



THE WAY OF RADICAL COMPASSION

AN EXCERPT FROM
PRACTICING COMPASSION
BY FRANK ROGERS JR.





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“Everybody believes in compassion, but nobody tells you how to practice it. Until now. Frank Rogers turns compassion into a doable, daily practice—as simple as catching your breath and taking your pulse. If you want to read a book that actually has the capacity to change your life (and the world), this is the book to read.”

— **Brian D. McLaren**

Author, speaker, blogger, activist (brianmclaren.net)



THE WAY OF RADICAL COMPASSION

Compassion is the heartbeat of humanity.

We are most fully human, most fully ourselves, when we see someone in the truth of his or her experience and are moved to respond with kindness and care.

We glimpse a colleague smiling at his beloved’s photograph, and our smile in response offers respite for us both from the whirlwind of the workday. We see our teenage daughter asleep on the couch, the cat curled up in her lap, and the wash of affection that comes over us reminds us of the love that ties us together. We see the same teenager, now late for school, frowning at her reflection in the mirror, and the morning’s mad dash dissolves into the yearning that our child know the beauty we behold.

Pausing from the busyness of our lives and recognizing the tender humanity of another restores us to our own humanity. The pulse of care and connection within us resuscitates. Our hearts, normally dulled by the day’s burdens, beat freely with love. And the ensuing kindness we extend to others has the power to resuscitate their spirits as well. For compassion not only restores the heart of our own humanity; its healing care makes human once more the heart of another grown hard and cold.

A GARDEN OF COMPASSION

James Worthington knows such compassion.

James runs an inner-city youth program that offers young people an alternative to the deceptive lures of gang life. He tells his kids about Raul Torres, a former custodian in their own community. Raul lived with his wife of forty-five years on a modest corner lot in South Central Los Angeles. When his wife died of a stroke in her sleep, Raul was grief-stricken. He retired from his job, sought solace from his church, and spent long hours staring at the yard from the porch his wife adored.

Raul decided to plant a memorial garden for his wife. It spanned the entire corner lot and contained flower beds ever in bloom, boxes of herbs and vegetables, tomatoes on the vine, cilantro in bundles, and rows of his beloved's favorite—prize-worthy roses of a dozen different hues. For Raul, the garden served as both a tender tribute and a second life in his later years.

One morning, Raul discovered that several rosebushes had been demolished. Shreds of blossom and bush were strewn on the ground as if they had been assaulted with a baseball bat. He was certain who had done it—a carload of local gang members had taken to cruising the place, driving by slowly and casing it with their cold, vacant stares.

Afraid of doing anything else, Raul simply swept up the mess, repaired the bushes, and tended the garden as if nothing had happened. Two days later, another bush was attacked. A few days later, yet another one. Angry and afraid, heartsick and powerless, Raul was beside himself about what to do. On the off chance it would deter the vandals, he sat in stoic vigil at the living room window.

That is when Raul saw the boy. He vaguely knew his story. The ten-year-old lived alone with his mother. His father had been gone for years and his brother, a gang member, was in jail for killing a rival. In retaliation for the murder his

brother committed, a drive-by occurred at the boy's home. His leg was nicked by a bullet. Though scarcely limping any longer, the boy still walked with a cane. Raul watched him, presumably on his way to school. When he got to the roses, the boy wielded the cane like a weapon and lashed out at one of the bushes. Once done with the attack, he started to leave but then stopped. He noticed Raul staring from the window. The boy looked scared, as if caught with nowhere to go. Then he glared in defiance and swiftly scrambled away.

Raul's first instinct was to chase the boy down and scold him. His second was to call the police and turn the truant in. But he could not shake those eyes. It was as if Raul could see it all—the boy's aloneness, the rage, the terror, the futility, and lacing throughout, the despair that would make a future in gang life all but inevitable. Raul did not have the heart to turn the boy in. He let the boy's eyes haunt him until he had an idea.

That afternoon, Raul found the boy walking home from school and approached him. The boy hardened in defiance. Raul told him that he was having trouble with his garden—someone was destroying his flowers. The boy insisted it wasn't him, that he didn't know a thing about it. That wasn't what he meant, Raul assured him. He needed someone to help him protect the flowers and to help him care for them from time to time. He'd pay him, let him plant his own bushes, and teach him how to grow plants if the boy wanted. The boy was skeptical. Raul offered that they try it for one week. The boy just had to keep an eye on the garden, and on Saturday morning he would get paid.

