

## **Desire and suffering: The crucible of compassion**

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Essential to counselling is the empathetic accompanying of another on their journey. For true empathy and compassion the companion/ counsellor needs to know the deep places of their own being.

Suffering and desire are the fires by which our own soul is forged and made ready to companion the vulnerable places of the other person. As we continue to allow our own suffering and desire to deepen us, so we can attend to the deep places of the soul of another. This workshop explores some of the journey around suffering, ambivalence, desire and spirituality and how this forging is essential for true compassion. I believe these shape us in our own transformation; and as we learn from this process so we are fashioned into those who can show compassion for ones who are suffering, or caught in desire. Compassion enables us to create a safe place where people can connect with the deeper parts of their being whether in counselling or spiritual direction.

Participants will be invited to connect with parts of themselves relevant to suffering and desire and with the Christ who knows these deeply

#### **Irene Alexander**

The mystic who wrote the *Cloud of Unknowing* says we can know God not by our intellect but by love, by a naked intent toward God. As an academic, psychologist and epistemologist I find my journey more informed by my longing for God and relationship with him and others who seek after him. As an educator in counselling I learn from my own and others' experience and attempt most of all to find what it is that transforms us to Christ's likeness in compassion and grace so that we may extend it to others.

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In talking with Bruce Reddrop earlier this year I was relating how I had been asked to teach an overseas course in counselling – in only one week. How on earth could I even begin?

“But you could,” said Bruce, “– teach empathy.”

Now one of the major parts of any introductory counselling course is to teach the skills of empathetic listening. But technical skills of reflection and paraphrasing are far from teaching true counselling. How do we teach, not empathetic skills, but true empathy? How do we learn, as counsellors, to truly be empathetic, to truly know compassion? Because it is only as our hearts are towards those we journey with, deeply towards them, that they will intuit that it is safe to go to their own deeper places.

Sometimes as counsellors, or counsellors in training, we may be given the idea that we are to keep ourselves somewhat aloof from counselees. That we shouldn't feel their pain. Certainly there is a complex process in knowing our own pain so that we can identify with others without getting entangled. But in the end we are to walk in compassion having done the work (and continuing to do so) of processing our own emotions.

Elie Wiesel was a child when he was taken to the concentration camps because he was a Jew. His book *Night* tells of the almost unbearable suffering. Now as an old man he continues to teach that we are to learn to be sensitive to each other – even though sensitivity hurts. In a recent interview he was asked what advice he would offer today's young people. He answered:

Sensitivity. Be sensitive in every way possible about everything in life. Be sensitive. Insensitivity brings indifference and nothing is worse than indifference. Indifference makes that person dead before the person dies. Indifference means there is a kind of

apathy that sets in and you no longer appreciate beauty, friendship, goodness, or anything. So, therefore, do not be insensitive. Be sensitive, only sensitive. Of course it hurts. Sensitivity is painful.

The path of sensitivity, compassion, empathy is a painful one. It involves us being in touch with our own pain. I see this process as somehow hollowing us out – forming within us a place where we can be hospitable to others. A place where we can show compassion and so create a safe environment for others on the journey of suffering and desire. And this – knowing our own pain – is still only the first step, the sensitising of us so that we will know when another is hurting. But it is more than that – it is a deep knowing of the reality that suffering will bring transformation if it is embraced.

The Western church has not had a good theology of suffering, has preferred a theology of anaesthesia. Our riches and education and safety have buffered us from much of the suffering of the rest of the world. And our theology has become weakened by a tendency to focus on the ascendant gospel – the gospel that says we are victorious, that implies we are immune from the suffering of the rest of the world. In some ways we have secretly believed that somehow they deserve their suffering while we are blessed and deserve blessing. Jesus specifically challenged such a theology. And we as counsellors need also to clarify our theology so that we reflect the true God – for more than anything our theology around suffering will show who we understand our God to be.

So what is our understanding of God's response to suffering? Maggie Ross (1988) in *Pillars of Flame* describes God as the self-emptying (kenotic) God: "The heart of Christianity is the self-emptying, kenotic humility of God expressed in Jesus the Christ... At the heart of God's humility is this: God willingly is wounded" (p. xvi). "...a kenotic living God who is unceasingly self-outpouring, compassionate, and engaged with the creation.... God's inviolable vulnerability, God's unswerving commitment to suffer with and within the creation, to go to the heart of pain, to generate new life, hope, and joy out of the cry of dereliction, out of the pain to utter self-denudation, utter self-emptying, utter engaging love" (p. 72).

