

A Therapist's Introduction to Compassion

When we think of compassion what comes to mind? For me there's something of childhood about it, something instructive, *this is how I should be feeling*. Is it a slightly worthy form of kindness, perhaps involving some empathy, even a little pity? It evokes charitable giving, appeals to help the suffering, such as Comic Relief or those charity adverts you see on daytime television urging you to give £2 a month. But compassion is so much more than that, it could well be the most important concept in the world today. There is a religious aspect to compassion and it's invoked by each of the world religions. Within Christianity it appears as 'caritas' and may be familiar from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the most popular bible reading at weddings with its famous closing line, "And now abideth faith hope and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity". Nowadays 'charity' is often replaced with the softer and easier on the ear, 'love' but the Latin 'caritas' referred to altruistic not passionate love and calls to mind what Karen Armstrong has called *the golden rule*: "Do not treat others as you would not like them to treat you". Karen Armstrong is one of my heroes, a former nun who lost her faith and moved outwards from the convent to the world, she has devoted her life to a comparative study of the world's major religions and has written many books on the history of religion along with biographies of Mohammed and the Buddha. Since 9/11 she has become a figure on the world stage arguing for closer understanding between the faiths, an understanding of religion that is based on the golden rule, and for life based on a principle of compassion. In 2008 Armstrong won the Ted prize which is aimed at helping those perceived to be making the world a better place. She dedicated her prize to the setting up of a Charter of Compassion which aimed at both bringing the religions of the world, and the religious and non-religious closer together and for a return of the golden rule as the cornerstone of religious and non-religious life. We live in difficult and dangerous times and the work of Karen Armstrong for me provides a much needed sense of hope. I find her work on compassion exciting and inspiring for compassion is integral to how I work as a therapist and every day I see the difference it makes to our experience of ourselves and the world. In her Charter for Compassion Armstrong suggests that if we are to anchor compassion in our lives we must approach it from a place that makes sense to us, through a tradition, religious or secular that resonates with our experience. As a therapist I approach compassion through my experience of the therapeutic relationship and through the Buddhist practice of compassion.

The Buddhist Practice of Compassion

The practice of compassion, or *maitri*, may be new to some but you've probably all heard of its sister practice, mindfulness. Mindfulness allows you to bring a calm and meditative mind to your daily tasks and to the thoughts and emotions that accompany them. Instead of multi-tasking you concentrate on the one thing you doing and really experience it. In recent years many non-Buddhists have discovered that mindfulness helps them cope better with the challenges of life through this focus on being rather than thinking. Over time mindfulness like good therapy can reveal to us our patterns and ways of seeing the world, how we *think, feel and behave*. But seeing ourselves more clearly is often painful and we want to look away. And this is where *compassion*, comes in.

Within Buddhism compassion is the desire that *all beings* including ourselves should be free from suffering, a kind of all-encompassing kindness. Though similar to kindness it is far more radical as Karen Armstrong explains:

“In compassion, when we feel with the other, we dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and we put another person there”.

Compassion is at the heart of Buddhist ethics, together with another very important idea, that of *shunyata* or *emptiness*. Emptiness is a difficult idea to convey as Tibetan Buddhist Master Ringu Tulku explains:

“Although I use the word emptiness here, I use it with some reservation... ‘interdependence’ would perhaps be a better term to use... because everything is interdependent, nothing can be said to exist separately and of itself” (Tulku, 2001, 2).

And that includes ourselves. In Buddhist psychology emptiness means that we are less the atomized individuals we see ourselves in the West. Instead we are restored to our context, part of our world & the flux of life. No-self is the Buddhist way of expressing this focus on reducing the importance of our ego. Both Emptiness and no-self are tricky terms for the Western ear as in English they sound negative, Ringu Tulku’s term *interdependence* is a good way of approaching it. “Among” was the mantra one of my Buddhist teachers used to remind himself that we are both ourselves *and* our context.