On Saturday, the boy showed up. He stayed the better part of the day. Raul taught him how to tend roses and helped him plant a rosebush of his own. They harvested tomatoes and cut fresh herbs. At day's end, they picked a bag full of lemons and made fresh lemonade. It was the best the boy had ever tasted. It was so good, the boy came back the following week and the next.

To this day, James asserts, the garden has never been vandalized again. He would know—he’s the boy who bludgeoned the roses. And this neighborhood is still his turf. It is where he works with other young people, offering them a place to flourish in the midst of the ever-present violence.

THE RADICAL INVITATION

When discussing compassion, we must be aware of the painful reality of our planet. We live in a violent world. Each day, lives and communities are ripped further apart by terrorist bombings and retaliatory attacks, school shootings and playground bullying, domestic abuse, gangland killings, even molestations in our sacred institutions. This violence bleeds into our relationships. Between loved ones at home, colleagues at the workplace, and adversaries dissenting in our political spaces, rage, resentment, blame, dismissiveness, and cycles of attack and withdrawal erode the very bonds on which love and community depend. And the violence cuts deeper still. It slices us open from the inside. Spite, disgust, anger, despair, fear, shame, loathing of others and ourselves consume us with such ferocity that we either act out, possessed by their power, or resist their grip through self-medication. We are a world at war, and the war is waged both within and without.

And yet.

In the midst of the world’s brutality, a retired custodian named Raul shines as a beacon of compassion. His example shows us that in the midst of the violence around and within us, it is possible to recover and retain our humanity. However mundane or severe the conflicts or afflictions that burden us—feuds at the office, hostilities at home, offenses at the hands of a stranger—a path toward life and reconnection lies before us. The path is radical, but so is its promise. It uncovers genuine compassion—a compassion so healing it resuscitates the heart of a man stricken by grief and softens the heart of a boy hardened into despairing rage. This book describes that path. The path’s invitation is threefold.

First, this path invites us to know, in the depths of our souls, a compassion that holds and heals us.

Even in the face of violence, sources of compassion continue to sustain our world. In spite of all the aloneness, alienation, cruelty, and coldness that pervade our broken planet, wellsprings of kindness and goodwill, like underground pools in a desert, offer healing, renewal, and sustenance. Compassion is birthed out of these springs. To give love, we have to know love. To be moved by the suffering or joy of another, our own suffering must be seen and our joy the object of someone's delight. In the absence of love, the heart hardens; in the presence of love, even the hardest of hearts can grow soft like clay massaged in a potter's hands.

We find such wellsprings of compassion all around—in a loved one's touch and a mentor's unfailing encouragement, in the kindness of strangers and the warmth of religious communities, in 12-step programs, contemplative retreats, a child's smile, a friend's embrace. Raul Torres found them in a spouse's care, in the gifts of the earth, in an evening's quiet, and weekly worship. A ten-year-old vandal found them in the face of a forgiving victim. For some, these springs are icons of a vast and cosmic presence of compassion that holds all of creation with infinite love. Cosmic or merely mortal, these pools of compassion are so empathic they hold with healing care our deepest wounds, our most secret shames. And they are so expansive that they hold and heal the bloodstained suffering even of one who would kill. The path of compassion reconnects us to the sources of life and love that sustain us. It invites us to see our reflection in the surface of these grace-filled pools and soak in the soothing waters until every tissue of our being knows we are held and healed in love.

Second, the path of compassion invites us to be liberated from the internal turbulence that disconnects us from our compassionate core.

Through most of our waking hours, emotions assail us—fear, anger, anxiety, and stress. Impulses drive us—to work, run errands, do chores, numb out. Internal monologues hound

us—self-critique, perfectionism, blame, or judgment. All of these alienate us from the loving people we know ourselves to be. We seldom feel like we are at the tiller of our lives; rather, we feel hurled about by the winds of the moment, swallowing water within the swirling waves of the passions and voices that toss us from within.

