

While poets, writers and musicians have waxed eloquent throughout the ages about oceans and lakes and streams, there is no doubt that what is most often considered synonymous with the perpetual flow of our myriad of experiences is a river. In my forty year journey along a number of spiritual paths, I believe I always encounter rivers because ancient masters speak of Spirit flowing like a river, without pause. Meister Eckhart puts it this way:

“God is a great underground river that no one can dam up and no one can stop.”¹

One might refer to this river as a “river of wisdom and compassion.”

And on my seemingly seamless journey, I am continually reminded of life’s most urgent question, “what are you doing for others?” All religions are similar in that they have some powerful system of advice, a “golden rule” as it were, with respect to the practice of compassion. Matthew Fox believes everyone, regardless of their spiritual path, taps in to these holy waters for guidance on their spiritual journeys.

And so we have these different wells into the river, a Buddhist well, a Taoist well, a native well, Christian, Sufi, Jewish wells. We all go down somewhere. Going down the well we come to the one underground river, the living waters of wisdom.²

We need to engage each other and our cosmos with compassion here in our earthly community, regardless of our faith tradition. Our world may not be as safe or nurturing as we might like it to be, but our shared spiritual task is to cherish, with humble thanks, this world with

which we have been blessed, and then make ourselves and others spiritually capable of living full, responsible and compassionate lives. Maybe we are journeying toward a better home some day, maybe. But faithful living offers a way of being better in the world we share in the present moment. Similar to my immersion in a river during a Pentecostal baptism as a five year old in Kentucky, we must be fully immersed in this primordial river to disappear as it were from any perceived separation from the oneness. Leonard Cohen addresses our interface with primordial Spirit:

*“so come my friends, be not afraid
We are so lightly here
It is in love that we are made
In love we disappear³*

Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God. He told us that this Kingdom is all around us, and within us. Maybe this Kingdom is not the reality of our world but rather the potentiality. It will never be perfect, but it can be better. This world, with our help, can become a place where there is more kindness, more justice, more peace and more compassion. Our common task is to transform our current reality into its potentiality as best we can. First we nurture the Kingdom within ourselves, and then expand our Kingdom until it embraces the cosmos. The teaching of Jesus was clear, *“Be you compassionate as your Creator in heaven is compassionate,” he insists (Luke 6:36) as a summary of all his teaching.* ⁴

May we always be aware of the grandeur of our cosmos, and may we weave a web of interdependence that connects us to our cosmos and each other. We must dedicate our lives to nurturing and healing our cosmos and each other through compassionate gestures so that we too may be nurtured and healed. It is difficult to be compassionate toward those who have harmed us. It is difficult, but it's a lot harder to hang on to anger and hurt and let it poison your soul. Do not take the pain to heart, for one's heart must remain a sanctuary, not a battleground.

We need to learn to treat each person as the most sacred person on Earth and to treat each moment as the most sacred moment that has ever been given to us, a moment to share with immediacy. One should never "need a reason" to practice compassion toward another person, or do so with an ulterior motive in mind. Immanuel Kant counsels us to:

*Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.*⁵

When we feel love and kindness towards others, it not only makes others feel loved and cared for, it helps us also to develop inner peace and happiness. Every life will be touched by a measure of sorrow. Sometimes it is this very sorrow that might awaken us to address the needs of another, and mercy then is the compassion we feel for someone else's misfortune. Mercy and compassion are both about the invisible link that exists between people. It is mercy that compels us to relieve the

misfortune of another without deliberation. Mercy, almost by necessity, will most often need to be spontaneous ... because misery is involuntary.

Practice this Dharma of compassion, for merely having knowledge of this Dharma will not help; it must be put into practice. An opportunity for compassionate gestures will come to you like ripples on still waters, they will arrive one after another, and you must be in the moment to both acknowledge and respond to their presence. If you do not care for others, who will care for you? And if your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.

In Nepal, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche reminded us that one can wish to help others as a bodhisattva, but their karma must be such that they are both willing and able to receive help. Compassionate gestures and acceptance of compassionate gestures are an integral part of one's practice. An unwillingness to engage in and actively participate in this process is an indication that one must examine their practice, for Dharma you do not practice yourself can never help others, even if you teach it to them.

In Mahayana Buddhism in particular great emphasis is placed on realizing the union of wisdom and compassionate action. Human fulfillment is seen to lie in the integration of these inner and outer dimensions of life, not in transcendent wisdom or world-saving compassion alone. And one cannot rely on faith alone on their spiritual journey.

The Buddha in particular never supported what is sometimes referred to as “blind faith,” but a balance between heart and mind, between wisdom and compassion. The saying that blind faith can move mountains unfortunately omits the fact that, being blind, faith doesn’t know which mountains need moving. That’s why wisdom and compassion are inseparable, flowing from the same source. Or as Matthew Fox explains, *“To birth wisdom or to birth compassion is to birth God.”*⁶

We must understand that we are a lot like those with whom we surround ourselves, and that our environment is stronger than we are. We need to understand each other’s struggles and disappointments, their hardships and inadequacies, and then we open our hearts. We must learn to judge no one, but to cradle all of humanity in our heart, acknowledging the worth and dignity of everyone. There are days we may feel like strangers, but when our hearts remain open, we will realize that we belong just here.

