

STEP 12: COMPASSION AND SELFISHNESS

Compassion lies at the very heart of our practice of Step 12.

Compassion as a topic deserves an entire book to itself. It is often misunderstood, occasionally very greatly misunderstood, not only in Program but in the spiritual life generally. We are only going to be able to touch briefly upon it here -- which is a pity. Because it is so widely misunderstood, it is controversial, and controversial topics deserve deeper study than we have room for in these little studies.

In Program, our idea of compassion tends to be profoundly affected by the so-called "twelfth-step work" we are encouraged to perform, very often from our first arrival in our respective 12-Step fellowships. "Twelfth-step work" is a Program phrase and almost always means carrying the basic message of recovery to another addict. When we are recommended to do this work, we are told that it is an excellent way of ensuring our own recovery -- that sharing our personal experience of recovery, no matter how brief, will not only help others who are still suffering from their addiction, but also provide solid support for our own programs. And there is no question but that this is true. Indeed, it is true to such an extent that "twelfth-step work" occupies the attention of the AA Big Book's treatment of Step 12 to the exclusion of virtually any other aspect of the Step. This reflects the experience of early AAs. None of them had more than a couple of years, very often only a few months or even weeks, of recovery. But the need they encountered among still-suffering alcoholics for help was so great that this lack of "time" in recovery could not be allowed to be a bar to sharing the message of recovery. This practice of carrying the message to other suffering addicts continues to this day in many of our fellowships, and it is perfectly correct that it should be so. In the lounge areas of AA clubs, in quiet corners of recovery centers which emphasize the Twelve Steps, in coffee bars and inexpensive restaurants across this country and around the world, the basic message of recovery is shared every minute of every day between the new arrival in Program and someone who has a little more "time."

But can we really carry the message when we ourselves are so new in recovery? Some people think that we can't -- and they also think that that fact doesn't matter very much. Chuck C., in his book *A New Pair of Glasses*, memorably suggests that we do not. After all, we can't carry a message if we don't have a message to carry. And -- as the AA Big Book says -- you can't transmit something you don't have. Instead, Chuck C. suggests, rather than carry the message to the addict, we carry the addict to the message. We can take the addict to a 12-Step meeting; we can show the addict where the message is, even if we can't carry it ourselves. We can, as Chuck says, show love to the addict. That's what we do when we perform this sort of "twelfth-step work."

Our experience of this early "twelfth-step work," and our continuing of it as we continue to live in and work our programs, inevitably has an effect on the way we view our practice of Step 12, and particularly when it comes to the involvement of compassion in that practice. When we carry the message to other addicts, we reason, we do so because

it continues to make our own recovery more solid, and it also involves us in helping others to recover and lead happier lives.

These reasons demonstrate why this sort of basic "twelfth-step work" is not based on compassion. Compassionate acts are not performed because we get something out of them, even if what we get seems to be "good." It may be true that carrying the message to others reinforces our own recovery, but if that is why we do it -- if that is why we *continue* to do it -- then it cannot, by definition, be a compassionate act. Similarly, if we are carrying the message to others because it will help them to recover, to become free of their addiction, and to be happier and more productive, then what we are doing -- however helpful and beneficial it may be -- is not compassionate action, because compassionate action has no purpose ... at least, no purpose that we are able to discern.

Now, these statements appear to many people to be simply inflammatory. How can it possibly be true that carrying the message of recovery to other addicts is not a compassionate act? How can it be true that helping other people who are suffering isn't necessarily an act of compassion? If it isn't a compassionate act, then what is it?

And what exactly is a compassionate action?

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A compassionate action is any action (or decision not to act -- we will talk more about this later) which is taken purely as a result of working Steps 10 and 11 on a continuous basis, as described elsewhere in our little studies on those two Steps.

Those of us who are very familiar with the AA Big Book's treatment of Steps 10 and 11 will realize that this position on compassionate action comes from a literal reading of that treatment, and in particular of what is said about Step 11:

We ask God to direct our thinking, especially asking that it be divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self-seeking motives. Under these conditions we can employ our mental faculties with assurance, for after all God gave us brains to use We may not be able to determine which course to take. Here we ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought, or a decision What used to be the hunch or the occasional inspiration gradually becomes a working part of the mind [O]ur thinking will, as time passes, be more and more on the plane of inspiration. We come to rely on it We constantly remind ourselves we are no longer running the show, humbly saying to ourselves many times each day, "Thy will be done."

