

Birthing Compassion

by Sue Monk Kidd

IN HIS BOOK, *The Power of the Powerless*, Christopher de Vinck tells a simple story:

One spring afternoon my five-year-old son, David, and I were planting raspberry bushes along the side of the garage. . . . A neighbor joined us for a few moments. . . . David pointed to the ground. . . . "Look Daddy! What's that?" I stopped talking with my neighbor and looked down.

"A beetle," I said.

David was impressed and pleased with the discovery of this fancy, colorful creature. My neighbor lifted his foot and stepped on the insect giving his shoe an extra twist in the dirt. "That ought to do it," he laughed.

David looked up at me, waiting for an explanation, a reason. . . . That night, just before I turned off the light in his bedroom, David whispered, "I liked that beetle, Daddy."

"I did too," I whispered back.¹

De Vinck concludes this story by saying, "We have the power to choose." So we do. We have the power to choose how we will respond to every living thing that crosses our path, to all the fancy, colorful creatures which God has set in motion upon our fragile planet, from beetles to human beings. Sometimes our feet are quicker than our hearts.

Compassion often eludes me. I remember the time I wept before a television image of a homeless man lying in an American gutter. Three weeks later I stepped over a homeless man on a sidewalk in New York without looking back. Perhaps I gave my shoe an extra twist on the cement, I don't recall. But as I strode away, I had the odd feeling that somewhere Someone was looking at me, waiting for an explanation, a reason.

"Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:36, JB). Sometimes I wonder how seriously we have taken these words of

¹ Christopher de Vinck, *The Power of the Powerless* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1988), pp. 3-5.

Jesus. I only know there is too much suffering, too much pain, too much homelessness, hungry, abused, rejected, poor, lonely, sick, grieving, fragmented, defeated, lost, and oppressed. There are too many bombs, too many wars, too many squashed beetles. The world is hip-deep in tears. Compassion is not an option. It is a matter of survival.

Remember the line in *The Little Prince*—"It is only with the heart that one can see clearly"? What renders the heart, even the "good, Christian heart," so full of blind spots? Why is compassion so elusive? Why are our feet sometimes quicker than our hearts?

YOU CAN'T FORCE THE HEART

THE BEGINNING OF AN ANSWER came to me the summer I was twelve, though I scarcely knew it at the time. I had gone to a nursing home with a youth group from my church. Frankly, I was there under duress. My mother had not heard my pleas that I be spared the unjust sentence of visiting a nursing home when my friends were enjoying the last day of summer vacation at the city swimming pool. Smarting from the inequity, I stood before this ancient-looking woman, holding a bouquet of crepe paper flowers. Everything about her saddened me—the worn-down face, the lopsided grin, the tendrils of gray hair protruding from a crocheted lavender cap. I thrust the bouquet at her. She looked at me, a look that pierced me to the marrow of my twelve-year-old bones. Then she spoke the words I haven't forgotten for nearly thirty years. "You didn't want to come, did you, child?"

The words stunned me. They were too painful, too powerful, too naked in their honesty. "Oh yes, I wanted to come," I protested.

A smile lifted one side of her mouth. "It's okay," she said. "You can't force the heart."

I tried to forget her. For a while I hated her for the rebuke. Then I passed it off as the harmless twittering of an old woman. Years later though, as I began to follow the labyrinth of my spiritual journey, I discovered the truth in her words.

You can't force the heart. Genuine compassion cannot be imposed from without. It doesn't happen simply by hearing a sermon on love, or being sent on a loving mission. How often have we set out to love the world—or even more difficult, to love some tiresome, undeserving, mule-headed person on our street—and given up, feeling exasperated, unappreciated, used, tired, burned out or just plain cynical? The point is, you don't arbitrarily make up your mind

to be compassionate so much as you choose to follow a journey that transforms your heart into a compassionate space.

Compassion, which is the very life of God within us, comes through slow and often difficult metamorphosis deep within the human soul. It happens through a *process*. If we look closely at the workings of creation, we find that God nearly always works through process and passages. Think of it. First there is a seed, then a sprout, then a blossom, and finally fruit. God does not begin with a butterfly but with a larva that becomes a chrysalis and finally a creature with wings. Neither does God speak a star into existence but sends dust floating in space, then interstellar gas, the slow heating of temperatures, and eons later, a star. Perhaps most mysterious of all is the unfolding process of ovum, fetus, baby, child, adolescent, adult. The universe is designed to move stage by stage, from incompleteness to completion. Now why should we suppose that God designed the heart any differently than the rest of creation? It, too, has its stages.

Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth-century theologian and mystic, used imagery which highlighted the truth that divine life, like human life, is implanted internally and comes about through a process of gestation and birth. "We are each meant to be mothers of God," he wrote.²

For Eckhart, birthing God essentially meant birthing compassion. He believed compassion to be the ultimate fruit of our birthing, a slow breaking out of divinity from within us. God is compassion, he insisted; therefore, as God is born more deeply in the soul, so too is the compassionate life.

The stages and movements in this birthing process entail a gradual shifting of spiritual consciousness. We move from a false and separated way of relating to the world, which I call being in the *Collective They*, to a union with our True Self, which means realizing the *Authentic I*, and finally to a sense of interconnectedness with all that is, which brings us to the birth of the *Compassionate We*.

The movement is portrayed somewhat in a story contained in the charming little book, *Tales of a Magic Monastery*:

I sat there in awe as the old monk answered our questions. Though I am usually shy, I felt so comfortable in his presence that I found myself raising my hand. "Father, could you tell us something about yourself?"

He leaned back. "Myself?" he mused. There was a long pause.

*"My name used to be Me. But now it's You."*³

² Matthew Fox, *Meditations with Meister Eckhart* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Co., 1983), p. 74.

³ Theophane the Monk, *Tales of a Magic Monastery* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 18.

We might ask ourselves what name we wear deep inside. "Our spiritual journey is undertaken in order that we may discover our real name, that is, our true identity," wrote Alan Jones.⁴ This identity is found not in the name *They*, or the name *I*, but in the name *We*. As we birth God more fully, we draw on new sets of values and orientations which reshuffle our identity and rename us within. We take on a we-consciousness, which is the deep and sure ground of compassion.

THE COLLECTIVE THEY

THE FIRST NAME we wear, however, is *They*. It can be startling to realize that much of the time we are not living out of our own unique truth and God-given purpose but from scripts written by culture, friends, family, church, job, and traditions. We spend much of our lives taking on a story for ourselves to live in. Rather than questing for our own individual truth, we may live out the expectations thrust upon us from without. The power of the collective to give us our sole identity and to "author" our lives and our beliefs is enormous. Let me give you a small example of what I mean.

"When I was six years old someone asked me, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' At that age, living in a small Georgia town in the 1950s, I could only think of four careers for women—they were the only stories I knew: teacher, nurse, secretary, and housewife. By some process of elimination, I picked nurse. From that moment on, I began to get little nurse kits for my birthdays. The librarian at school set aside the biography of Florence Nightingale for me, and if someone cut their finger, I was called in as the designated bandager. At sixteen, my parents arranged for me to be a volunteer at the local hospital. Everyone expected me to be a nurse, and I was like wet cement taking on the expectations. Indeed I got my BS degree in nursing and worked nine years, even teaching nursing in a college before I stopped and said to myself, "This is not who I am. I am not really a nurse inside. I'm a writer." By that time, the cement had hardened and I had some jack-hammer work to do, breaking up the old name imbedded within and releasing a new identity.

Frequently we take on the scripting of the world in order to protect and serve the ego. We create patterns designed to keep us

⁴ Alan Jones, *Journey into Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 110.

invulnerable from the slings and arrows that come whenever we diverge from "they-ness," to borrow philosopher Martin Heidegger's term. I continued with nursing, not because it is a noble profession that stirred my deep gladness but because I did not want to risk upsetting others, not to mention my own, ingrained notion of who I was. I wanted to please. I wanted to protect myself from the uncertainty of starting over. In such ways our consciousness becomes centered in the outer roles and masks we wear, rather than in the True Self within.

I have had to struggle to pull myself from the suction of the Collective They on all sorts of fronts. At various times I have lived out of narrowly prescribed identities which I accepted and internalized from the collective: dutiful and submissive wife, ever-sacrificing mother, armored career woman, perfectionist, pleaser, performer, good little girl who never colored outside the lines drawn for her. Sometimes I was so busy being tuned into outside ideas, expectations, and demands, I failed to hear the unique music in my own soul. I forfeited my ability to listen creatively to my deepest self, to my own God-within. I was wearing the name They.

When I wear this name I am limited in my ability to relate to others in a genuinely compassionate way. I am separated from them by the masks that keep me from being real with them. Stuck in the Collective They, I am more apt to have mixed motives, hidden agendas, a what's-in-it-for-me bottom line. I am apt to relate out of my ego needs, from the subtleties of my false selves and from mandates and demands placed on me from others rather than love born in my own heart.