As Raul Torres shows us, even within the riptides of such strong emotions as grief, despair, fear, and indignation, we can find a space of freedom from the tumult of our inner world. We can cultivate a grounded internal stability that quiets the cacophony, anchors our power, and restores our capacity for purposeful action. The power that stills these storms within is compassion, compassion turned inward. Self-compassion is the secret to interior freedom and personal restoration. The raging heart of a ten-year-old delinquent relaxes before a caring and understanding face. So too does the raging heart within us. When we extend to ourselves the understanding and care we would to a suffering child, the tempest within subsides, solid ground appears, and the way forward reveals itself to us. Self-compassion brings us home to ourselves.¹

Unfortunately, self-compassion is a rather rare commodity in our world. We do not love ourselves very well. Self-loathing, self-disgust, and self-castigation are obscenely epidemic. Think of the internal voices with which we berate ourselves: You stupid idiot. How could you do such a shameful thing? If people ever saw what you are really like they would turn away in disgust. If we ever attacked another with these words, it would rightly be considered abusive. The invitation that comes from Jewish and Christian spiritual paths, for example, is to love our neighbor as ourselves, not instead of ourselves. The care, goodwill, and delight we extend to ourselves should be the measure of that which we offer to others. Tragically, for most of us, this is a rather low bar.

The path of compassion offers an antidote to the self-hatred that consumes us. It invites us into a relationship with ourselves that truly knows ourselves as beloved; that

holds our own shadows, shames, and internal furies with empathic understanding and healing love; and that restores us to the core of care that is the essence of who we are. Out of the abundance of such self-compassion we are able to have genuine compassion for others— indeed, to love our neighbors with the very same love with which we love ourselves.

Third, the path of compassion invites us to feel genuine care toward others.

This is a care that sees others free from the distortions of our own fears and wounds. It recognizes the inherent dignity and unique beauty within all persons, even those most damaged; it is moved by others' suffering, however well hidden; and it extends a word or gesture of kindness that might ease their pain or foster the restoration of their beaten down humanity. Such connection and care can be cultivated toward colleagues in the workplace, loved ones at home, and the person next door or at the supermarket. In such moments, our hearts flow freely with the pulse of compassion. We feel human. We feel like ourselves.

The reach of compassion, however, extends radically further. As Raul Torres exemplifies, compassion can be cultivated not only toward our friends, allies, and associates but also toward our opponents, our enemies, people who trigger us, and people who accost us. In our fight-or-flight world, we are often convinced that our only two options in the face of aggression are retaliation or passivity. Whether in reaction to a loved one who yells at us, a coworker mistreating us, an adversary demeaning us, or an assailant violating the work of our hands, our response to assault defaults into counterattack or submissive endurance.

The path of compassion points to another way. To be sure, it is a way that stands up to violation—protects the vulnerable, empowers the victimized, holds offenders accountable, and restrains the unrepentant. However, it does so in ways that refuse to demonize the other, even those whose deeds

are monstrous; that recognize the suffering of the attacker, though hidden underneath his or her attempts to inflict pain; and that invite the offender's restoration to the community on the condition he or she makes amends, even if only symbolically, and acts humanely. We can meet adversaries with empowered constraint, empathic understanding, and a genuine sense of restorative care. When we do, we retain our own humanity even when others remain marred by the inhumane.

Compassion is the means to becoming most deeply human. It revives the pulse of one depleted by heartbreak and suffering. It sustains the pulse of interior freedom and grounded empowered care. And it resuscitates the pulse of the person deadened by brutality, uniting him or her once more with the human community. Compassion is the heartbeat that restores life. Compassion is the bond of genuine connection.

Truth be told, however, compassion is difficult.

THE PROBLEM IS HOW

Kathy's inner world is so out of control it is making her physically sick. A highly successful businesswoman at a Fortune 500 affiliate, she lives in constant fear of being exposed for the incompetent imposter she believes she is. Anxiety all but paralyzes her when preparing a presentation. The slightest critique from her supervisor devastates her for days. Her own inner voice of self-contempt so savagely picks her apart, her only means to sleep at night is to munch on Tums and work until she drops. She knows she is acting irrationally. She graduated from Stanford summa cum laude and followed that with an MBA from Harvard. But it doesn't matter. She is driven to perfection, and she is painfully aware of how far she falls short.

Bill is a single dad with two teenaged boys. He loves them dearly. Bill holds down two jobs—a traveling sales rep by day, a web designer from the house by night. He comes home

each evening with but a tiny window of time to connect with the boys, make dinner, check on homework, and attend to the most pressing of the household chores. All he asks is that they clean up their own messes before he gets home. They never do. The second he walks through the door, the sight of food wrappers and dirty dishes strewn from the kitchen counters to the family room coffee table infuriates him. He nags. They ignore him. He turns off the TV and yells. They sigh in disgust, toss dishes into the sink, and retreat to their bedrooms both shamed and defiant. Bill feels horrible—he is certain he is losing them—but he is defiant as well. His sons really do have to learn. Yet the only thing anyone learns is how to endure dinner in silence.