There is another version of this in the much-neglected summary of Program found in Bill's story in the first chapter of the Big Book:

I was to test my thinking by the new God-consciousness within. Common sense would thus become uncommon sense. I was to sit quietly when in doubt, asking only for direction and strength to meet my problems as He would have me Belief in the power

of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements.

Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness.

We have seen the first of these passages so frequently that paradoxically we no longer see what it says. It suggests quite literally the ongoing replacement of the calculating mind of self with intuition and inspiration derived from the practice of prayer and meditation. The Big Book is suggesting that “we can employ our mental faculties with assurance” only when “our thinking ... [is] divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self-seeking motives.” Our thought-life, it says, “will be placed on a much higher plane when our thinking is cleared of wrong [i.e. selfish] motives.”

Of course, attempting to lead one’s life on this basis does not mean “that we are going to be inspired at all times. We might pay for this presumption in all sorts of absurd actions and ideas. Nevertheless, we find that our thinking will, as time passes, be more and more on the plane of inspiration. *We come to rely upon it* [our italics].”

We have noted elsewhere that one of the great spiritual insights of the AA Big Book is that the root cause of our problem is not lack of morality but selfishness. And whenever our calculating minds start to determine a course of action, we can be sure that lurking there somewhere is a selfish motive, however pure-minded we would like to think our motivation is. In fact, when a recovering addict has any sort of motive to do any action, there is always at least a hint of selfishness there. So an action which carries with it a motive of any kind tends to be suspect. It seems, from what the Big Book is suggesting, that to a great extent our actions should be goal-less.

And that may be an answer to part of our question about what a compassionate action is. It is, at its heart, goal-less. It may well have a purpose as far as God as we understand God is concerned, but that purpose is no affair of ours. Compassionate actions seem in the first instance to simply “come out” of our practice of Steps 10 and 11. We acknowledge in Step 10 that we do not know what to do; we use our practice of Step 11 to ask God as we understand God what we should do; and the answer simply seems to suggest itself. But this will only happen as long as we are vigilant about keeping “self” out of the picture.

By very definition, therefore, a compassionate action cannot benefit us – or, at least, we may not take it *because* it benefits us. This means that compassionate action is always directed in its entirety to others. It follows, therefore – even though this may seem odd – that compassionate action is much easier with people we do not know at all than it is with people with whom we are familiar. With those whom we know, it is extremely difficult to keep our own feelings and our own goals or motivation out of the way. We want to be generous to friends or relatives in need ... but why? Isn’t it because we have a goal for them, some sort of result to which we’re guiding them? And isn’t the action we’re contemplating merely manipulation at its heart? Isn’t it true that we made that gift of money so that our relative would spend it on college fees? And isn’t that the very reason

that we became annoyed when he spent it on audio equipment? At this point it may be worth our examining every interaction we've had with others in our recovery where we believed that we were acting compassionately. Think over those actions, and then exclude every single one from consideration where there was any hint of a selfish component in the action. How many of our so-called "compassionate" actions survive this sort of scrutiny? Probably not many.

And indeed it's unlikely that many of them *can* survive that scrutiny, unless we are routinely and deliberately practicing Steps 10 and 11. The practice of Step 10 in particular is aimed at the very heart of selfish action. Absent an ongoing practice of that Step, our egos can have a field day directing us towards supposedly compassionate actions which carry with them a significant chunk of personal motivation. And personal motivation means selfishness; and selfishness, when indulged with these kinds of bogus actions, means the worst sort of personal gratification.

We have spent some time on compassionate action here, and we do not seem to have gotten very far. In fact, we seem to have spent most of our time talking about what compassionate action *isn't*. But let's be patient. There are other characteristics of compassionate action for us to examine, and when we are through we will likely have a much better understanding of what it *is*. For now, at least we have become aware of the following:

1. Compassionate action results from an ongoing, dedicated, and meaningful practice of Steps 10 and 11;
2. Compassionate action results from God-directed intuition and inspiration, not from our calculating minds;
3. Selfishness is the enemy of compassionate action;
4. By definition, therefore, no action which has any hint of personal goal in it – no matter how "enlightened" or noble that goal may be – is or can be a compassionate action.