The Buddha suggested that it is our dawning awareness of emptiness that causes much unhappiness, trapped in what he called *ignorance*, we’ve a creeping sense that we are less real and individual than we like to think we are. So we puff ourselves up and get lost in ego games and a ceaseless striving for what we like and pushing away what we don’t. Mindfulness can help us see ourselves more clearly and compassion is a reminder that we are part of the flux of life and if want a better life for ourselves, we must wish the same for the all other beings who are part of the same fabric. Something significant about compassion is that it is something that can be *learned*. In many Buddhist traditions equal weight is given to mindfulness meditation, learning to spot our repetitive thinking and ego games, and loving-kindness meditation which is an embodied focussing on the heart not the head, cultivating kind feelings for ourselves, those we love, those we don’t know and those we find difficult. For many of us learning to be kind to ourselves and to see ourselves in our context is both a challenge and a liberation. For when Buddhism started to become popular in the west something interesting was discovered: we’d somehow lost this habit of being gentle on ourselves. Our focus on individualism had led to a fragile and self-critical ego that falls easily into *rumination*, circular repetitive, negative thinking. Once we start ruminating it’s almost impossible to stop, it’s the attempt to use thinking to solve a painful feeling, a fool’s errand, and one that has only one sure solution, compassion. But for many of us self-compassion is something we’ve never been taught. And this is where good therapy can help.

It was only in supervision recently that I realised I hadn't yet articulated how I use mindfulness and compassion in therapy and this is important question as I'm far from a traditional Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapist. I'm not a great employer of exercises or techniques, rather mindfulness and compassion *inform* my work as a therapist, they provide in large part the frame within which I explore with my clients. The meat of the therapy is *relationship* and making sense together of how our early life has shaped us and in many cases left a shadow. In this there is an echo of the Buddhist idea of ignorance. The Buddha believed that we could not awaken to the reality of emptiness alone, we needed to explore together. Similarly, in therapy we need to explore in relationship the biases and often damaging beliefs about self and world that we constructed as children. Alone we are too close to this material to see it, it is the air that we breathe.

Bibliotherapy, or How Books Can Change Your Life

Tolstoy memorably said that happy family families are all alike but "each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". Therapy for me was an opportunity to explore my own family unhappiness. Two important books prepared the way for me, Alice Miller's *the Drama of Being a Child* and Oliver James's *They Fuck You Up*. Both books are polemics and their effect on me was the aim of all good polemic, they changed my view of the world. Alice Miller was one of the early psychoanalysts. There's something really exciting for me in the birth of psychoanalysis, and those early analysts have something of the flavour of the saints of the early Christian church, disciples of a new and radical way of seeing the world taking the message out into a sometimes dangerous world. But Alice Miller found herself out of step both with the mores of her time & Freudian orthodoxy, reacting against both the gender normativity of early psychoanalysis and its tendency to negate the importance of real childhood trauma in favour of unconscious fantasy. Miller became a passionate advocate for the child arguing that the traditional way of raising and educating children traumatizes them, and that as we become parents and educators we revisit that trauma on children, as our own projections of how we need them to be intrude on their process and we subject them to cruelty and harsh punishments for failing to live up to these projections. Making sense of our often painful childhood experience offers a way out of this trap which Miller termed *poisonous pedagogy*. Psychologist, broadcaster & author Oliver James' takes Larkin's infamous poem, *This Be the Verse* as the starting point for an exploration of John Bowlby's *attachment theory*, which argued that our sense of self derives from the care we received as children and sometimes we miss out on the kind of care that we needed. Like Alice Miller John Bowlby moved away from Freud's emphasis on drives and instincts and suggested that *attachment* or relationship was the primary motivation of human beings. If all goes well we experience our early relationship with our parents as a secure base from which to move forward in life and a model for future relationships. Oliver James takes the reader through the successive stages of child rearing and how we grow through these stages James shows how things can go wrong but offers the possibility of change. Reading both these books my life began to make sense, in a way it hadn't before. They ignited my belief in *bibliotherapy*, the difference reading can make to mental health. But books can only take you so far, to change I needed a new experience of relationship. Luckily for me reading myself into these accounts left feeling hopeful that the therapeutic relationship could make a difference to my life.

