

THE SHAPE OF COMPASSION

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Last night at dinner Krista spoke forcefully about being frustrated with sitting in silence after hearing a particularly poignant and painful reading by Donna about being raped as a young girl. A group of twenty-one, we had been in silence for four days sitting in silent meditation interspersed with periods of walking, eating, sleeping, writing practice, and reading out loud to each other. Writing practice consists of naming a topic (or no topic) and writing for ten minutes. Go. Keep your pen moving. Don't stop. Don't let your mind get in the way. Don't edit. Wind down. Stop. I have been participating in an intensive writing course over the last nine months; we meet once a quarter for a week of silence, writing, reading, and all that accompanies a retreat setting. It is a powerful program and the silence drops you into places you never thought in a million years you would go, but you do. You go there.

At various times throughout the day, we read out loud writings that we have just finished. No edits. No changes. After Donna read her piece, you could cut the room with a knife; the pain that we all were sitting with was palpable, raw and intense. This kind of reading occurred often in the safe container of the quiet zendo. It was not an uncommon occurrence but depending on the quality of our silence, sitting and presence during any given week, some readings landed with a force beyond the writer's voice. This was one of those times. Our container had been very strong this week. The practice was deep. People were doing the tough work. Donna's voice fell silent. We sat very, very still. Krista said that the silence made her angry; she wanted to be able to talk to Donna, console her, hug her, and ease her pain.

I was thankful for the silence. I was thankful for the room and stillness of everyone who witnessed and was present for that reading. I was thankful for no movement. I felt as though the stillness we had together in that moment could hold a world of excruciating pain.

I told Krista that, "By not being able to move out of the silence, we gave a precious gift to Donna of letting her sit with the fullness of what she had just ripped open and shared." She could sit with her trembling body and her brave spirit. I know for sure (I don't know how I know this but I do) that Donna could feel every one of us there with her almost as though humanity through the ages itself was holding her through us. It was that vast. If we had each met Donna eye to eye, she would have seen the tears and the recognition of ourselves in her. We are not separate. We are not separate. But with eyes downcast in the quaking zendo, she knew we were there and she was comforted. Sometimes there is no need for words. Silence can speak healing.

I said to Krista, "I felt like the silence gave each one of us the opportunity to also sit with our own discomfort, the incredible gut-ripping emotions that accompany our connection to another human being." Not connection, really, for that implies separation: Me here, you over there. This connection with Donna was beyond just us in the room.



It is a shared space, this place of human vulnerability and despair. We don't meet each other there; we are already there and we sit in it together. Your tears? My tears? Perhaps there are just tears. Donna's tears are mine. Mine are hers. I do not

write these words in some sort of philosophical way; I think that all of us in that room were not separate from Donna in that moment and it was piercing, unfathomable and heart-breaking. Is rape anything other than that? I needed to sit in my own discomfort, sit with my own ability or lack of ability to be open to that amount of human suffering.

The question becomes, "Do I have a body, a mind, a soul that can actually be with the fullness of the human condition? Not pushing away pain or clinging to moments of joy but fully opening to the all of what it means to be walking on the planet in these times?" Not in the sense of chanting a sutra and all is well but in the sense of really being with the fullness of pain and joy, death and birth, permanence and impermanence; a chant, or any prayer, being only the all and the beginning of grief.

Sitting together in silence forces us to get intimate with our own shape, our container, wanting to crawl out of our skin and alleviate our discomfort. Sitting still with the rawness of reading aloud our stories into the quiet is a deeply personal act. The silence enables this bravery.

If we were all chatting in that room about the latest movie or book we've read, our newest ideas or theories, our squabbles with family and friends, how the shower ran out of hot water this morning or the eggs were cold, there would not have been enough space in the room to receive Donna's words, Jeff's words, Patty's words, or mine. Our usual chatty discourse can have us make believe that we are connecting, sharing, and getting to know each other. But if we were asked about when we really got to know each other, we would reply, "Reading aloud."

In fact, after you have written and read into the silence unedited in this way and then you break silence, it feels significantly below threshold to make eye contact with a class-mate over dinner and take part in usual day to day conversation, "So: where are you from? What do you do?"

Who cares? I just read to you about my alcoholic father dying and how I had not spoken to him in twenty years and about the day that I received his small box of remains and seat-belted that oak container onto my passenger seat and took him on a tour of my home town, to all the places I used to go to escape when I was a child, and how I sat all through that long, anguished night in the zendo with his ashes, speaking a lifetime of words before burying him in the earth the next day with my three sisters. What else is there to know? Please pass the salt.

Some of us have a hard time with silence and can't wait to speak at breakfast on Friday. Some of us have an easy time with the silence and breaking it becomes almost unbearable. I have struggled with the breaking of the quiet stillness. I want to keep holding the silence until the last possible minute. My beloved Zen teacher has said to me, "When you are sitting in the zendo, be fully in the sitting. When you are in conversation in the dining room on Friday morning, be fully in the conversation. No attachment." I surrender.

As I think about Donna's incredible words spoken into the silence of the zendo, if any of us were to have done the culturally approved act of moving in to comfort her, we would have immediately changed the nature of the space and the story. When we shift to hug someone, it is not just to alleviate their suffering but our own incredible pain of witnessing someone's anguish. We may not like to admit this but it is part of the equation. This witnessing pain is ours not theirs. And sometimes being a witness is unbearable. Sometimes, sitting in silence this way is intolerable to the listener. Our body, this container of ours is shocked and overwhelmed with what has been expressed.