We are called to unravel the illusions we live with in order to find our true and essential being. Thomas Merton wrote often of the spiritual life as a movement from false selves to the True Self, from fabrications to real identity. He wrote:

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and discovering my true self.⁵

One's actual self may be far from "real," since it may be profoundly alienated from one's own deep spiritual identity. To reach one's real self, one must in fact be delivered from that illusory and

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. 26.

false self whom we have created. . . . To use common language, we must "return to ourselves."⁶

AN AUTHENTIC I

ONE DAY driving down the street, I asked myself, "Sue Monk Kidd, who are you?" And right away the obvious answers came. "You are Bob and Ann's mother, Sandy's wife, Leah and Ridley's daughter, a writer, a member of Grace Episcopal Church. . . ." All nice things. Then I asked myself, "So, if all these roles were stripped away, then who would you be?" The question jolted me. It brought me to stand before the bare mystery of my own being. Was there something deeper at the very core of me that was purely and truly my "I"?

I came to believe, along with many of the mystics of the church, that our true identity goes beyond the outer roles we play. It transcends the ego. I came to understand that there is an Authentic "I" within—an "I-Am" or divine spark within the soul which mystics have called *scintilla animae*. Eckhart wrote:

There is something in the soul which is only God. . . . The seed of God is in us. If the seed had a good, wise and industrious cultivator, it would thrive and grow up into God. Now the seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree. . . . the seed of God into God.⁷

Here is where our real selfhood is rooted, in the divine spark or seed, in the image of God imprinted on the human soul. The real self is not our creation, but God's. It is the self we are in our depths. It is our capacity for divinity and transcendence.

Unraveling external selves and coming home to our real identity is the real meaning of soul work. I remember a time in my life when I actually thought the term "soul work" referred to the evangelistic effort of "winning souls." That hints at how little attention I had paid to the soul as the seedbed of the divine life. I eventually found that the soul is more than an immortal commodity to win and save. It is the seat and repository of the inner Divine, the truest part of us. In fact, when Paul writes, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in

⁶ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), pp. 63-64.

⁷ Meister Eckhart, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Centered Spirituality in New Translation*, introduction and commentary by Matthew Fox (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1980), pp. 103, 118.

me" (Gal. 2:20, rsv), I believe he is referring to the crucial soul work of coming home to this Authentic I.

A few years ago, struggling with false selves, wearing masks as if life were a masquerade party, I began to feel the suffocation that happens when we cut ourselves off from the True Self. I went away to Springbank, a Dominican retreat center nestled among live oaks in the low country of South Carolina. I went to try and remember who I really was. I walked in the front door, and there tacked on the wall was a picture of the pregnant Madonna and these words:

This image represents each person who is trying to birth the Real Self, the Imago Dei that is taking shape within. For that conception to move to its fullness, we all need time to be quiet, to be reflective, to be centered in our deep places.

In the Christian mystical tradition, to move from the Collective They to an Authentic I involves setting up an honest dialogue with the soul. It means becoming partakers of solitude, silence, and prayer, particularly contemplative prayer. In these ways, as well as through other spiritual disciplines, we recover the I-Am in the ground of our soul. "Prayer unites the soul to God," wrote Julian of Norwich.⁸

During that retreat, I walked beneath the trees alone with God, alone with my real name, praying wordless prayers, touching the space of mystery, going to my center. That time produced the energy needed to shift my awareness back toward an Authentic I, which is the necessary prelude for real compassion.

A COMPASSIONATE WE

THE EMERGENCE of one's Authentic I awakens a fresh awareness that God is the life of us all and we are one in God together. Without this movement our journey would be in danger of privatism and selfishness. Teresa of Avila taught adamantly that true prayer and uniting with the True Self flows outward in compassion. "It is in the effects and deeds following afterward that one discerns the value of prayer. . . . If we fail to love our neighbor, we are lost," she wrote.⁹

It is inevitable. The journey of birthing God leads to our neighbor. It refocuses our heart-vision. We move from what Paul

⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 253.

⁹ St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 76, 102.

Tillich referred to as "our essential solitude" into a deeper and more expanded relationship with others and creation. We discover that God so loved the world he gave us one another.

I took part in a retreat once in which the leader gathered the group into a circle and handed out three balls of colored yarn. She asked us to toss the balls back and forth to one another across the circle, each holding onto a piece of it. The result was a beautiful, multi-colored web stretched across the center of the circle. "Each of you take turns and wiggle your thread," the leader instructed. What we found was that every movement vibrated the entire web. And it dawned on me—this immeasurable truth we were portraying. We are each a thread woven into the vast web of the universe, linked and connected so that our lives are irrevocably bound up with one another. I looked at those faces around the circle in a new way. The old adage, "I am my brother's keeper"—or in this case, my sister's keeper—melted into something new: I am my sister. And suddenly I wanted to gather them to me and do what I could to heal them and bless them and affirm to them how beautiful they were.

