

Compassion with ourselves ...

By Astrid Schillings, Clinical Psychologist/Focusing Coordinator, Germany

Yes, and how can that work? Is it something spiritual? Yes it is, and there is a paradox in it too. The more honestly we can love ourselves, the more selfless we become. I mean “naturally” honest and not as a spiritual ideal or commandment, in other words, feeling how I really am underneath my images of myself — the good as well as the bad. Let me invite you to take a few steps together in the direction of compassion and presence.

Exploring the way a little

Carl Rogers, a pioneer in psychotherapy, found that if as children we are not listened to, understood, loved, we become cut off from ourselves. As a result we cannot listen to or love ourselves. We live out of tune with ourselves, resisting ourselves. In order to be loved and accepted, children make their fears, their longings, and their rage too, “disappear” from their awareness. This is everyday violence.

Every time something seemingly disappears like that, a piece of us freezes up. And then we pass on this non-aliveness to our children, by not listening to them, failing to understand their pains and fears, their joy and rage. We leave them alone, on their own with it. Vibrant life dies away, there is inward destruction--and violence against others, which is outward destruction.

And what if we try to hear beneath our self-images, underneath all words? We find bodily felt aliveness, experiencing. What can we feel right now, in this never-to-be repeated moment, this unique situation? How is it for us right now? Maybe something tight, oppressive or tingling ... constantly changing ... seemingly insignificant alongside the big feelings and the words. And yet it was within this delicate, bodily aliveness that Eugene Gendlin, a philosopher and successor of Rogers, found that our

compassionate awareness is needed. He called it Focusing. If we can touch ourselves with compassion in this aliveness, something miraculous will happen: seemingly solid feelings such as anger or impatience, as well as solidified opinions about us, ourselves, begin to move, seem to liquidize when awareness unfolds in our bodily felt experiencing. Our life unfolds into a fresh direction.

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Which direction cannot be discovered just by thinking. It can be felt by deep listening. Here is an example in an extract from a Focusing session with the mother of a disabled child. She practices meditation too. The sheer enormity of it, "Why does my child have to be disabled?" led her to meditation. Her everyday feelings about her daughter are not yet transformable by her spiritual practice. Again and again, she notices how she quickly becomes exasperated when her handicapped daughter acts awkwardly. She is beginning to believe she is an unloving mother.

Now she is attending to the exasperation she felt in a particular situation, "It is so tight, so oppressively close." She indicates the place where her heart is. Her Focusing partner asks, "Is it good to stay with that?" She nods ... a silence ... labored breathing. Then it becomes calmer. She is being with the "tightness" in her chest. As she stays with it, it begins to feel a little softer and calmer.

She stays in that place, and her partner suggests she could inquire into this *oppressive-tight*, "What makes it so *oppressively tight* when the girl is awkward?"--stillness again, sensing and listening.

A tear rolls down her cheek. "Something in me wants Anna to be whole, like other children." Her hand passes across

her face, surprised, "That's not at all loveless." A pause, her eyes become clearer. "Something is different. I can't say what exactly. My daughter's handicap will not go away. But feeling that pressure, the burning desire for her to be whole, it's a relief. That's not unloving ... there's affection there. More space. Loving Anna, yes, loving Anna disabled without this pressure, this wish. I am not there yet."

As she allows herself to be accompanied while directing her awareness under the labels "loving mother" and "exasperation" in a deep sensing and listening—not evaluating in any way—she is feeling with 'com-compassion' herself, her bodily experiencing, and a way opens up for her to love her daughter as she is. There is knowing in there, that it will come, and there is some love already now. And each step needs to be felt and allowed to be. By not fighting any more what we are experiencing, it moves and changes "on its own." What—and who—we think we are starts liquidizing.

Buddhist teachers of different traditions have understood Focusing as a "skillful means" when I have presented it to them at various conferences.

Being with our experiencing, moment by moment, friendly and honest. This is compassion, and it transforms, empties out our blockages and identifications, opening the way into the direction of radical presence, vibrant suchness.

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