

On Three Facets of Compassion: #2 Receiving
an online talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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Blurb

Maya Angelou says it best: "When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed." Angelou's insight is that compassion is not a one-way street. Compassion is the best sort of a two-way street. #Compassion #Humanism #Giving #Meaning #Purpose

READING

"The opposite of racist isn't 'not racist.' It is 'anti-racist.' What's the difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an anti-racist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an anti-racist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an anti-racist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist.'"

~Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*

INTRODUCTION: a very silent killer

Here's a question for you:

What *increases* vulnerability to psychological disorders and disease,
increases the likelihood of excessive self-criticism,
markedly *increases* the risk of anxiety and depression,
leads to suppressed emotional response,
leads to alexithymia, a diminished capacity to recognize and describe emotions within
oneself and in other people,
impedes mindfulness,
increases cardiovascular risk,
and imposes a risk factor to physical health greater than a lifetime smoking habit?

Answer: fear of accepting compassion.

Compassion avoidance. It's a thing.

And it can kill you.

ONE: a hog on ice

We have a saying where I come from: "As independent as a hog on ice." It's a phrase that expresses despair at trying to help someone: "We cain't do nothin'. She's as independent as a hog on ice."

What do hogs do on ice? The way to get a hog to go somewhere is to use a long stick and follow behind. When the hog goes the correct way, you do nothing. When the hog turns the wrong way, you tap the stick on the side that the hog should not be going.

It's like a dance in a way. But with a hog on ice, the moment the hog slips, it stops paying any heed to you or the stick. It's thinking only of how to stay standing. It has gone into self-preservation mode and you can't do a thing about it.

Being "as independent as a hog on ice" is being someone beyond help because they won't accept help.

Compassion avoidance. It's a thing.

And it can kill you.

TWO: it's a two way street

Here's one of those spiritual laws I like to talk about: If you can't *take* help, you can't *give* help. If you can't *accept* compassion from others, you can't *have or give* compassion.

Maya Angelou says it best: "When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed." Angelou's insight is that compassion is not a one-way street. Compassion is the best sort of a two-way street.

There's a newer type of therapy called "compassion focused therapy." The research is clear: people who fail to be compassionate are those who suffer from shame and/or self-criticism. People who suffer a lot of shame and people whose inner-critic is turned up to eleven all the time just can't feel compassion.

The message is clear: in order to be a compassionate person, you've got to do some work on yourself. You've got to change your way of thinking.

Last week I diagnosed the nation's ills as a vast failure of compassion. There are historical reasons for this failure. There are philosophical and theological reasons for this failure.

What it comes down to is the American mindset that insists on an individualism well summed up in that old phrase, "as independent as a hog on ice." Our society teaches each of us that individualism is the ultimate ideal to strive for.

That's a total lie.

It's compassion avoidance.

And it can kill you.

THREE: Getting your religion backwards

As I've said before, bad theology can be very damaging.

Christian tradition has treated mystical experiences as individualistic experiences. The archetypal Christian mystical experience was reported by Paul, who wrote this:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. (2 Corinthians 12:2-4 NRSV)

You see the pattern Paul follows: What he experienced was so strange, Paul didn't know whether it had occurred to his physical body, or had occurred only in his mind. He has a vision, but what he hears cannot be communicated, either because it is too wonderful, too forbidden, or completely inexpressible. Paul relates this experience not for what it has shown him, but as a way of authenticating his holiness quotient.

Paul's faux-humble "I know a guy" tells us volumes about Paul's ego, but not a lot about the realm of the human spirit or the nature of reality.

Such mystical experiences convince the one who experiences them, and might even impress others, but the experiencer brings nothing back from the experience beyond personal

conviction and a story to tell. The experience feels expansive—even boundless—but it is centered in the individual, the ego.

Mystical experiences feel great, but that boundless, “being one” with the universe thing, can serve as more than a burnish on the spiritual resume. I

n the imagination, we can turn the experience around, so that it isn’t about me—the ego, the self—radiating *out* into the universe from the center of me, but rather a radiation *in* that serves to remind me that this me is a tiny strand of a tiny thread in the fabric of the universe. This generates the kind of compassion I described last week.

This difference in orientation is one reason that mysticism is much prized in the monotheisms but is treated with suspicion by traditions such as Buddhism that focus on mental processes and that warn against ego formations and ego projections.

The great Buddhist monk Santideva calls this “exchange of self & other.”

See yourself as you once saw others:
not much; not at all.

See others as you once saw yourself:
everything. Ultimate importance.

Santideva goes on to say:

Whatever suffering there is in the world flows from the wish for your own happiness.
Whatever happiness there is in the world flows from the wish for the happiness of others.

That is as straightforward as spiritual truths get.

Ideally, mystical experiences, and we all have them from time to time, should encourage us to reach out and embrace what we often experience as “other.”

Last week, I talked about how for Humanists, the *encounter with the other* is the baseline for our ethics and our ideals.

That’s exactly what Ibram X. Kendi talks about in the reading this morning.

Dr. Kendi is a historian and this fall Kendi will launch the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research.

If you haven’t read his book *How to Be an Antiracist, do!*

From the reading, notice how Kendi phrases this:

One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an anti-racist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist.'