Maria's stepfather sexually abused her throughout her childhood. After years of therapy, she has created a stable life. More than a survivor, she is thriving—she is married, studying women's health, and raising a daughter of her own. For nearly ten years, however, she has refused to be in the same city with the man who violated her. Her religious friends have been little help, admonishing her to forgive and let go, telling her that her resentment will eat her from the inside out. Yet even the thought of him enrages her; the very word forgiveness makes her want to scream. Now, her younger brother is getting married and wants her daughter to be the flower girl. Both he and their mother implore Maria to bring her family to the wedding. She is genuinely torn. She loves her brother, and her daughter would be thrilled. But that man sitting next to her mother ignites a fury inside her that wants to torch the entire event. How does she care for both herself and her family when her abuser remains present and unrepentant?

How indeed.

The call for compassion arises from all quarters of our society. Peace-keeping agencies appeal for compassion in resolving escalating hostilities internationally. Civic leaders plead for more compassion within the demonizing rhetoric of our political discourse. Management consultants advise

corporate executives that compassion enhances workplace harmony, employee well-being, as well as the bottom line. Anti-bullying campaigners implore school boards to include compassion in their required curriculum.

This summons for compassion echoes from across the world's wisdom traditions as well. As Karen Armstrong, the noted scholar of religion, observes, teachers and guides from all faiths, all wisdom schools, and all spiritual traditions extol compassion as the truest mark of our humanity, the deepest essence of the transcendence interlaced with the universe, and the most promising path to peace on our planet.² The Charter for Compassion that Armstrong inaugurated has been signed by nearly one hundred thousand people of faith. It reminds us that some version of the Golden Rule is the ethical core of every religion.

Jewish rabbis and scholars, for example, consider the ethic of compassion the summative commandment of the Torah. This is witnessed to in the famous Talmudic tale in which a pagan approaches the great sage Hillel and promises to convert to Judaism if Hillel can recite the entire Torah while standing on one leg. Hillel, up to the task, responds simply, "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to another. That is the whole Torah. The rest is but commentary."³

The rest is but commentary for Buddhism as well. The four boundless attitudes that foster enlightenment are all facets of connective care: compassion, loving-kindness, joyful delight in another's delight, and the equanimity that extends such caring regard to all beings—animals and strangers, the loving and the difficult—with unwavering impartiality.⁴ Indeed, when a disciple asked the Buddha, "Would it be true to say that part of our training is for love and compassion?" the Buddha succinctly responded, "No. All of our training is for love and compassion."⁵

Christian teachers also have admonished their followers to love not only their neighbor as themselves—to care for the suffering, the poor, and the outcast—but also more radically,

to love their enemies as well—to forgive those who trespass against them, to bless those who curse them, and to return good to all, even those who do evil. Jesus compared God’s compassion to the sun that shines on the just and the unjust alike. He summarized the essence of his spiritual path: Be all-inclusively compassionate, just as your Father in heaven is all-inclusively compassionate.⁶ (See Matthew 5:48 and Luke 6:36.)

This radical ethic of compassion seems extraordinary to the point of being unattainable—or attainable only to the gifted few. Those few who embody compassion in the extreme seem saintly. An Amish community forgives a man who shot and killed their schoolgirls. A South African president invites his jailor of twenty-seven years to stand at his side during his inauguration. A Palestinian woman who has lost her son in a terrorist bombing takes in an Israeli boy and raises him as a Jew. A violated gardener befriends an angry boy and teaches him how to grow roses. These exemplars shimmer with the miraculous. Ordinary folk like us stand in awe, amazed and inspired.

We can also feel indicted and shamed by these examples. Genuine compassion is excruciatingly difficult. How do we refrain from doing what is hateful to another when someone treats us with hateful disdain? How do we care with unwavering impartiality when tension, exhaustion, and unending demands are unwavering burdens on our spirits? How do we love our enemies—a stepfather who abused us, for example—when their impassive non-repentance renders mercy obscene and downright irresponsible? How do we love our enemies when, driven by perfectionism and our own castigation, our enemies are ourselves? How do we love our enemies when the people who most repel and infuriate us are our very own children, partners, or parents?