They Fuck You Up Your Mum & Dad They Do Not Mean To But They Do

Let's have a look at Larkin's poem *This Be The Verse* now, though its message is bleak it articulates a truth about family unhappiness. At the end of this piece we'll finish with a very different poem, Rumi's *the Guest House* and my intention is to show in the difference between the two poems, the difference therapy and compassion can make to your experience of yourself in the world.

This Be The Verse by Philip Larkin

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another's throats

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

Strong stuff isn't it? From that famous opening line through to its bleak conclusion: 'don't have any kids yourself'. Though it resonates with me, as with Alice Miller and Oliver James' contribution it could be termed polemic which means though it contains a truth about human nature its strokes are bold and there's no place for the subtleties of our own relationships. Though I wouldn't say my childhood was happy that was due in large part to my experience of school rather than family and it doesn't mean that there weren't happy times and that my parents weren't good and kind people. They were struggling people, as they'd had unhappy childhoods themselves and were both frightened of their own unhappy parents: the "fools in old-style hats and coats" mocked by Larkin. I wasn't frightened of my parents, I loved them but their sometime unhappiness meant that they could oscillate between the solidity of adults and the shakiness of children. Though they tried very hard not to repeat the

mistakes of their own parents they'd been given few emotional tools by their own unhappy families & consequently struggled to articulate difficult emotions and to teach me to do the same. Generational transmission is the psychoanalytic term for how we pass on pain through the generations (Larkin's deepening coastal shelf).

There's No Such Thing As a Baby

Later, when I was training to become a therapist, my early experience of reading Miller and James led me towards Object Relations, the British School of Psychoanalysis which moved away from Freudian drives and instincts and placed the early relationship between parent and child front and centre and was a major influence on Bowlby's Attachment Theory. In particular I was drawn to Donald Winnicott and his work with mothers and babies. Winnicott argued that there was "no such thing as a baby" only the relationship between mother and baby. From this early experience of being cared for we begin to form our sense of self. What is key is that the parent does not *impinge* upon the child allowing them to remain in a relaxed playful state Winnicott termed 'unintegration' which is the basis of the future self. In recent years neuroscience has backed up Winnicott's belief in the importance of early relationship and we have learnt that the human brain is functionally incomplete at birth. Our orbitofrontal cortex with which we make sense of the world develops only in the first year, we literally grow in relationship. So, what happens when things go wrong and we don't receive the kind of care we need? The benign development described by Winnicott can take place if the parent is not *impinging* upon the child: "projecting her own expectations, fears and plans for the child" (ibid: 31). One of the tragedies of being human is that we are clumsy with our people, we find it all too easy to mix them up and start projecting. Projecting is when an experience from an earlier time in our life becomes a lens through which we view the present, it is an unavoidable part of human being and a kind of shorthand that allows us to make sense of the people who fill our life. However, when things have gone wrong in our childhood and we've missed out on an empathic experience of being parented projection can get out of control and the people around us can become blank screens on which we project our childhood fears and terrors. Even those of us who've had a fairly good experience of parenting are still at risk of our projections getting out of control when strong emotions are elicited by an experience. Someone who has themselves experienced unempathic care when confronted with a crying baby can experience once more the unempathic, withholding parent, just as someone bullied by their parent can confuse the rage they feel towards their own screaming baby with the rage they felt towards both the abusing parent and the wounded child in themselves for being weak. My psychoanalysis lecturer confided in our class of trainee therapists that she'd first turned to therapy when as a young mother she was horrified to find herself experiencing the same rage towards her baby that she felt towards her violent mother. And only recently in supervision I noticed feelings of anger towards a client for not doing what I thought was best and realised my mother must have felt just the same feelings towards me. If you have your own children it can be upsetting, even frightening to read about how things can go wrong in childhood but something to remember is that children (and adults) are remarkably resilient. Winnicott had a lovely term for how to get it right, he talked about the 'good-enough mother', apologies to good-enough fathers for the gender normativity of an earlier time. We none of us have to be perfect, good-enough is more than enough.

