

**ON THE NECESSITY FOR COMPASSION
AND THE DANGERS OF MORAL PURITY**

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There is a saying that has come to mean a great deal to me over the past half-century.

What is important is not that our teachers, possessing so many astonishing gifts, did some things that we feel were failures of character but that, in possessing the same limitations we all possess as human beings, they did so much despite them.

During the half-century that I have followed this path I have met and studied with a great many famous people, people of note, innovators, great men and women. There is not a one of them that did not fail more than once as a human being. Not a one of them that did not demonstrate failures of character. Not a one of them that lived a life of complete moral purity. Not a one of them that did not hurt others, sometimes terribly, during their lives. None of them were saints. Besides, I have studied the lives of saints and they were a pretty fucked up bunch overall. The thing is, all the people I revere as my great teachers (and the saints as well) never became the enemies of their souls or their memories. Each and every one of them *learned*, in fact spent the majority of their lives serving something outside the self. They were committed to changing who they were in response to what they learned.

The director of Second City, the comedy group out of which Saturday Night Live's stars originally came, said something to each of those people just before they went on: "Go out and

make mistakes.” For he knew something essential about the nature of human beings. *The only way we learn anything important is through mistakes.* None of us learned the proper use of fire without burning ourselves just as none of us learned the necessity of moral behavior without being immoral. It is impossible to learn moral behavior without, in the beginning, engaging in immoral behavior. And that process lasts our entire lives. Our human perspective is by nature flawed. We are always too young and no human being lives long enough to ever surmount our flawed nature, if in fact it can be surmounted.

When I was young I believed, as most young people do, that I was morally pure, that moral purity was possible. And I castigated many because of that belief. It took me decades to learn that moral purity is an illusion, that by nature it is cruel in its actions, that it quite often is far more cruel than the behaviors of those it attacks. Those who act from a position of indignant moral purity are caught in the grip of a utopian ideal of perfection. And they cause great damage whenever they achieve social or political power.

The historical amnesia affecting the left in our present era is dangerous as is every action the left takes out of moral indignation. If you want to see the historical outcome of movements based on such misplaced idealism you have only to look at what happened after the French Revolution, the time know as The Terror. During that period the left turned on itself, killing any who strayed from their ideological platform. And as time went on, the degree of acceptable straying became very tiny indeed. The same thing happened in Mao’s China during the Cultural Revolution. And in Stalin’s Russia during the Purges. The truth, which was hard for me to accept, is that the left, when it gains power and bases its political orientation on a platform of ideological purity kills far more than the Right ever has.

It has taken me a lifetime to understand the nature and necessity of compassion. To see in every person I meet a human being that is trying as all of us do to live a life based on inadequate information and insufficient capacities. There is not a one of us who has not hurt another life, sometimes terribly. And every single one of us, when we are older, are awakened in the night by a voice in the darkness saying, "There is something we need to talk about." In those moments, we replay each and every one of those hurts. And one of the curses of growing old is that our sensitivity to moral transgressions increases with every year we live. Behaviors that were once thought free of hurt are recognized later in life as hurtful, sometimes terribly damaging. There is not a one of us who has not been hurt, not a one that has not hurt others. And we will always hurt others no matter how carefully we approach life, how carefully we craft our actions, how careful we try to be. This is one of the terrible tragedies of the human condition.

Over time we are forced to this recognition. By its nature it forces humility upon us, one of the most difficult of the virtues to develop. There is not a person I meet now for whom I do not have compassion, however much I may dislike them personally. And this growing capacity for compassion has brought me another understanding. That the hardest compassion there is to develop is the one we must learn to give to ourselves.

I have no tolerance for the ideological fanaticism of moral purity. But in those I see acting it out among our liberal tribe I feel not only dismay but a great compassion. For I know, from bitter experience, that in their turn, they will look back from their elder years in dismay on what they have done. I know that their memories will burn them in the night like a hot iron rammed into the core of their deepest self. But in the meantime, I speak out against the insanity of their sense of moral purity, their attacks on others, the cruelty of their indignation. By my nature, I

must otherwise I will become complicit in their actions.

If we wish to supplant the Right we must develop a foundation that is based in something other than violence, which is what the indignation of a belief in moral purity truly is at its core. We must become human in the best sense of that word. And that demands that we know the flawed nature of our companions, our teachers, our friends – and ourselves. We must have compassion for them, for the struggle they face, the struggle each one of us faces every day of our lives.

So, before you hunt in packs, engage in mob rule, attack your teachers and companions for their failures of character, look inside your past at the sins you have yourself committed. For as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross once told me, “There is a Hitler inside each of us. And if we do not come to terms with it, the violence will never stop.”