

## COMPASSION

Wisdom about how to live does not come naturally, it must be sought if much of it is to be gained. It is not experience alone that produces it, but pondering the meaning of experience. Even that may not lead to wisdom if one has blinders that prevent learning the right lessons from experience. Fortunately not everything we need to learn about how to live has to be learned by our own personal experience or it would indeed take more than one lifetime. And learning some lessons by experience is fatal. Much of what we learn is taught us by other people as we grow up. And we can learn much by choosing to listen to or read the writings of people of various opinions.

We need then to weigh and consider their thoughts very carefully, and with an open mind. We should give more weight to the opinions and advice of people who really care about us, and much less to the opinions of people who seem not to care about anybody but themselves.

But few people learn very early in life to do that. We start out as a bundle of conflicting impulses. We follow some at one time and others at other times. The very notion of seeking wisdom sometimes seems repulsive. We don't really understand what it is or why it might be important to us. We don't know that it is something we need and would profit from to the extent we are able to achieve some measure of it. Indeed we mistakenly suppose that, whatever it is, it isn't something that most people could achieve. On the other hand, we somehow believe at the same time, after we mature enough, that we know as well as or better than anyone else what sort of life style is right for us.

And so we live our lives, not always, and maybe seldom, with results entirely satisfactory to us. But we blame what is unsatisfactory upon something other than ourselves, and resist changes in the way we approach life. To be able to blame something or someone else is very helpful. It spares us the psychological pain and disorientation that occurs when we recognize that the result is due in some significant degree to our own shortcomings. Nothing makes the world seem such a bad place as when we are really dissatisfied with ourselves and our poor performance, or actually discouraged by our failures and about ready to give up on ourselves. We sometimes need outside help then from someone to encourage us to make some further changes in ourselves and to try again.

Of course there is not just one pattern of life that everyone must follow, though there are some patterns that are self-defeating and some that are too harmful to other people. These two types of patterns in life need to be changed by any who fall into them. Self-defeating life styles are a

real problem for other people as well. How best to deal with people who become a serious threat to others is a real problem for our social institutions. Some clearly have to be removed from society to protect it. The problem is how to rehabilitate those who can be rehabilitated.

There is a tendency however for human beings to judge all life styles other than their own much too harshly. We seem to want everybody else to be like us, to do as we do. We seem to have a natural intolerance of people with different life styles. The fact is that we do have to make judgments of life styles in order to make our own decisions as to how we think we should live. The trouble is that we do not recognize that other people have as much right as we do to make a different decision in that regard. And we do not respect a different judgment. It takes some deliberate thought about the matter to achieve tolerance of differences in such matters. The tolerance can be promoted just by recognition of the equal rights of others to differ, and of our rights to criticize each other. For criticize each other we certainly do. The problem is to criticize actions without actually condemning people.

What I am about to write about tolerance is something I have to keep telling myself. Indeed, it has taken me far too many years to fully appreciate the need for compassion. I often heard preachers talk about condemning the action but not the person, and I mentally agreed that this distinction was a proper one. But I couldn't manage it in real life myself. Only slowly did I begin to appreciate the fact that everyone is trying to make the best of life, even those who are going about it in entirely the wrong ways, often without knowing how wrong they are. I did not fully appreciate how difficult life really is for many people. Many people, with or without realizing it, get themselves into trouble by making bad choices that they may regret sooner or later. Sometimes it is too late to change their ways. I did not have real compassion for these people. Compassion for them does not imply at all that I approve of what they do. It may even be necessary to isolate some people so they can do no more harm to others. But I now know it is wrong for me to be intolerant with everyone who disagrees with me about what is right for them. I should have compassion for them no matter how wrong I think their actions are. I have no right to try to force them to agree with me as to just how they should live, provided they also tolerate me and do no harm to others.

It is also important to recognize the consequences for all of us if intolerance leads to extensive and even violent efforts to deny others their rights. The consequences can lead to totalitarian dictatorship on a local or national scale. We must not accept the idea that people can legitimately be forced to accept the dictates of any one or any group of us. None has a

right to dictate what others must believe or how they must live, so long as they do not injure anyone. The seeds of such totalitarianism, though unrecognized, are in all of us, and are seeds that must not be cultivated.

The basic problem is that sometimes people who think they are right about anything they deem to be important seem also to think that nobody else has a right to be wrong. The only thing that can save any of us from falling into that trap, with its potentially horrible social consequences, is a recognition that we also just might be at least partly wrong. We must never be so totally sure of the total rightness of our views that we are willing to force them upon others. History is strewn with mistaken persecutions by those who were too sure they were right.

This is especially important for people who hold governmental power, though we can all persecute to a small degree. Power tends to corrupt in a more insidious way than simply tempting rulers or politicians to get their hand in the money till. It corrupts their minds so that they forget their own fallibility, and they forget the rights of other people to disagree with them. So they try to use their power to enforce conformity. On a smaller scale, we are all tempted that way after we have made the judgments we have to make about what to think and about how to live.