When we don't receive the empathic care we need as small children, when our parents' emotions and child-feelings impinge upon our process, we can turn away from relationship and effectively begin to care for ourselves, hopeless that the environment will meet our needs. In Bowlby's attachment theory when this early relationship fails or is unstable we fail to develop the secure base from which to move outwards into the world and instead our attachments to others and the world are *insecure* or *disorganised*. Winnicott suggested we lock away or split off our difficult feelings and develop a *false self*, one that responds to the environment. These split off feelings may survive as anger or depression, or we may seek succour in alternatives to relationship such as drink, drugs, food and sex. We may sublimate our hopes for relationship in working hard to achieve academic or professional success, falling into narcissism, substituting external praise or status for the internal vacuum.

At some point though, something has to give and this hopefully is where good therapy can help. I trained as an existential therapist and we set great store by the existential crisis, how periodically your old way of living no longer works for you and you need to stop and take stock. I had just such a life crisis in my early 30s and the experience of several periods of good enough therapy enabled me to stop relying on my brittle false self and achieve a greater fluidity. And this for me is where compassion comes in. Therapy is a long road and learning both that we may have missed out on some of the care that we needed and that this is still holding us back in our relationships is both painful and patient work. Though we may not have always experienced our childhood families as safe or emotionally stable places, when things get tricky in our lives today, whether in work, with friends or in our relationships, we have a tendency to revert to the communication styles of our childhood families. For me this means that when I don't feel safe I move too quickly to anger which can be painful for those around me. Realising we have 'done it again', we've regressed to childlike ways of making sense of the world is painful and brings up feelings of shame and hopelessness.

Listening To the Child, Responding With the Adult

The best way I've found of helping clients deal with the many times they slip back into old habits is a combination of compassion and Transactional Analysis. Transactional Analysis, or TA for short, shares many of the same theoretical ideas of object relations and attachment theory but is simpler and clients really 'get it'. TA proposes that when we are very small we record vivid memories of how it is to be a small powerless child and equally vivid memories of what it is to be parented and schooled. Depending on our childhood experience our "parent tape" can be quite self-attacking and take the form of angry commands, "No! Don't do that!" "How many times have I told you?" "How dare you speak back to me!". As we grow we learn to move beyond the parent or child response and develop our adult response. However for many of us the experience of being a child is less than perfect, we may have grown up at time when in school and at home there was a more punitive attitude towards children's behaviour (Alice Miller's poisonous pedagogy) and we have a large store of wounded child / angry parent tapes that come-online when powerful emotions such as anger, fear, shame or sadness are triggered. It's hard when these child feelings are activated not to move towards the angry parent as a way of defending ourselves. It's important to remember here that our parents were enacting the demands of their culture, we all bear cultural wounds and it is up to all of us to enact the necessary changes, in Gandhi's famous description 'be the change you want to see'. I'm very proud of my own

parents for making huge strides in moving the conversation on, from their own frightening experience of their own parents they were able to construct a home on far more loving and democratic lines.

However it seems to be a universal truth that being a child is always going to be frightening at times. Being a small person in a world full of unpredictable large people can be scary and families and schools are real, imperfect places so we all have a store of painful child feelings to draw on. In this model we are trying to listen to our child feelings from an adult compassionate place. Our painful child-feelings too easily lead not to the compassionate adult response but to the bullying critical response. This is the voice of the inner critic which we internalised and synthesised from all those times we were told off by parents or teachers, or ridiculed and bullied by siblings or peers. We all too easily turn this critical voice against ourselves and our loved ones when our painful child feelings have been activated and we don't feel safe. A good way of telling whether your child feelings have been triggered is that you feel a little out of control emotionally, this can manifest as a weepy helplessness or the red mist feeling where your anger feels uncontrollable. When your emotions feel hot in this way it could be time to take some time out and bring your adult online. For this move towards our adult we need compassion. There is a great Buddhist saying that human beings find it hard to look at themselves without turning their experience into a stick to beat themselves with: 'why am I still doing this!' 'Why can't I change?' 'I'm always going to be thinking this way!' Becoming more compassionate with ourselves allows us to notice when we turn our painful child feelings into a stick to beat ourselves with and allows us to put down the sticks we use on ourselves and our loved ones.

