

Compassion and Justice

This is a talk I gave in June 2007 at the 17th anniversary of the founding of Joseph's House where we presented the first annual compassion and justice awards. This is a talk I gave in June 2007 at the 17th anniversary of the founding of Joseph's House where we presented the first annual compassion and justice awards.

When I was a small boy my father was the Director of Fellowship Center, an integrated community center on the border between the poor white and poor black ghettos of St Louis, MO. Fifteen years later when I was in high school in the early Sixties, when dad was the pastor of a middle-class church in suburban Buffalo, NY, my parents invited a young African-American college student—who'd come up from the same St Louis ghetto through Fellowship Center—to live with us while he was on a six-month study program at the nearby University of Buffalo. It was one of those small, daily acts of generosity and compassion that hardly anyone would notice today, but—although I never realized it at the time—given the circumstances of the time, it was also an intentional act of what-we-might-call social disobedience. For the Powers of the segregated white suburb where we lived had not long before forced a recently arrived African-American family out of town with crosses burning in their front yard.

I remember certain parishioners tut-tutting that my parents would endanger my younger sister by allowing a black man in the house. Without saying a word, my parents' simple act of generosity and compassion was also a tiny part of the Civil Rights struggle for racial justice.

For much of human history, acts of compassion and mercy have often been, in themselves, acts of justice. Today we might think of Jesus' touching a leper, or having dinner at the home of a tax collector, or healing a man's hand crippled from birth as acts of compassion, which they certainly were. But, in Jesus' context, the simple act of having compassion for those who'd been excluded by the social structures was a challenge to the purity and honor codes—those social structures and laws that had been erected by the powerful to maintain their privilege. It's no coincidence that already very early in Mark's gospel, Jesus' simple act of healing a man on the Sabbath sets into motion the Pharisees' plot to kill him. For much of human history, compassion for the excluded has been in itself a confrontation with the Powers, a radical act of justice.

Perhaps one sign that we're maturing spiritually as a culture is that compassion generally no longer threatens the Powers-that-be. Care for the sick, for the excluded, for the victims of social structures, even for prisoners is not only generally acceptable these days; it's also a powerful

addition to your résumé. High school students must volunteer somewhere as a criterion of graduation. College graduates come to Joseph's House for a year's program, supported by the religious and government establishment. Corporations make provision for employees to volunteer on company time. I don't mean at all to demean any of their actions. I think they're wonderful. But I do mean to highlight how different it is from times past, when acts of compassion were often in themselves challenges to the social structure, in themselves acts in the struggle for justice.

So, while we should certainly welcome all such acts of compassion, we should also understand that something has been lost. It's truly wonderful that we're able to give care here at Joseph's House to formerly homeless men and women dying of AIDS and cancer, but our care is no longer a challenge to the surround of forces that makes that care necessary; of itself, our care no longer puts pressure on the unjust structures that brought people here in the first place. In today's culture, justice has usually been stripped out from acts of compassion.

In fact, one can make a strong argument that such acts of compassion become part of the very structures they mean to challenge. Let me count some ways.

First, our charitable institutions that provide shelter or food or medical care for a few become the societal response, become part of the system, become in some sense the system itself, and they can camouflage the injustice. Shelters for the homeless, for instance, were originally a compassionate private response to a housing crisis when government support for affordable housing shriveled in the early 1980s. Certainly their founders never intended them as the de facto housing program for the poor. Yet that's what they've become, camouflaging the injustice of government failure.

Second, by concentrating on the care of individuals, we take attention off the fact that it's social structures that have caused much of this suffering in the first place. The environments where too many impoverished African-American children in Washington have to grow up in, for instance, are intolerable: violence, drug use, joblessness, absent fathers, and so on. The schools they attend are inadequate, hardly prepared to educate a child from the most stable environment, to say nothing of these needy children who actually enter their doors. Over half the children drop out before high school graduation. Of the black men who do drop out of high school, two-thirds aren't working at any given time. There's no place for these children as they grows into adulthood. The criminal justice system is highly discriminatory against African Americans, so that, for instance, a black drug user has twenty times the risk of going to jail as a white drug user. Given the vindictive nature of our criminal justice system without rehabilitation, once a person enters, they're likely to stay on that incarceration merry-go-round: the

near-impossibility of getting a job that supports a family once they get out makes it likely they'll be back in. Overall, the black rate of incarceration is five times that of whites. At any given time, one-third of young black men without a high school diploma are incarcerated, decimating their community. And, now, new studies indicate that it's that differential rate of incarceration between blacks and whites that's responsible for AIDS being nine times more common among black men than white men and a stunning eighteen times higher among black women than white woman.

If we at Joseph's House were to concentrate only on the care of the men and women who come to us—as important as that is—we'd in essence be covering up with gentle images and nourishing care the extraordinary injustice that's brought them here, covering up the structures that privilege us and make life so difficult for them.

Third, charitable work for the poor can lead too many of us to believe that that covers our part in the struggle for racial and class justice. We go down to the soup kitchen one or two evenings a month, serve some meals, have some meaningful conversations with homeless folks, and so on, and it's tempting to leave to another day the work of changing the structures so that soup kitchens become unnecessary.

