge connections with others, nature and world. We cannot turn things around by good intentions alone. Reason will not lead to a solution. We need a

new compass, a new sense of the sacred, a return of the sacred as a guidepost to what matters. Humanism and secularism won't get us there, but to safeguard the future, we have to think in terms of an initiation into a new kind of consciousness.

It is still not too late for Christianity to take the lead in inducting our society into a new consciousness. This can be facilitated by a close study of the Bible. When Jesus began his teaching ministry, he famously opened with the words: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt 3:2). At least that is what we read in the English translation of the New Testament. However, in the original Greek, Jesus does not say 'repent'. He says 'Metanoia, for the kingdom is at hand'. The Greek word *metanoia* does not mean repent. It does not mean self-flagellation, or being down about ourselves, which is what the word 'repent' has implied for most of us. Metanoia means to change (meta) your mind (noia). It involves an attitude of trust, letting go and surrender.

Those who translated the Bible into English made an error. They were thinking only of the moral dimensions of Jesus' teaching, and were not attuned to his call to transformation.<sup>6</sup> Originating with the Hebrew prophets, the biblical idea of *metanoia* is that of a change of mind and heart, a full turning around, a whole transformation of one's mentality and level of consciousness. It is not merely a moral command, but an invitation to transformation, an invitation to be initiated into a new way of being. Metanoia means change your inner self, your old way of thinking, live your life. It is much greater message than just individual salvation, which has not got us far at all.

From this new state, compassion is not a conscious or deliberate act of the mind, not just an ethical obligation. If we follow the indigenous example, we might achieve a level of being where compassion arises from within, and is not forced by external authorities. Compassion arises from a deeper level than morality, as it is part of our being that has been released by the activation of the divine in the human.

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<sup>1</sup> The word in the Arrernte languages of central Australia is ngangkere. In Pitjantjatjara it is ngangkari.

<sup>2</sup> Goethe, quoted in Otto Sharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (San Francisco: Berrett: Koehler Publishers, 2009), 20.

<sup>3</sup> As a man, I am forbidden by Aboriginal tribal law to discuss the initiation of women, which is women's business.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Strehlow, *The Aranda and Loritja Tribes of Central Australia (1907-1920)*, quoted by Erich Neumann, in *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (1949, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 289.

<sup>5</sup> Les Murray, 'The Human-Hair Thread', *Persistence in Folly* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Thomas Nelson: 2006).