

A Context For Compassion Circle Practice

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In helping our Servant Leadership School students to discern God's call for their lives, we find it helpful to distinguish between "specific" call and "general" call. Much of our work goes into helping individuals to reflect on the uniqueness of their life story, the particularity of their gifts, their experience and personal history, their present circumstances and, in that context, what "specifically" might God be calling them to be or do in this moment or season of their life. But we also believe, in a biblical context, that every authentic call from God will include these three "general" features.

First, it will be a call to Communion: an ever-deepening capacity for presence, intimacy and connection with the Divine Presence, on a daily basis plugging our lives into that Divine Source from whom all good things and good works come. Second, it will be a call to Compassion: awakening the heart to reflect both God's and our own deepest nature, embodying the compassion and love that was the central reality of Jesus' life and teaching. And third, it will be a call to Co-creation in some form. We are the instruments through which God is seeking to bring this Creation to its intended fulfillment. Even if you feel personally inadequate to the task, like Moses did, God is calling you to serve a divine purpose, not all on your own, but to work in a co-creative relationship, as an instrument through which God is able to complete the work of creation and fulfill God's Dream for this earth.

And you will quickly recognize those three "general" features of Call in the biblical sense as the three central practices of Servant Leadership - the three practices around which our whole curriculum is organized. Communion – prayer and the practice of presence; Compassion – awakening the heart; Co-creation – alignment with divine power and purpose. Whatever your specific call may turn out to be, God is calling all of us, in a general sense, to make the journey from one realm (represented by the left side of the chart) to this alternative realm, the reality represented by the right side of the chart.

Because God's call is the call to a new Kingdom, to a different way of being human, to a new paradigm which Jesus called the Kingdom of God and insisted is available to us right here and right now, in the present moment of our living. And that is easier said than done; because this fear/control world-view, this power-over paradigm, has a powerfully hypnotic effect on us. It actually works like a "trance" that we need, first, to recognize, and, second, to be intentional about waking up from. And these three practices are specific ways of awakening from the "trance" that keeps us stuck in the old paradigm, a trance that is both personal and cultural. And I am using the word "trance" in a specific and fairly technical sense.

As a state marked by (1) a bypassing of the critical faculty (it's not something we critically reflect upon, rather it's what we assume is "just the way things are"), (2) selective thinking (we learn to "filter out" whatever does not fit into the paradigm), (3) high suggestibility (if you've ever seen demonstrations of hypnosis, you see that people can be incredibly suggestible, acting like robots, in ways entirely against their nature), and (4) lack of awareness that one is in a trance. A dream seems totally real – until you wake up from it. Then you see – gosh, that was only a dream. The authors of The Paradigm Conspiracy suggest that this is precisely how this Egyptian Paradigm operates. It works to systematically disconnect people from their own souls, from their internal guidance system, and keep people hypnotized and acting something like lemmings, moving and acting in ultimately self-destructive ways, in the direction dictated by the control paradigm.

It is a massive cultural trance into which we are inducted as we are socialized into the Domination System. And almost everything in the culture, including advertising, entertainment, schooling, the "news," etc., is geared to constantly reinforce the 'reality of this worldview – and the sense that this is the only reality, the way things are – and if you are going to be a realistic, rational, responsible person, you will conform to this world-view, its rules, values and expectations.

However, this paradigm is not "the way things are." It is just one "picture of the world." The Paradigm Conspiracy calls it "a trance posing as a philosophy," a picture marked by these characteristics: (1) "materialism," a belief that the material world is more real and takes precedence over the spiritual; (2) "identity and value externally conferred," something you have to "earn" or manipulate from people around you, rather than something intrinsically given to us by God; and (3) the strong drive, the need, to "control" life and other people. It is a belief system that encourages and rewards greedy, self-centered, and aggressive, often violent behavior; and we think, well that's just "the way things are," that's "reality." According to Jesus, that is not "reality." And something inside us seems to know that, as well.