Such interconnection is what Jesus was getting at when he said, "As you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40, rsv). This deep knowledge, born from the heart, draws us into a compassionate posture toward the entire cosmos. As Madeleine L'Engle once said to me during an interview, "We need to realize that what we do affects the stars." We are also linked through God's web to humpback whales and hummingbirds and the trees in a rain forest. In the book *The Color Purple* the character Celie said she knew if she cut a tree, her arm would bleed. That is the oneness of wearing the name We.

Living out of the Compassionate We also means blending our tears with the world's in a way that heals and creates community. The word *compassion* literally means *com* (with) *passion* (suffering). Compassion is not, therefore, having a sentimental feeling of pity; it is sharing the pain. It means a "suffering with" that flows from the life of God in the soul, not from ego-motivations.

When compassion wakes up in us, we find ourselves more willing to become vulnerable, to take the risk of entering the pain of others. We open our lives to them in a genuine willingness to be known. We tell them our own story of suffering as a way of offering healing and hope. We feel their heart bleeding into ours; we catch their tears. We relieve their pain as much as we are able, and by relieving theirs, we relieve God's.

GOD'S DOMINATION-FREE ORDER

by Walter Wink

DURING MY SOPHOMORE YEAR of college I took my first class in philosophy taught by a devout atheist and materialist. In the face of his seasoned polemic against God and all things religion, the intellectual house of cards that was my adolescent faith collapsed. I was no longer able to believe in God (though I was certain that the God who no longer existed was still calling me into the ministry!).

Toward the close of the spring semester, I was in church, surveying the wreckage of my faith, when I heard—really *heard*—the scripture reading about seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness, and everything else being provided (Matt. 6:25-34). Suddenly it occurred to me: This promise is falsifiable. It can be put to scientific test. During the coming summer I will stake my life on this passage being true, and, if God is real, by the end of the summer I will know. I will act *as if* this statement were true. I will prove or disprove it empirically.

That test proved stunningly successful. I now knew there was a God, freed from the debris of childish expectation. But what, really, was the kingdom of God that I was seeking? For my pietistic bent, it seemed to be a completely personal relationship with God—not so much a kingdom as a private audience.

Seminary and graduate studies enlarged the compass of the kingdom by giving it historical perspective. Israel's long agony with kingship, its yearning for a righteous nation, its visions of a coming benevolent divine rule, were met by Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom of God was indeed dawning in his own ministry. My teachers helped me to understand *where* the kingdom was and *when* the kingdom was, but not *what* the kingdom was.

Where is the kingdom? Already in our midst, wherever anyone is liberated or healed or exorcised or forgiven or transformed. Where is the kingdom? Already inside of you, in your soul, your depths, the

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Once when I was going through a difficult time, my husband touched his finger to the tears winding down my face, then touched his wet finger to his own cheek. His gesture spoke volumes to me. It said: "Your tears run down *my* face, too. Your suffering aches inside *my* heart as well. I share your wounded place." It is with such compassion that we lift our finger to the world's teary face.

While reading Elie Weisel's book *Night*, which is the chronicle of his suffering in a Nazi concentration camp, I came upon a story that spread before me a metaphoric picture of what it means to live in the Compassionate We as a community.

Nazi soldiers herded the Jews out of their barracks before dawn into a thickly falling snow in order to wait for a train that would transport them to another camp. Without food and drink for three days, the Jews stood in the snow till evening, forbidden to sit or even bend over. The snow formed a layer on their shoulders. One thirsty man took out his spoon and began to eat the snow that had accumulated on the shoulders of the person in front of him. The act spread through the line until that collection of separate individuals, each of whom had been struggling alone with their pain, became a community sharing their suffering together.¹⁰

I could feel the image burn in my mind, and I knew that in some way this is how we would survive as a human family, by becoming a place of nourishment for our brothers and sisters, by quietly shouldering their pain and their healing. We would survive as we became a We-community, sharing our sufferings in a great and holy act of compassion.

A WOMB FOR COMPASSION

WHEN WE SEEK compassion, we must remember that ultimately the heart cannot be forced. But it *can* become a womb where compassion is gestated and birthed. In fact the Hebrew word for womb and compassion come from the same root word, portraying the connection between them. According to Meister Eckhart we are called to the "divine maternity bed" in the core and ground of the soul. There we birth God. There we birth the name We. And with this holy name we will look with the eyes of the heart at all creatures, great and small, and walk gently upon God's bruised planet.

¹⁰ Elie Weisel, *Night* (New York: Avon Books, 1958), p. 109.