That's from the introduction to the book. A bit earlier in the introduction, Kendi writes,

Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy. It's a pretty easy mistake to make: People are in our faces. Policies are distant. We are particularly poor at seeing the policies lurking behind the struggles of people.

How to Be an Antiracist is a particularly good book for Humanists to read on the subject because the center of Kendi's thesis is that racism is a set of unexamined beliefs. He says that explicitly: "Racist ideas love believers, not thinkers."

We Humanists think that it is incumbent upon us to examine our beliefs. We strive to be thinkers, not believers.

Racism is a set of unexamined prejudices and assumptions created by a particular set of cultural circumstances.

We live in a nation with a constitution written to ensure that captured Africans could be enslaved and prevented from becoming citizens.

Yes, a bit more than a hundred and fifty years ago, the Thirteenth Amendment made men of African origin citizens—"African Americans."

It's been nearly sixty years since the last laws to explicitly enforce white supremacy were finally removed from the books—laws specifically designed to ensure that African Americans did not enjoy the full benefits of citizenship.

It's been more than 150 years since Abraham Lincoln talked about "the proposition that all men are created equal." We are still treating that as a debatable proposition, not a truth.

Equality is not debatable.

One of my favorite definitions of Humanism is by the Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov: "The autonomy of the I, the finality of the you and the universality of the they."

That's where the compassion comes from: I am free to choose compassion rather than hate; I recognize the "finality of the you": *you* are as free as I am to be what you strive to be. And the

“universality of the they”: I choose compassion rather than hate because I understand that all compassion is self-compassion. We’re all in this together.

I choose to be an anti-racist because I choose to be a thinker, not a believer. As Dr. Kendi says, “Racist ideas love believers, not thinkers.”

FOUR: still not even close

Great thanks to Minneapolis artist Brother Ali for giving us permission to play his brilliant song “Letter to My Countrymen.” In that song, Brother Ali hones the terrible question down to a sharp point and names the sorrow: for those not only betrayed by a nation but also are still mercilessly exploited by a nation, what are the choices?

Endless rebellion is one choice. Perhaps even the choice that feels most authentic and true to one’s own principles.

But Brother Ali understands the question asked by Alexander Hamilton that I talked about last week: will it be “reflection and choice” or “accident and force”?

Brother Ali writes,

It's home so we better make the best of it
I wanna make this country what it says it is

Why?

We're still not even close to really sharing things
The situation of oppressed people
Shows what we feel it means to be a human being
What does it mean to be American?
I think the struggle to be free is our inheritance

Brother Ali brings in the voice of Dr. Cornel West, I would argue the greatest theologian of our time. West says to Brother Ali,

You don't want to be just well adjusted to injustice and well adapted to indifference.
You want to be a person with integrity who leaves a mark on the world.

Cornell West asks us to examine our lives because the unexamined life leads to the mindset Dr. Kindi mentions: “Racist ideas love believers, not thinkers.”

I feel Brother Ali's words very deeply because I've struggled with this feeling of rebellion a lot in my life. Emma's Revolution, in the song this morning says,

My parents always told me work hard and stay in school
Trust the church and leaders of our town

That wasn't my experience. I was taught to distrust leaders and my religion, Pentecostalism, was all about "Burn it down!" Government and authority was the "principalities and powers" that were in the power of Satan.

And, my wife will tell you that that is often still my first reaction to some things in the news. Resentment and hatred. It's a gut reaction for me: "They're all crooks!" "Wait till the revolution comes!"

Looking for a way to practice "accident and force."

There is a scary number of Americans who live there.

Left or right. Fascist or anarchist. Carrying guns and burning things down hoping that some sort of cleansing violence will finally set things right.

But the older I get, the more I know that "reflection and choice" are the only viable options. Reflection. Choice. Compassion.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago outside the White House, oppressors know force and violence very well.

It's difficult to see the deeper truth. But as Brother Ali says in another of his songs,

Because the children can't escape from the pain
And they're born with poisonous hatred in their veins
Try and separate a man from his soul
You only strengthen him, and lose your own ("Uncle Sam Goddamn")

Another firm spiritual truth, I think.

CONCLUSION: it's our inheritance

In these dark days, have some compassion for yourself. As Maya Angelou says, "Compassion is the best sort of a two-way street."

Compassion avoidance isolates us from life's meaning and purpose. So, don't avoid compassion.

The Humanist proposition is that human beings can solve human problems. The problem to be solved is crystal clear. At the very birth of Humanism, Humanists demanded "a shared life in a shared world."

But Brother Ali is speaking truth when he says: "We're still not even close to sharing things."

He's also correct about what it means to be American:

Like it or not, "the struggle to be free"—and to make everyone free—"is our inheritance." And our obligation.

Yes. Americans have inherited a constitution written to ensure that captured Africans could be enslaved and prevented from becoming citizens.

Yes. It's been nearly sixty years since the last laws to explicitly enforce white supremacy were finally removed from the books—and many of those old laws still exist in other forms.

Yes. It's been more than 150 years since Abraham Lincoln talked about "the proposition that all men are created equal." And, yes, we are still treating it as a debatable proposition, not a truth. That's a failure of very basic compassion.

Still—and because—even with all the injustice of our history, "the struggle to be free"—and to make everyone free—"is our inheritance."

SOURCES

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