

# Compassion

*John Gray:* I'm thankful for the technology that allows us to gather from distant places with such ease. It's good to see you all and feel our presence together.

This is the last of our biweekly teleconference gatherings for this year. As calendar years draw to a close it's usual to look back and assess the year that was. AJ Willingham, a writer for *CNN*, posted yesterday, "If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that kindness and compassion have never been more important. It's taught us that difficult times are made easier when we work together, when we take care of each other; when we reach out a hand to those struggling and lift up the heroes that protect us. It's taught us that the best way through the darkness is to look for the light—and if there is none, to make it ourselves."

When the *Washington Post* asked readers recently to describe their experience of 2020 in one word or short phrase, they reported receiving over two thousand replies very quickly. The most common one-words submitted were "exhausting," "relentless," "lost," "chaotic," and "surreal." Those are understandable descriptives. But they aren't words that I'd choose. How about you?

The adjectives for 2020 that come to my mind are "attention-getting," "opportune," "progressive," "confirming," "rut-breaking," and "uplifting." Our experienced personal identities determine how we see things, of course.

On a light note, this has been a great year for online retail profits and no doubt for ZOOM.com. I heard on the radio that 2020 has also been a banner year for budding ventriloquists everywhere: No one can see their lips move with their masks on! 😊

A moment of twice-annual solstice occurs tomorrow, December 21<sup>st</sup>. We'll have the longest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere and the longest day of the year in the Southern. In the northern half of the planet the winter solstice is when the earth is tilted furthest away from the sun. In South Africa, Argentina, and Australia, for examples, this is the summer solstice. The earth is tilted closest toward the sun. Also tomorrow, Jupiter and Saturn appear to nearly conjoin in the southwest sky at dusk. We're told this is the closest together they've appeared in eight centuries. Of course this is only how it looks to us from here. The physical planets are actually 400 million miles apart in their respective orbits, but the conjunction has meaning at other levels.

There are events of far more significance going on than human affairs, but to most people what's happening to them in their own lives has overwhelming importance. Of course we take attentive care of what's closest at hand, but we do that while maintaining perspective as the large spiritual beings we really are.

Most everyone on earth is aware of the current pandemic, and many are personally impacted in some way—physically, mentally, emotionally, maybe financially. The *Washington Post* readers' chosen adjectives speak to that, I think.

I looked up some statistics online an hour ago: About 1.7 million people worldwide are reported to have died of Covid-19 infection complications so far this year, with almost 320,000 of those fatalities in the United States—335,000 if we add Canada. I read that right now the Covid-19 daily mortality rate in America exceeds the number of people dying each day of heart disease and cancer combined. Globally in 2020, an estimated 60 million people died from all causes and about 150 million babies were born. That's a lot of comings and goings, for sure, but as a proportion of the estimated total human population of 7.85 billion the increase was about 1%. These are just statistics of course, and statistics can be impersonal, even numbing.

Let's draw the matter in from the realm of numbers and closer to home: How many people died this year who you personally knew? How many children were born to people you know? I bet none of us would answer *zero* to either question; we all know of some departures and arrivals. For the most part, this is all seen as a normal part of human life experience. The coronavirus pandemic introduced a new element into the usual human view of life and death, however. We expect—and are maybe a little numbed to—people dying of heart problems and cancer, for examples, but this has added something different.

It's human nature to grieve about death and loss. And there's a lot of grief in the world. This may be especially felt by an individual when it is their loved one who died. The deep substantial connection known in life shifts with death of the physical body. Resisting this process produces a painful experience to the griever.

I think grief may be second only to shame as the most painful emotion human beings feel. We feel grief when our heads and our hearts—facts and feelings—pull in opposite directions. A person may feel, "Maybe such-and-such is a fact, but I don't *want* it to be and I don't *like* it!" It's this internal division that produces pain. We can understand a toddler's tantrum, grieving loudly over being told "no," but it becomes an irrational and irresponsible thing in a person who is chronologically adult. The pain of grief can feel so great that facts are not faced at all.

Grief is an invaluable way to internally deal with events like death, and it shouldn't be run from. One of our roles as divine beings in human form is, as may at times be necessary, preside over a process of reconciling and realigning mind and heart in ourselves and in the world. I don't think grief is something to get over. Its presence indicates, often

sharply, the need for healing, for making whole. When the heart/mind divide is closed, grief is no more. Just a thin scar remains.

Grief is not related to just bodily death, of course. This past year many people have mourned the demise of some comfortable norms of everyday social life. Some grieve the fact that they can't get together with family and friends as in the past, or they are controlled by those feelings and do it anyway. How many grieve over the death of a rain forest, or of untold species of plants and animals? How many grieve the innumerable imbalanced conditions in the natural and manmade worlds, and the state of the planet itself?

Personal experiences of grief are connected to and are rooted in deeper collective experiences of grief in the whole body of mankind and of the planet. We are each, after all, inextricable parts of that whole and we share a deep subconscious past. Much of that remains unresolved, unhealed. This may help explain why feelings of grief may seem bottomless, as they sometimes do. We feel on behalf of the whole. Doing this is an aspect of our service.

Well, good grief! What's needed to comport ourselves effectively and well in the midst of all this? Dealing with grief is just a small bit of what is ours to give and receive and bless in the world, of course, but when it's to the fore, it can seem pretty big.

Spiritual leaders have for centuries emphasized the need for compassion—compassion for oneself and for one's fellows; to uplift the afflicted. Compassion is defined in dictionaries as “having care and concern for the suffering or misfortune of another, often including the desire to alleviate it.” Both Greek and Latin roots of the word have to do with feeling the suffering and having empathy for another's plight—and, to me, suggests extending understanding and a helping hand.

There is a well-loved passage in the Old Testament of the Bible which describes these essences so well: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty unto the captives... to comfort all that mourn; to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness...” [Isaiah 61:1-3]

Anyone looking for a resolution for the New Year—and the rest of this incarnation—could hardly do better than adopt these words!

The proclamation I quoted, attributed to the prophet Isaiah, comes from the same spiritual symphony as the basic teachings of Buddha a couple of centuries later. Per *Wikipedia*, “According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. It's not passive—it's not empathy alone—but rather an

empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering. Genuine compassion must have both wisdom and lovingkindness.”

Isaiah and Buddha were among enlightened ones who were forerunners to the coming of the one we call the Lord of Lords. What the Christ came to accomplish—minimally, the establishment of a nucleus collective body of spiritually conscious individuals—could not be accomplished the way it might have been had those close to him been more willing. In the New Testament portrayal of this, when this fact became evident, it is said, “Jesus wept.” [John 11:35] I can only imagine his profound sorrow. Not long after this point came his crucifixion. Notwithstanding that horrific event, his attitude toward everyone throughout this whole time was, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” [Luke 23:34] He demonstrated supreme compassion.

I confess that there have been times in my life when I’ve said, “Father forgive *me*, for I know not what I did.” Gradually I came to know with certainty that it is my anointed place—and it is each of ours—to extend the same qualities of forgiveness and compassion to all and to everything.

Let us hold the world this way. It so needs us.

*December 20, 2020*

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### **Pre-Service Music**

*Messiah, HWV 56, Pt. 1: And He shall purify & For unto us a child is born*

Composed by George Frideric Handel and performed by The Sixteen & Harry Christophers

*Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen*

Composed by Michael Praetorius and performed by The King's Singers