I was co-facilitator of a series of Interfaith Dialogue dinners this past spring in Asheville; part of the “Kindness Campaign.” Though participants came from a variety of faith traditions, they realized that core teachings are similar, and compassion was an integral part of those core teachings. We must strive to develop a “spiritual resonance” of wisdom and compassion which emanates from ourselves to others on our

spiritual journeys. *“I believe in compassion and love and the fact that when you love others as you love yourself, that’s compassion”*⁷

Time does indeed pass in moments, moments which rushing past define the path of our life, just as surely as they lead towards its end ... Each one of us individually needs to do the best he can and maintain a “quiet faith,” because we are in the middle of a journey whose conclusion is uncertain. How to make our lives an embodiment of wisdom and compassion is the greatest challenge spiritual seekers face. Matthew Fox believes this a cornerstone of our relationships,

*Wisdom and compassion; compassion and wisdom: wouldn’t such energy revitalize Western religion and civilization, forge new links with non-Western traditions, create gentler and more dialectical relationships to earth, to body, to pleasure, to work, to the artist within and among us? God as mother, as Julian insists, is “all wisdom.”*⁸

We must be “present” in order to merge these attributes and we must dedicate ourselves to be of service to others, and to step forward in faith and work to make our world a better place, for as John reminds us in Chapter 8:44, *“our own lack of faith is our limitation.”* So may we all become an integral part of this nurturing river, and develop a sense of wisdom and compassion that allows us to be available to contribute to and benefit from healing waters of our “river of compassion” with each passing moment. Wisdom is not worth having unless in each moment it

is applied in acts of compassion, nor compassion helpful unless directed by the wisdom which knows what to do.

There is an almost universal saying: “You can never step in the same river twice.” Like all good folk wisdom, it sounds something like a Zen koan: it is brief, both obvious and challenging. Clearly the opposite view is also true: for to be a river and have an identity as a river, it must be there tomorrow.

The Hebrew Creation story tells us of a river that emerges from out of the deepest of mysteries, from the Infinite Being of all beings. This beautiful wellspring carries us through our earthly existence and remains pure always, undisturbed by the turmoil of our life journey, gifting us with a core sense of balance and reminding us of God’s unconditional love.... In down to earth terms, this is your heart of hearts... To this heart of hearts we can always turn and return again.⁹

In Bhaktapur, near Kathmandu in Nepal, I sat in meditation many days as family after family cremated their loved ones’ remains on a makeshift ghat. Their ashes were carefully directed to a small ditch to join a trickle of water that would eventually wind its way to India and the Ganges River. Though so narrow that to refer to this small stream as a creek would be an exaggeration, one elderly Hindu man explained that his wife’s ashes “*must be placed in the holy waters of this river*” so she might one day be reborn again to continue her journey.

Clearly, one “can step in the same river twice,” and though the current particulate flow may be different in one’s current manifesting incarnation, the wellspring/Godhead/source remains constant. This river of wisdom, love and compassion is inseparable from God.

And God never separates Itself from Love. As is written: And a river flows forth from Eden. (Genesis 2:10) Indeed, it flows forth continuously, and bonds with the universe in Love.¹⁰

We need to immerse ourselves in the water, let go, and become one with Spirit, for as The Buddha speaks of our life purpose, “*In the end these things matter most: How well did you love? How fully did you love? How deeply did you learn to let go?*”¹¹ And to fulfill our life purpose, we will always return to the all- embracing, ever-flowing waters of the “river of wisdom and compassion” for one simple reason... “*Running water is a holy thing.*”¹²

¹ Fox, M. and R. Sheldrake (1997). Natural Grace. New York, New York, Image by Doubleday, p. 113.

² Ibid., p. 113.

³ Ingram, C. (2003). Passionate Presence. New York, New York, Penguin Putnam, Inc., p. 56.

⁴ Fox, M. (2000). Original Blessing. New York, New York, Jeremy P. Tarcher / Putnam., p. 225.

⁵ Braybrooke, M., Ed. (2002). Life Lines. London, Duncan Baird Publishers., p. 109.

⁶ Fox, Original Blessing, p. 225.

⁷ Fox and Sheldrake, p. 95.

⁸ Fox, Original Blessing, p. 25.

⁹ Winkler, G. (2004). Kaballah 365: Daily Fruit From The Tree Of Life. Kansas City, MO, Andrews McMeel Publishing., p. 295.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 152

¹¹ Braybrooke, p. 68.

¹² Freeman, M. (2001). Kindling the Celtic Spirit. New York, New York, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., p. 71.