In our Compassion course, we read from a book by Marc Ian Barasch entitled Field Notes on the Compassionate Life. And he recalls September 11, the trauma of 9/11, as the one time (in recent memory) we, briefly but collectively, as a culture, awakened from that cultural trance. Do you remember? It all simply stopped – the numbing, hypnotic ritual of it. They simply stopped showing the commercials because we could not bear the shallowness and obvious manipulation of them. The comedians stopped telling their jokes, because we simply could not bear the cynicism and mean-spiritedness of them. It all just stopped.

Our hearts were broken by the trauma and tragedy of it, but, in so many cases, those hearts were broken open, and what was released was this massive outpouring of compassion. The desire to connect with people we love, and to tell them we love them, even to acknowledge the humanity of strangers on the street, to reach out and help in some way, by donating blood, giving money, or heading up to Ground Zero to lend a hand. Do you remember what that felt like and how different it was in those days and weeks after 9/11? It didn't last very long. Before long, we were back in the trance, business as usual. But it did awaken something in us, and helped us, I think, to become conscious of the fact that we are indeed living in a trance much of the time and most of our lives.

Barasch puts it this way: “It does seem that we suffer from a collective cognitive dissonance. We know that the children are starving; the ice caps really are melting. We know our designer sweats are connected to designer sweatshops; our automobiles to the turbid atmosphere; the food on our table to the dwindling water table and the chemicalized soil. We sense that life in the developed world has become a desire machine cranked up to maximum RPM, spinning out a dizzying succession of induced wants for which satisfaction is supplied, scratches for itches, at fair market price – no matter what the cost.

We also know there’s already enough to feed, clothe, house, heal and educate everyone, without exception. It’s less a shortage of resources than a shortage of imagination: compassion being an ability to imagine – to see – the connection between everyone and everything, everywhere.”

Being able to “see,” of course, means awakening from the trance. And that is the challenge. In our Compassion course, we also read an extraordinary essay by Gerald May, entitled “From Cruelty to Compassion.” In this essay May, a psychiatrist by training, clinically “de-constructs” the reality of human cruelty into its component parts, which he identifies as: “attachment” or addiction (seeking a sense of security where it cannot be found), compounded by “tribalism” (a sense of identity based on an us vs. them, insider/outsider dynamic, I have a sense of identity and belonging because someone else doesn’t), leading to “vengeance” (those endless cycles of self-justifying retribution which can continue for generations).

Witness the endless conflicts between Bosnians and Serbs, Jews and Palestinians, Hutus and Tutsis, Hatfields and McCoys, Sharks and Jets, Crips and Bloods, sometimes ex-husbands and wives, the list goes on. But the dynamic of such human cruelty is this pattern of attachment/addiction, tribalism, vengeance. It is a pattern that goes on at every level of human life – from Junior High to the Junior League to ethnic cleansing and international relations.

Gerald May says that: “The human capacities for cruelty and violence are indeed innate, ‘hard-wired’ into our brain.” BUT, he says, “but I also propose that our capacities for compassion, tenderness and justice are just as innate, just as organic as our capacity for violence.” It’s like we come from the factory, if you will, ‘hardwired’ with this dual circuitry, and as human beings in any given moment, we have the capacity to operate our lives through one circuitry or the other – cruelty or compassion. Human beings have the capacity to operate on one power source or the other – AC or DC – the dynamic energy of cruelty or the dynamic energy of compassion. The intentional choosing of the Compassion circuitry, life on THIS (the right) side of the chart, is what I believe Jesus meant by “conversion.” It is a conversion from one hard-wired human circuitry, one innate human capacity, one quality of energy to the other. This is what the Gospel is about. This is what Servant Leadership is about.

There is a Native American story that illustrates the point. An old Cherokee chieftain told his grandson about the battle that goes on inside every human being. He said, “My son, the battle is between two wolves. One is called Evil. It is anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other wolf is called Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, truth, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, compassion and faith.” The young boy thought for a bit, and then asked, “Grandfather, which wolf wins the battle?” The chieftain replied, “The one you feed.” Whatever your specific call may be, God is calling you, and all of us, to begin a journey toward a New Kingdom – to switch circuits, to give up the addictions, attachments, tribalism and vengeance of the cultural trance – to move from one paradigm, one way of being human, to this other way embodied

by Jesus. And these three practices – communion, compassion, co-creation – are specific ways, in the context of our daily lives, specific ways of awakening from that trance and making this shift – by feeding the “wolf called Good.”