If this indeed is what our God is like- and it certainly is what Jesus showed God to be – then how can we be any different? This is the keystone of our theology of suffering.

But of course suffering in itself is not the point. It is what suffering does to us – it somehow hollows us out, or, in another metaphor "ripens us." Hanser (1979) in a story of Munich students revolting against Hitler, says:

"No one can know what goes on in the soul of an afflicted person. No one can know what secret inner ripening can come from suffering and sorrow. All we know is that every individual's life is priceless - that each is dear to God."

Somehow we have to learn to not only know our own suffering, but also how to value it. Paul explains this in Romans 5: and not only this but we also rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance character, and character hope, and hope makes us not ashamed... When suffering has indeed ripened us, taught us deeply that we can hope in God in the midst of suffering, then we can live in hope, not denying the suffering, but knowing the God who also suffers, and who somehow turns death to life. In this way we will not deny the pain of those we journey with, but we will hold hope for them.

The mystics understood this process and assure us that it is in the darkness that we find the Beloved. In *The Dark Night* St John of the Cross names the darkness, the absence of God's felt presence, as the very place that we will be united with the Beloved, and indeed transformed:

Oh guiding night!  
O night more lovely than the dawn!  
O night that has united  
The Lover with His beloved,  
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.

This then is true relationship with God – a faith that God is present, that even though the floods may come, and the fire, God is present. And this relationship enables us to journey with others in their wilderness and their darkness – having faith that God too, is for them, and with them. “Faith is not assent to doctrines or surrounding ourselves with props and propositions. It is trust that God – as Christ shows us – has been there before us, goes within us, waits to find us beyond the edges of utter dark. And, found by God, we become aware that God is closer to our being than we are” (Ross 1988, p. 135).

The God who does not remove the pain – but sits with us in it. This is the message of the psalms of lament. Of the prophet's lament. Says Jeremiah “Oh that my head were a fountain of tears.” I speak out my pain. I do not pretend to overcome. But I do bring my pain to God. I do trust that he is interested – has not abandoned me, is still God. This is Job's great triumph – that he refuses to accept suffering as punishment, and refuses to be silent – brings his suffering again and again into God's presence. And God's answer was not an explanation of why suffering is a necessary part of our world. His answer is actually more like “Who are you to even think you can understand? Where were you when I created out of nothing? And yet I will respond to you...” And in Jesus there is a God revealed who so knows that suffering is a part of living that he sets his face like flint towards the suffering, and walks into it, even to torture and death. He does not explain either. He just goes towards it. And through it.

And so we also need to acknowledge our own pain, our own unanswered questions, our personal psalms of lament. And bring them in to the presence of the Suffering One.

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Where is the place of pain for me? Or the darkness – that will lead more surely than the dawn...?

Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly.  
Let it cut more deep.  
Let it ferment you  
As few human  
Or even divine ingredients can.  
Something missing in your heart tonight  
Has made your eyes so soft  
Your voice so tender  
Your need of God absolutely clear.

Hafiz

When the words stop  
And you can endure the silence that reveals  
Your heart's pain of emptiness  
Or that great wrenching-sweet longing.  
That is the time to try to listen  
To what the Beloved's eyes most want to say. Hafiz

Richard Rohr (1995) suggests that there are three main metaphors that characterise the human spiritual journey – and one of these will fit particularly with our own experience and way of being. They are the hero's journey characterised by action, adventure, conquest and sacrifice – slaying dragons and rescuing maidens. Then there is the journey of suffering, which not many would choose, but which comes unbidden to some – and becomes for them a sacrament of grace – the way to the Divine. And finally the way of the lover. The journey of those who long for deep connection, who long for relationship, to know and be known, more than anything else. Like it or not, if we are going to grow spiritually we will engage with suffering or desire – or both.

Again we western Christians have tended to choose a theology of anaesthesia – not to desire too strongly – or to hide our desire beneath superficial consumerism, and all too often sexual titillation or addiction. Whereas the journey of the lover is the journey of desire – a willingness to admit that I long for more – that I am indeed not satisfied. Says Rilke (1996) there are some who “casual, easy, .. move in the world as though untouched”, and yet it is those “who know they thirst.. who grip you for survival” that God takes pleasure in.