Fourth, in a related way places like Joseph's House take the time, energy, and commitment of those most desirous and capable of changing the structures and channels them into these works of compassion. The work here is important, it's life-changing, it's deeply meaningful, but it's also all-consuming, draining most of us of extra energy. Too often there's just too little left for the often unrewarding work of political advocacy, testimony before committees, teaching and educating, demonstrations, and so on that are so vital to movements for justice.

Fifth ... well, I won't belabor the point. As wonderful as Joseph's House and many other institutions like us are, we're not enough within a culture that co-opts the good to work against the best.

June 4th was the seventeenth anniversary of the day that Marja and I and our three children moved into the house with Ron, and Howard, and Bruce. They and those who followed them educated us deeply in the realities of the structures that had brought them to Joseph's House. In our individualistic culture, of course, it's easy to look at any given person and lay the responsibility solely at his or her feet:

- if only he'd finished school and gotten a regular job;
- if only she hadn't gotten pregnant;
- she should have known better than to use intravenous drugs;
- he should have been smart enough to stay out of drug dealing,
- and so on.

But when you live with a person day after day and listen carefully to his or her story, a very different picture emerges, and you begin to marvel that this person has survived to this point at all. And it makes you want to do something about it. A commitment to justice grows.

So, over the years at Joseph's House, we've gradually tried to incorporate work for justice in what we do. It's still pretty rudimentary.

- We make sure that everyone who works here receives a living wage, adequate time off, and health insurance. The top annual salary at Joseph's House is less than twice the lowest.
- Joseph's House has freed me and increasingly Patty to lecture and teach about the injustice of the inner city, to educate middle-class people like ourselves about what we've learned.
- Gradually, our newsletters and appeal letters include more and more stories and articles about our concern for justice.
- More recently, we've tried to testify before relevant committees downtown, to push for different structures.
- We've done some very intentional educational work with the interns and volunteers who work with us day in and day out.

It all feels like we're just beginning, and we know there's much more to be done.

But there's a potential price to pay for our more inclusive focus. Both individual supporters of Joseph's House and those who work at the institutions that fund us tend to be relatively wealthy. They've done well by the structures of our society and may not be comfortable financially supporting us if we advocate too strongly for changing those very structures. We sent out a Joseph's House newsletter last fall about compassion and justice that brought an avalanche of responses, some gentle support but others strong objections from some of our supporters who saw our role as offering compassion for the residents, not advocating particular kinds of structural changes. So, it's a delicate balancing act: making sure that we speak the truth as we

see it, yet also making room for those who disagree with our perception of the truth to remain part of our community.

But I'm convinced that ultimately true compassion and true justice can't be separated. In our advocacy work, when we talk about social structures and injustice, people listen to us because they can sense our compassion and know that we've been there, experiencing for ourselves the realities of those structures. Our stories are believable because they're true.

And in our daily work at the house, we're also beginning to discover that when we know the structures of injustice with which our residents have had to struggle, we know them at a much deeper level. We're able to listen better and be more present. True compassion includes justice; true justice is anchored in compassion.

We're honoring two local politicians today, Councilmembers Jim Graham and Phil Mendelson. In our culture, the cynic could be forgiven for seeing this as just one more organization sucking up to the powerful. But we see it quite differently. You don't hear much about "public servants" these days, but that's what these two men are. To be willing and able to enter into the thicket of politics and to continue to fight for justice takes remarkable courage, capacity and dedication. Government is, after all, the only place where all of us can come together, debate, and fashion the rules and regulations for the kind of society we want. Government is a primary place where justice—or injustice—is created. To wash one's hands of the political process is to give up on real justice within our society. I'm grateful for two men such as these who are willing to struggle with the art of compromise to move us towards a more just society.

We're also honoring Eileen Scofield because we want to recognize the example that she is for us all and to share in the profound joy that she takes in compassionate service to others.

And, finally, we're honoring TASSC with the first annual Compassion and Justice Award for an organization. I should admit that I'm a bit biased—in part because I volunteer a bit over there, in part because a number of survivors of torture have come through our Eighth Day faith community. But Dianna and Orlando and Alice and others have understood from the earliest days of the organization that it makes no sense to provide services for survivors of torture seeking asylum in the United States without also doing everything in their capacity to change society to make torture a thing of the past. Because they represent real, live survivors of torture, their testimony and witness are especially powerful; because they're actively involved in changing the structures of society, they reach out to survivors with a deeper sense of integrity

... and they can allow survivors themselves to find meaning in struggling against the Powers that were responsible for their torture.

In many respects it's a good thing that people can now do acts of compassion without having to challenge social structures. It means that our society has come so far that at least in what we say, at least in what we believe intellectually, we understand that no one should be outside of our field of compassion, that everyone deserves to be comforted, attended to, given food, shelter, and community.

At the same time, however, it gives us the added responsibility to examine our acts of compassion to make sure they're not strengthening the structures responsible for the suffering in the first place. It gives us the responsibility to join with Eileen and Dianna and Orlando and Alice and so many others to act with both compassion and justice.