One of the most useful things I've taken from TA is that when we consciously retrieve a memory, it functions as a memory. However when an emotional memory is elicited by our experience of life we aren't remembering, we are *re-experiencing*. This is a really important distinction. Clients so often beat themselves up for backsliding in their therapy journey: 'I thought was doing so well and yet I'm back there with these feelings'. Every day, we are back there, but this doesn't have to be a problem if we can respond with self-compassion. Freud vividly describes this particularly tricky part of being human in *Civilization and its Discontents* where he compares the human psyche with the city of Rome, with its many layers of history. However, unlike the city of Rome, each layer of our lives doesn't rest tidily one upon the next. Rather, all those ages and experiences still coexist and all it takes is the right circumstance (or the right family member) and our five year old, our ten year old or our truculent teenager lives again with all the archaic sorrow and rage that our younger self can muster.

You Are Not 'Back There', It Just Feels That Way

What's important to remember when something triggers these younger feelings: 1) You are not 'back there', it just feels that way for a moment; 2) You do not need to act from those feelings, just let them be; 3) When you find yourself dragged back to an earlier and more painful time, it's an opportunity to nurture yourself, to give yourself some time and some kindness. For so many of us when we find ourselves confronted with painful childhood feelings our default response is to turn to the inner critic. In effect we start bawling ourselves out, trying vainly to scare ourselves into being better like a parade

ground sergeant major. Something to remember here is that if the sergeant major's technique works it is because he is trying to form a collection of disparate individuals into a cohesive group, bullying yourself in this way will only distress and discourage you. Becoming gentler on ourselves and developing a more compassionate way of being with these feelings is hard and patient work. But it is the most important work we will ever do. The Buddha used to teach his monks about the difference between pain and suffering, he'd say pain is inevitable, suffering isn't. Pain is the childhood pain we all have stored up and we all experience from time to time. Suffering is the critical voice that tells us we shouldn't be feeling this, we should be stronger, better, more grown up. And away we go, carried off on a wave of rumination. Teaching clients to be more mindful allows them to see when their painful child feelings have come into play and when they are compensating with the bludgeon of their inner critic. When you notice painful child feelings surfacing, don't try and push them away, bring your adult online and care for them in the way you would care for a child. It's not a case of moving away from the child towards the adult, it's allowing our child feelings to be present and holding them with the adult. We can then act from our more stable and powerful adult self. One of the reasons we can get so nasty in our dealings with other people is that when we are 'in our child' we see other people from the perspective of a child and this is terrifying, so we often feel we need anger to keep us safe. Allowing ourselves a moment to listen to and process our painful feelings allows us to come back to an adult way of being which reminds us that we aren't really a powerless child, it just feels that way for a moment and we can respond with the calmness of the adult. Noticing how we are bringing our childhood into the present every day is repetitive and painful work and we couldn't go on with it without compassion for ourselves and for our loved ones.

I Am Me, Hear Me Roar!

There are a couple of final points I'd like to make. The first is that compassion isn't just kindness, it's far more radical than that. The lesson of shunyata or emptiness is that we are less the atomized individuals we are taught to believe we are and compassion returns us to our context, part of the flux of life. As an existential therapist this view of human being is important to me. The existential view derived from the work of Martin Heidegger is of man as *dasein*, or being-in-the-world, with an emphasis on our "interconnectedness and interdependence". As Emmy van Deurzen has argued, this view of human being is radically different from the popular Western view as atomized thinking isolates: "human being is essentially always in a world, and in relationship, never in isolation". Let's think about this for a moment. We've all seen those wildlife programmes where we follow the lives of a herd of elephants or a burrow of meerkats. The worst thing that can happen is to be expelled from the group as they are animals that only make sense as part of their group. We understand this in an animal context but when it comes to ourselves we are taught to discount this view of ourselves as group animals instead we are taught to think of ourselves as individuals, consumers, meaning makers. While being able to think and make sense of our world is undoubtedly part of what makes us human, we cannot function alone. From where do we get our food, water and electricity? While our education system may teach us to think for ourselves we are taking part in an ongoing conversation that relies on thousands if not millions of thinking minds in conversation with one another down the centuries. We can't exist alone. This contextual view of human being isn't a popular one at this point in history. A while back I read an interview with David Simon creator of the TV series *the Wire* where

he talked about the popular American view of individuality which he satirized as “I am me hear me roar!”. Simon suggested that this over emphasis on individualism had turned the U.S.A. into “a horror show” and sees in the fury unleashed by Obama’s healthcare reforms an almost phobic resistance to the idea of interconnectedness: “they don’t want to hear it. It’s too much. Too much to contemplate the idea that the whole country might be actually connected.”