We have been told by religious thinkers that we ought to judge the deeds of others, but ought not to condemn the persons for their errors. That is an important distinction, and one that we often fail to make. We condemn the criminal as well as the crime. Of course people have responsibilities, and need to be held responsible for their actions. But we may not recognize that, had all the circumstances of life been the same, we might have done the same thing. By condemning the person we may be removing what little chance of rehabilitation might exist. When the crimes against other people are serious, it is hard to feel compassion for the criminal as well as for the victims. But there is nothing that has any chance of rehabilitating the criminal but feeling someone's compassion.

Quite apart from those who harm other people, we need to feel compassion for other people whose ways of life we cannot approve. They are all stumbling through life, as we all are, with too little wisdom as to how to go about it. We may give vent to different feelings that arise in us we know not how. We do not recognize the extent to which we may be slaves to irrational impulses. We can not really free ourselves of the multitude of conflicting impulses in our natures, but we do in fact make choices as to which ones to promote and develop, and which impulses not to give free reign or allow to dominate us. From time immemorial people have recognized a sort of dual nature in us, and knew that there was a better part to be cultivated and a worse part to be overcome. We want others to have

compassion for us when we make mistakes at times in such respects, and we ought to have such compassion for others likewise.

All the above fails to go far enough. We should feel some compassion for others whatever they do in life. We should be able to see them as seeking, perhaps unknowingly and sometimes we would say unwisely, to find satisfaction for some of the inexplicable impulses of humans. Our circumstances are often quite different, and our efforts to find happiness may be quite different. Our compassion should certainly extend to those whose efforts appear to be mistaken and unable to yield them much real happiness.

The fact seems to be that human nature requires a balance between different kinds of experience, and what is the best balance seems itself to be different for different people. We all need to find quiet and rest for the spirit as well as for the body, though we do not always recognize that need, nor meet it properly or well. But we also seem to have a need to experience exhilaration, some people more than others. And it makes a difference, both to us and to other people, how we seek it. Some ways can be harmful to ourselves and some harmful to others. We all have need, recognized or not, for nearly complete self-effacement at times. And we clearly all have a need to find adequate and appropriate opportunities for self-assertion in harmless ways. We need to find our satisfactions in what are for us proper proportions, and on socially proper occasions, for each of these and other types of experiences. We need to experience friendship and love. Our needs for security, for recognition from others, and for new experience differ somewhat among persons.

Some psychologists have talked about our need for self-fulfillment, or our need to seek our full potentials. The qualitative dimension of this should be explicit, however, or it leaves room for some things that are very undesirable. One potentiality of human beings is represented by Hitler and those of his henchmen who put other people through various tortures. Human beings have also the potentials that are represented by the composers and performers of great music, and by those who have spent their lives in the service of others. It is not sufficient to speak of human potentials; it is necessary to specify our need to have opportunity to strive to achieve our finer potentials. The self-fulfillment we need is of that sort, not the fulfillment of our potential sadism.

The complex of situations into which individuals are thrust in life differ greatly, and they present us with only limited choices. Some circumstances make life extremely hard and allow little opportunity for anything better. The situations and our reactions determine what sort of life experiences and quality of life we will have. Our attitudes and actions do

not have to stay on the proverbial straight and narrow path for there are many alternative good life patterns. But there are also many ways to make mistakes of various degrees of seriousness. True life satisfaction will vary with our wisdom. Some people make quite bad choices in their life situations, and they and others around them reap the consequences, the former partly in the sort of people they become. We all accommodate better or worse in various degrees and in various respects to the different circumstances that we face.

It is easy to be compassionate for people who for whatever reason are having trouble earning enough to meet adequately their basic physical needs. It may be fairly easy to be compassionate for people who seem to need different proportions of life's varied experiences than we do. It is harder to feel much compassion for people who seem to be far off the track that can give them much real happiness, or on tracks that we properly judge to be wrong because they injure others. But we need to try, since they too are seeking life fulfillment even if too unwisely. Our natural human compassion for others is so strained it quite disappears when it comes to those in the grip of such things as sadism. It takes an almost unnatural effort to realize that they too are human, though they have sunk so low. But some potential evil resides in all of us, and we escape its clutches in various degrees. Our hatred of all evil can accompany some compassion for those who for whatever reason have not exercised their responsibility to overcome it to the extent that we have tried to.

We are all human, as the old expression goes. Too often that means we are in some respects a sorry lot. And so we are. And some are terrible. But being human means also that we all have within us the potential to achieve things that are even sublime. Some have indeed become admirable. Most of us do achieve, though less than we could and should, a tolerable and even respectable personhood and path through life. Recognition of all that that requires, and how hard it all is for some people, should bring us a measure of compassion for all humans.