The Biblical insight, the insight of Jesus, is that this Power-Over Paradigm, this Fear/Control worldview constantly feeds “the wolf called Evil,” and ultimately it does not work. It has never worked for the poor, for those on the margins, for those living near the bottom of the Pyramid; it has never worked for “the least of these,” as Jesus himself pointed out forcefully and repeatedly. For a time, it did seem to work for those on the top of the Pyramid. But, in the language of Bennett Sims, we are now living on “a hinge of history,” a vast “turning point” in the evolution of human consciousness. As Sims says, we are now living in a world that has grown “too small for violence.” We have now reached a period in human history – with the development of technology, the technology of weaponry by which the dynamics of tribalism and vengeance may now be acted out, not with sticks and stones or even bullets and blades, but with weapons of mass destruction, the possibly irreversible damage our lifestyle is inflicting upon the environment, this good Earth, which sustains all of life – we have now reached a period of history when this Power-Over Paradigm is threatening to destroy the planet. The destructive dynamics of the Paradigm are threatening to bring down the whole Pyramid. I am not privy to any kind of time-table, and I remain rooted in deep sense of hope, but, unless there is a dramatic shift in human consciousness, it seems like simply a matter of time.

The Pyramid itself seems destined to implode from its own greedy, violent and destructive energies. Deep down, we know this is true. Do we not? Yet, we keep going on with “business as usual,” like those lemmings moving toward the cliff, because we are suffering from that “cognitive dissonance,” under the hypnotic effects of that cultural trance.

The Gospel is calling us, finally, to wake up. We are the generation being called decisively to “switch circuits,” not just so we have better lives as individuals, but for the possibility and hope of co-creating a future anybody would want to live in. The way of Jesus is calling us, in this generation, to provide for not just an enrichment of our personal spiritual life, but for the long-term continuation and viability of life itself. Any real hope for a viable and sustainable human future depends upon some critical mass of human beings making this paradigm shift. This is what Servant Leadership is about. We are being called, in this generation, to become “servants of life.” You and I.

That is what these “practices” are about – this awakening. I am hoping we will see the organic connection between our personal practice, learning to make this shift in the moment to moment, day to day circumstances of our individual lives AND this larger context of the evolutionary challenge of our species and hope for human life on this planet. An essential dimension of God’s “call” to us, in this generation, is to treat the rest of our lives as a journey, a pilgrimage, toward this new realm of communion, compassion, and co-creation. Not just for our own personal well-being but for all of life. Is that sufficient motivation to take this path and these practices seriously?

Gerald May begins his essay with a quote from the Dalai Lama that goes like this: “Although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way.” The point is that our own shift, our own awakening IS HUMANITY AWAKENING, humanity, person by person, group by group, making this desperately needed shift to which Jesus has been calling us for over 2000 years. We are being called, in this generation, to be instruments through which God can co-create a new humanity and a new world, and to finally fulfill God’s Dream for this Creation.

The “Compassion Circle Practice” offers a context, a structure and support for making this shift. It comes out of some conversations with Gordon Cosby of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC. Gordon spoke of the remarkable witness of Alcoholics Anonymous, the Twelve Step program, as a group structure which supports a profound process of healing and transformation in so many persons suffering from addiction to alcohol (and other substances). In just some seventy years, AA, as a grassroots movement with very little in the way of resources or organizational superstructure, has literally circled the globe, with meetings in almost every city or town in which you might find yourself on a given day.

What if we had available a group structure that offered support and empowerment to people who want to withdraw from the “cultural addictions” that are killing our souls and threatening to destroy our planet? What if we had available a support group structure in which we could help one another in the “practices” by which we awaken from the cultural trance? Is a “mass movement of compassion” possible at this juncture of human history? We believe it is. We believe that is what the Church in this generation is being called to become – a global, grassroots, mass movement of compassion. We offer the Compassion Circle Practice as a support for such a movement.