“Blessed”, says the first beatitude, “are the poor in spirit” (Luke 6), – those who know they are in need. ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst’ is a message implicit in Jesus’ sayings. If we can only stay with our thirst long enough so we find the deepest quenching in the One who brings living water. It is those who deny their thirst, or fill it with shallow non-living water, who do not find the true water of life. Says Simone Weil, “The danger is that the soul should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can only persuade itself this by lying” (cited in Eldridge).

Our theology has seemed to imply that desire is in itself, sinful, or at best, temptation. But that is because we have seen it in too superficial a way. A desire for sex may more deeply be a desire for deep connection, for true nakedness, for true intimacy. Staying with desire can allow us to find the deeper longing instead of the superficial one. Then indeed desire may be Gift – for it leads to the One who longs for relationship more intensely than we do, leads to a God who is deeply in love with us. So, recognising that desire itself can lead to the One who desires us, allows us to change our understanding and to be more honest and more real about our own longings. Through the ages the mystics have believed that our small human desires are a tiny reflection of the God who knows the depth of Desire.

“Our desiring already originates in God desiring us...[The mystics] strongly assert that our desires, our wants, our longings, our outward and inward searching – when uncovered, expressed and recognised – all lead to the Divine Beloved at the core. As Augustine so tellingly phrased it in the *Confessions*, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God” (Ruffing 2000, p 11).

Ruffing (2000) suggests that using desire as a way to God, necessitates identifying the desire beneath the desire. But that first obliges us to stay with our desire, however painful. “I am convinced that many Christians never entertain their desires long enough to know what they really want. If we habitually suppress our wants” she says, [and I would add, or habitually smother them with false comfort], “we may not discover the true core of our longing that could lead us deeply into God” (p 12). She suggests an exercise:

When was the last time you asked yourself what you really want? And how long did you allow yourself to entertain that longing? Thirty seconds, a couple of minutes? What inner or outer voices suggested that whatever it was, you ought not to be so foolish as to think it could be satisfied? At some point did you judge yourself wilful or selfish? (Ruffing 2000, p 13).

Willful, selfish or, which I am sure is true for many of us – downright sinful. But underneath that longing, I am convinced, is a longing for connection with the Divine Other, an experience of knowing and being known, recognised and valued for our most true self.

This initiative of God towards us, says Ruffing, is the essence of Christian understanding.

This movement of the Mystery towards us forms the core meaning of revelation in Christian faith.. God awakens us to this divine-human love affair and initiates in us the search for the Divine Beloved. No matter how confusedly we interpret this experience, no matter how many mistakes we make along the way, no matter how often this love for the Divine Beloved gets displaced onto other loves or other objects of desire, God continues to solicit and elicit our love. As Sebastian Moore says “All desire [is] solicitation by the mystery we are in...all human loves contribute to our capacity for this divine-human intimacy.” (2000, p106).

The assurance that “no matter how often this love for the Divine Beloved gets displaced onto other loves or other objects of desire” God continues to draw us, is the message implicit in the parable of the prodigal son, indeed implicit in the gospel story, the core revelation of all of God’s word.

And again, if we have learned this deeply in our own lives, we are able to make a safe place for those we journey with. We are able to enable them to face their desire, to explore and find the deeper desire, while we hold the hope that the Divine Lover, will forgive their sidetracking, will understand their confusion, will make himself known, and finally will be sufficient for their thirst and restlessness.

There are some stories in the Bible we can look at. The woman at the well and Jacob. Both had gone towards desire, both had taken illicitly – and not been satisfied. God alone is the true end of all our longing – but our hearts do not know that. Take either story and sit with God. Be the woman to whom Jesus is saying I could give you living water - and tell him what you truly want. Or be Jacob who wrestles and will not let go until he is blessed. Or indeed David who also took what he desired – and still was considered ‘a man after God’s own heart.’ Name what is you want. And stay with that desire in God’s presence – is there more under the desire that you name? We have been afraid that we were meant to be non-passionate. Hafiz, a fourteenth century Persian mystic knew otherwise:

Throw away  
All your begging bowls at God’s door,  
For I have heard the Beloved  
Prefers sweet threatening shouts,  
Something in the order of:

“Hey, Beloved,  
My heart is a raging volcano  
Of love for you!  
You better start kissing me –  
Or else!”

As we discover the Passion of God – in both senses of the word; as we allow in ourselves real passion also – and find our answers in God; so we can truly show com-passion to those we

journey with; allowing them also to name their own pain and desire - and so discover the God who desires them.

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