While spiritual teachers and advocates of the common good increasingly call for compassion, seldom does anyone explain precisely how to cultivate it.⁷ In the absence of practical guidance, acting compassionately seems a near impossible

ideal. Our angers, fears, drives, and aversions burn with primal power. Without a means to tend them, we either succumb to shame at our inevitable failures, or we suppress our repulsions, pretend we don't have them, and force a civility that rings hollow to both others and ourselves. This is not compassion. Compassion is not about willing away unpleasant emotions and feigning politeness to those we secretly despise. Compassion is genuine loving regard that flows freely from the heart. Its path transforms perfectionist self-hatred into authentic, empathic self-compassion. It rekindles the care we truly feel for our loved ones and fosters a relationship in which we all feel heard. It tames the furies we feel toward an abuser and heeds our pleas for the protection, power, and personal dignity prerequisite for any possibility of truthful encounter and accountable reconnection. The path of compassion emboldens personhood. It restores our capacities to love others and ourselves with equal measure. It leads us back to our humanity.

This book describes how.

THE PRACTICE AT THE HEART OF IT ALL

The intricacies of how are encapsulated in the practice detailed throughout the rest of this book. Practicing compassion reconnects us to the sources of compassion that resuscitate and sustain the pulse of our spirits. It calms the difficult emotions, drives, and self-talk that tyrannizes our interior worlds and transforms them into grounded, free, and empowered self-compassion. It restores our capacities for genuine compassion toward our loved ones, friends, and allies but also, more radically, toward our opponents, our enemies, people who trigger us, and people who threaten us. Lastly, practicing compassion discerns wise and restorative actions that care for the suffering, protect the vulnerable, and preserve the dignity of ourselves and others.

This practice—the **Compassion Practice**—unfolds into layers of intricacy and unveils subtle dynamics of deep transformative power. Its simplest form, however, has an elegant simplicity. The Compassion Practice invites us to:

1. **Catch your breath** (Get grounded). Get some emotional and physical distance in whatever ways help you become centered and reconnected with the source of your vitality.
2. **Take your PULSE** (Cultivate compassion for yourself). Take a U-turn and connect empathically with the cry of your soul hidden within your emotions and impulses.
3. **Take the other's PULSE** (Cultivate compassion for another). Turn toward the other and connect empathically with the cry of the soul hidden within his or her emotions and behaviors.
4. **Decide what to do** (Discern compassionate action). Now grounded in compassion—both for yourself and the other—discern those actions that heal the suffering and nurture the flourishing of all parties involved and do them.

These deceptively simple moves hold the secrets to cultivating genuine compassion. They reconnect us to the sources of life and love; they kindle a healing care for ourselves; and they give rise to the loving regard that repairs our relationships. In short, the Compassion Practice restores the heartbeat of our humanity.

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Notes from The Invitation: The Way of Radical Compassion

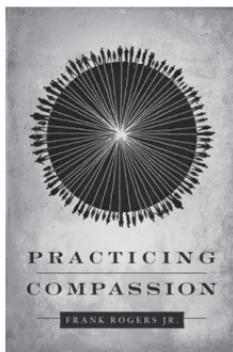
1. For a helpful exploration of self-compassion, see Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind* (New York: William Morrow, 2011).
2. Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 4.
3. One source for this legend is Armstrong, *Twelve Steps*, 50–51.
4. A helpful source on Buddhist compassion is John Makransky, *Awakening through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007).
5. See Christina Feldman, “Nurturing Compassion,” in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), 19.
6. This summation synthesizes the parallel verses of Matt. 5:48 and Luke 6:36 with translations from Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 267–69, 396.
7. Notable exceptions include John Makransky, *Awakening through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness*; Thupten Jinpa, *Compassion Cultivation Training* (CCT) in association with The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE) at Stanford University; Lobsang Tenzin Negi, *Cognitive-Based Compassion Training* (CBCT) in association with Emory University.



TO LEARN MORE

Compassion is more than a sympathetic feeling – it's a bond of human connection.

Through rich and moving stories of people from various faiths, Frank Rogers Jr. offers us ways to practice compassion in a hurting world. His interfaith perspective helps us pay attention, understand with empathy, love with connection, sense sacredness, and embody with new life.



Dr. Frank Rogers Jr. is the Muriel Bernice Roberts Professor of Spiritual Formation and Narrative Pedagogy at Claremont School of Theology. He also codirects the Center for Engaged Compassion at Claremont Lincoln University.

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