

Self-Compassion By James Crews

*My friend and I snickered the first time
we heard the meditation teacher, a grown man,
call himself honey, with a hand placed
over his heart to illustrate how we too
might become more gentle with ourselves
and our runaway minds. It's been years
since we sat with legs twisted on cushions,
holding back our laughter, but today
I found myself crouched on the floor again,
not meditating exactly, just agreeing
to be still, saying honey to myself each time
I thought about my husband splayed
on the couch with aching joints and fever
from a tick bite—what if he never gets better?—
or considered the threat of more wildfires,
the possible collapse of the Gulf Stream,
then remembered that in a few more minutes,
I'd have to climb down to the cellar and empty
the bucket I placed beneath a leaky pipe
that can't be fixed until next week. How long
do any of us really have before the body
begins to break down and empty its mysteries
into the air? Oh honey, I said—for once
without a trace of irony or blush of shame—
the touch of my own hand on my chest
like that of a stranger, oddly comforting
in spite of the facts.*

by James Crews

Commentary, by George, 22 December 2023

There is something in our culture that makes self compassion and self love feel somehow wrong. There is very little I taught to soldiers that I got as much push back on. Many people do not believe that love of self is as important as love of others. Jack Kornfield likes to say if the circle of compassion does not include you it is not complete. Compassion, you may remember, is what love looks like when it meets pain and suffering. So, what happens when you meet your own suffering? Do you meet it with tenderness or with judgment and fear?

The deficit of self-compassion in our culture is widespread and deeply problematic. It is truly very difficult to extend compassion to others when one has not given it to oneself. One is ill equipped to feel for another when one has not felt for their own pain. Kristen Neff has a program of teachings on the Yin and Yang of compassion intended to help with this cultural deficit.¹ Neff uses the analogy of back draft to explain the anger that sometimes comes up when people first start trying to practice self compassion. Like a fire starved of oxygen the human heart starved of compassion can react almost violently at first when the fresh air of compassion rushes in. This is why Kristen's teaching about the Yin and Yang of compassion is so helpful. Yin compassion is soft, warm, tender. Yang compassion is fierce, brave, and fearless. We need both. To be able to say "honey" to oneself is tender Yin compassion.

The Tibetan expression of the Buddhist tradition has a great emphasis on tenderness and the essential warmth of the human heart. Teachers in this tradition recommend cultivating this warmth. Here is Pema Chodron:

When my mother died and I was asked to go through her personal belongings, this awareness hit me hard. She had kept boxes of papers and trinkets that she treasured, things that she held on to through her many moves to smaller and smaller accommodations. They had represented security and comfort for her, and she had been unable to let them go. Now they were just boxes of stuff, things that held no meaning and represented no comfort or security to anyone. For me these were just empty objects, yet she had clung to them. Seeing this made me sad, and also thoughtful. After that I could never look at my own treasured objects in the same way. I had seen that things themselves are just what they are, neither precious nor worthless, and that all the labels, all our views and opinions about them, are arbitrary.

This was an experience of uncovering basic warmth. The loss of my mother and the pain of seeing so clearly how we impose judgments and values, prejudices, likes and dislikes, onto the world, made me feel great compassion for our shared human predicament. I remember explaining to myself that the whole world consisted of people just like me who were making much ado about nothing and suffering from it tremendously.²

Practices like metta or loving kindness meditation, *tonglen*,³ and forgiveness meditation, are meant to cultivate and help us remember this basic human warmth. When we do

¹ Kristen Neff, *The Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion*, (Sounds True, 2019).

² Pema Chodron, "The Natural Warmth of the Heart," *Lion's Roar*, <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-natural-warmth-of-the-heart/#:~:text=The%20natural%20warmth%20that%20emerges,and%20the%20shakiness%20of%20fear.>

³ Tonglen is sending and receiving. This is an imagery practice where one imagines breathing in the suffering of others and breathing out freshness, relief and well beings. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-x95ltQP8qQ>

these practices consistently over time we become less and less embarrassed by compassion, both offering it oneself and extending it to others.

Naomi Shihab Nye in her poem “Kindness” says that before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things. Likewise, Pema says, to know this warmth you almost have to experience pain. Pema says she experienced this after her divorce and New Yorkers experienced it after 9/11.

When things fall apart and we can't get the pieces back together, when we lose something dear to us, when the whole thing is just not working and we don't know what to do, this is the time when the natural warmth of tenderness, the warmth of empathy and kindness, are just waiting to be uncovered, just waiting to be embraced.⁴

Now, the human tendency when we meet pain is to harden, armor up, brace ourselves and then strike back in some way or to go into some form of numbing or denial. The practice is to learn to meet pain with tenderness, with kindness, with courage, and with the great heart of compassion.

Anne Lamott in a recent piece about aging says “The game of life is hard and a lot of us are playing hurt.”⁵

Anne says that she was out for a walk not long ago with an 84 year old friend. Her friend was picking up small bits and pieces of debris and when Annie asked her what she was doing she said, ‘picking up micro-litter, I try to help where I can.’

I reminded her of an old story along these lines, of a sparrow and a horse. A great warhorse comes upon a tiny sparrow lying on its back with its feet in the air, eyes squinched tightly shut with effort. The horse asks it what it's doing.

“I'm trying to help hold back the darkness.”

The horse roars with laughter. “That is so pathetic. What do you weigh, about an ounce?”

And the sparrow replies, “One does what one can.”

Learning and practicing meeting the world and oneself with compassion is a good way to move toward doing what one can.

⁴ Pema Chodron, “The Natural Warmth of the Heart,” LR.

⁵ Anne Lamott, “The Dressing Room Encounter that Made Me Get Real About Aging,” The Washington Post, 20 December 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/12/20/aging-friendship-outdoors/?pwapi_token=eyJ0eXAiOiJKV1QiLCJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiJ9.eyJyZWZzb24iOiJnaWZ0liwibmJmljoxNzAzMDQ4NDAwLjpc3MiOiJzdWJzY3JpcHRpb25zliwiZXhwLjoxNzAzMDQ4NDg0MDAsImp0aSI6IjhmZWFhMTdiLTQyYWItNGY5Ni1iNTE4LThjODNhMGRIN2ZhoSIsInVybCI6Imh0dHBzOi8vd3d3Lndhc2hpbmd0b25wb3NOlMnVbS9vcGluaW9ucy8yMDIzLzEyLzlwL2FnaW5nLWZyaWVudHNoaXAtd3V0ZG9vcnMvIn0.0A3dWrS--10vZ7KkqLW99PkZgVNS_ua1xMNMtrqX9cA.