The lesson of compassion is that we aren’t quite the atomized individuals our society increasingly view us as. This requires us as therapists to think critically and to look beyond the disease model of mental health which sees the problem as located within the individual, let’s look too at the system. Are nuclear families with little outside support a good way of structuring our society? Similarly is our current school system with its emphasis on excellence and league tables of schools and exam results the best way to educate our children? The concept of intersectionality which looks at how much privilege or lack thereof we each experience is now common in academic circles and is beginning to colonise the world of therapy as mindfulness did in the last ten years. Intersectionality is another way of appreciating that we cannot be abstracted from our contexts and addresses the fact that there is no such thing as a level playing field and we need to think critically about such concepts as race, gender, sexuality and power.

Compassionate Therapy As the Basis For Compassionate Living

My final point is a plea for the importance of compassionate therapy. Let’s look again at the Buddhist term *ignorance*. For the Buddha, the human tendency to ignore what we find painful means that it is only in coming together that we can begin to see how we are. For me this finds an important parallel in the work of therapist and client. The painful early childhood experience described by Alice Miller, Donald Winnicott and John Bowlby is with us throughout our lives but it exists as a felt sense and in dormant emotions such as sorrow, anger, grief and shame which are stored in the body. Such material is *unconscious*, it is held outside of awareness. Perhaps the simplest way of expressing it is that it has yet to be put into words. When clients begin their therapeutic journeys there is a structural inequality, the therapist understands more of what is happening and more about where their journey may take them than they do and it is vital that they hold this knowledge and allow clients their work of understanding and bringing to light. Once an experience has been put into words it is available to be explored and we can bring adult meaning to what had been painful child feeling states.

For me therapy comes in two stages, the first I think of as counselling which is where the client puts into words their often painful account of how they learned to be themselves in their childhood family. In this stage the therapist is compassionate with the client. In the second stage which I think of as psychotherapy the client must observe themselves being the person they learned to be, doing the things that may make them sad, hopeless or angry, and be patient and gentle with that person. The therapist enlarges the circle of compassion by modelling self-compassion so that over time the client is able to feel compassion for themselves as they make the many inevitable trip ups on the way. As Samuel Becket memorably put it, “Fail again, fail better”. If we can fail without turning the experience

into a stick to beat ourselves, neutralizing the critical voice and responding with compassion, we are on the way.

For those of us that didn't have the kinds of early experience that would provide what Bowlby terms *a secure base*, psychotherapy offers an alternative, an opportunity to internalize a new and better experience of relationship. But this is painstaking work, each time our child feelings cry out and we find ourselves "back there" we must respond with compassion, resisting our critical voices or turning experience into a sticks to beat ourselves with. I'd like to end with Rumi's poem the guest house. Rumi was a 13th Century Islamic scholar, poet and Sufi mystic who saw life as the journey of the ego upwards towards the divine. Rumi's believed in a very personal experience of religion at the heart of which is love. For Rumi as for Saint Paul and the Buddha, love or compassion is the cornerstone of religion, Karen Armstrong's golden rule: "always to treat others as we wish to be treated ourselves". Rumi's poems have a beauty and immediacy that still speaks to us today irrespective of whether we belong to a religious tradition or none. His poem *the Guesthouse* encourages us to respond compassionately to the difficult child feelings and emotions that are elicited by our daily experiences without turning them into sticks and stones. Instead we can follow Rumi's example and step forward into life compassionately.

THE GUEST HOUSE

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

-- Jelaluddin Rumi,
translation by Coleman Barks

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