But the speaker, the writer, the voice of the story owner has the container of time, has the shape that their body has taken, has the strength it developed and built in order to hold, to carry, to know of this horrific pain for so damn long. Longer than we can imagine. We sit in silence. Longer than we can imagine. Her container knows its story intimately beyond the words we are hearing for the first time. There is much, much more behind every sentence that lives in Donna's container. It has history and substance and intensity and a very long memory that we are only glimpsing. It has a path of anger and grief and healing that we will never know.

For us, as listeners, the story is a shock, a revelation, a sudden jolt to our silent bodies. And in that precious moment, we get to see the nature of our containers.

Do we feel solid and open as we connect deeply and widely to the pain of another human being? Are we aware of our own pain and the ache of the human condition? Does our body expand out taking in the millennia of harm done and harm received and harm survived and harm forgiven? Do we find ourselves re-committing to liberating all beings from suffering? Do the words of metta practice, words of loving kindness roll in unannounced and unprepared for:

May you be well.
May you be happy.
May you be at peace.

May I be well.
May I be happy.
May I be at peace.

May all beings be well.
May all beings be happy.
May all beings be at peace.

Or does our body recoil, constrict, flare up with the anger of the ages? And is the rage so intolerable that we long to hold this other being, provide comfort, healing, and make it all go away? Make it better. What are we trying to make better? Anger is not a bad thing in its own right; it brings energy and impetus for action and mobilizing forces. But without the balance of compassion, wisdom and perspective, anger can be just as destructive. It lashes out. It causes harm. And demands apology.

And in the move to "get the bastards" or in the move to hug, comfort and console, we don't get to sit in the fullness of the agony, ours and the other's. We don't let the story owner sit in the power of their own healing. We have moved in and we think it will comfort and perhaps it will, in that briefest of moment, but we may have also just interrupted their healing path and, quite frankly, our own. Silence gives us pause. And it is ripe with compassion. It is palpable and real and comforting to a story owner to be held by the stillness of presence, generosity and kindness. And: it gives the listener's witnessing pain a chance to widen and connect and hold. It gives our anger a chance to flare, be seen and alchemized into wise action and skilful means.

As coaches, we sit as listeners a great deal. We sit with the pain of others especially as they traverse particularly perilous journeys of development. Clients longing for change, healthy growth or transcendence tell the stories of their lives because any change involves a whole life. We will never know all the details of a client's past but it lives on in their words, their perceptions, their sense of what is possible and not. We do not hear words every day as raw and explicit as Donna's but we are not in a

silent retreat as we walk into a client's office or meet them at Starbuck's for a coffee. The environment is different. The context is different. Still, you scrape the surface and pain is not usually far beneath. A person's own sense of limits and possibility is informed by the forty years that have come before them. And tears show up as we try to bring about change. How could it not? Change is disruptive. Growth is disruptive. It breaks structure.

Ken Wilber was once asked, "How do you know you're making progress in your development over time?" He responded, "You laugh more every day. And you cry more every day." I believe this to be true.

And so: what kind of a container does an Integral Coach™ need in order to be with clients undertaking change and breaking structures (small and large) in their lives? What kind of somatic presence does a coach require to cultivate the witness and support another human being? What does a body of an Integral Coach™ possess in order to introduce wise action and skilful means? Our bodies are the containers of our abilities and they speak quickly. What shape does my body unconsciously move into? What is my "shape" while I sit with your anguish? Am I wide, available and able to take it all in? Do I move to pat your knee, take your hand, and rub your shoulders? Whose pain am I easing? Am I feeling the edge of my container's current abilities?

Perhaps by taking a "consoling shape" I cut off part of the story you have not yet told. Perhaps there is more to tell and I have interrupted the telling. Perhaps you are not asking for consolation and perhaps you need something else from me.

Perhaps by taking a "crying with you shape" you become concerned about sharing more because you start to worry about me. Or perhaps by my joining in you feel that it is becoming bigger than you want it to be. And so, you start patting my knee and letting me know that you're okay.

Perhaps by taking an "angry shape" (I want to go kill the bastard who did this to you) I prevent your own rage from coming forward in its own time, in its own way, in its own shape. Perhaps my anger stops your own from emerging into action.

I am not for one moment suggesting that as a coach you sit unspeaking, frozen, and silent in your chair as you listen to your client's unedited anguish. These stories break our hearts, break our bodies, break our spirits, and souls. But they also connect me to you deeply. In this place, we are not separate. And I want to pause long enough to know that I am being skilful with you. Not moving to action because of the limits of my own container and its ability to sit with intolerable pain but skilfully moving to words and actions because they will be clearly supportive of your journey.

In order to do this, I need to better understand the limits of my container. I need to be aware of the "shapes" I tend to fall into. I need to consciously work with my own history and the behaviours I take that spring from my own unresolved pains – those I have felt and those I have caused. And I first need to be compassionate with myself. My desire to alleviate your suffering by moving to hold you and say, "It will be okay; it will be okay," when I don't know for sure that it will be okay at all is about my suffering too.

What is the "shape" of compassion?
What is the "shape" of skilful means?"

Can you be directly pierced and still sit clearly, fully, awake with another person? Can you feel your belly clench, your jaw tighten and still relax around it? Can you hold the long gaze with her and not look

away? Can you let her know with your eyes, the presence of your body, the stillness of your mind, the strength of your humanness and without any words spoken convey, "I know you. I see you. I ache with you. May you be deeply well."

It is in this moment that our client is seen, is supported and held. Her shape is recognized by how it presses into the soft clay of the coach's container leaving an indentation that will never go away.

Donna's story lives in my shape now. And so does every client, student, family member, colleague, and friend. How could it be anything else? Perhaps this is the human shape of compassion.



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