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Compassion, Hospitality, Justice and Peace: A Brief Exploration of Virtue Ethics

What is a human being? What makes a being human? Is it possible to lose our humanity? Is it possible to take away the humanity of another human being? What makes a human being a good human being? What excellences, what virtues ought a human being have to be an excellent, a virtuous human being?

A human being is more than *homo sapien*. It is more than that higher primate who walks upright, with the big brain and the opposable thumb, who is able to craft tools that can help h/er plant crops and harvest them to sustain h/er life. A human being is more than that animal who is able to domesticate other animals and to dig into the earth to pull out its oil, coal, gas and mineral material to fuel h/er living and to decorate h/erself. The human being is more than that animal who fells trees and who builds huts and skyscrapers, who manufactures automobiles and trucks and buses and trains and jet planes.

The human being is an animal that thinks about the transcendent, that contemplates the beginning and the end of all that was, is or will be. The human being is the animal who contemplates a life beyond h/er own individual death and breaths the breath s/he calls spirit, the breath that connects her to all living things and to a life beyond h/er earthly existence, that connects h/er to transcendence and to a transcendent being. The human being is the animal that crafts tools to make musical instruments to help h/er express her joy and fear and love and

longing. H/er artistic expressions in forms of dance and song and drawing and painting and poetry and more helps h/er turn the lead of her mundane existence into gold of lasting beauty. S/he calls the transcendent other being holy; s/he calls it divine and sings praises to its goodness and glory. However for some belief systems, none of this makes a human being human. What makes a human being human is the kind and quality of h/er relationships with other human beings, with creation and with the Divine.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has taken the African idea of humanity that is formed through right relationship and blended it with the Christian idea of the *imago dei*, the notion that human beings are made in the image and the likeness of God. Through this idea known as Ubuntu, every human being is holy and worthy of respect and care and justice and dignity because s/he bears the image and the likeness of God, and that we create our humanity through our acts. Good acts, acts that build a right relationship between people make us human. Bad acts, acts that break right relationship between people make us less human. We become something unhuman. Thus, from within this context of meaning, our humanity is a function of our right acting. Our humanity is a matter of the virtues we live that helps to build human community.

Further, the human being is an animal that both loves and suffers. It is the animal that strives to put language on those realities of life, and the language is a link to other human beings who also love, who also suffer. **Compassion** is the virtue that connects us to the suffering of others. It connects us at the deepest levels of our psychological and our spiritual selves to the pain of the Other. The tears of the Other become our tears; we imagine ourselves in that place and we want to do something to end the pain and suffering of the Other because that pain and suffering has become our own. It is a kind of solidarity. Catholic Womanist theologian M.

Shawn Copeland not only sees compassion as a component of solidarity, but it is also a result of memory. She writes: “ memories call for a new mediation of sorrow and remorse, compassion and recompense as well as a new way through which we may begin to feel and shoulder each other’s suffering, dislocation and pain *as if it were our own.*”¹

However, when we think of the aspect of compassion that is passion, we have another touchstone for thinking about how we come to compassion and what it means.

Passion/compassion is the awareness of the Other that comes through love. Passion is a burning desire that is a deep devotion, an enthusiasm, a divine indwelling that leads us to a love that is beyond reason. It is a crazy, insane, I will be a fool for you love. It is a radical love. The passion/compassion that is born of such a radical love is that which wants for the Other the same thing that we would want for our beloved, to want for their children what we would want for our own children. Love erases dividing lines and helps us see the Other as ourselves, but also more than ourselves; it helps us see the Other as beloved. The stranger whose suffering we see through the eyes of our own capability to love becomes someone whose suffering we must end. We have no choice. The suffering is too much to bear. We will do whatever is necessary to stop their suffering because our love is what causes us to suffer along with them. This radical love insists

¹ This is from an unpublished essay: “To Re-member Us Whole: Pain and Promise in the Call to Solidarity Between Africans and African-Americans.”

that we find a cure to the suffering; it insists upon a healing.

So, this opens the door of **hospitality**. When we think about the etymology of the word hospitality, it takes us back to the moment when a hospital was a hospice for travelers. It takes us back to the time when travel was travail, a hard, tortuous and difficult thing. It takes us back to the time before superhighways and turnpikes with a rest stop and fast food restaurants every few miles. Sometimes a hospice for travelers was run by a monastic order. The place of rest on the road, the home away from home, could have spelled the difference between life and death. Thus we now understand the hospice, and hospital to be places where a woman gives birth, where the sick come to get well, where the dying come to die. It is a place of life and death. At the same time, hospitality also means welcome; it means the open door to the stranger. French philosopher Jacques Derrida thinks about hospitality as the radical welcome of the Other, not only the expected guest, the guest who has written ahead or called ahead to say s/he is coming, but hospitality for Derrida is only hospitality when the guest is a surprise guest. Hospitality is only hospitality when the arrival of the guest causes interruption. It disrupts our day, causes us to have to change our plans.² Further, for Derrida, hospitality is only hospitality when we welcome the other with joy. There is a story about a little boy who was asked to play the inn keeper in the Christmas story. You know how the story goes: Joseph is looking for a place to shelter his pregnant wife Mary as she gives birth to the Son of God. Everyone in the story gets to welcome the baby Jesus -- the shepherds, the wise men, the angels. It is only the inn keeper who does not welcome the baby Jesus. The little boy asked to play the inn keeper did not want this negative

role. His family and Sunday school teachers asked and asked and finally the little boy said “yes.”

When the night of the Christmas play came, and the drama reached the moment where the little boy was to say his part. “There is no room in the inn,” he decided to change the script. “Come on in” he proclaimed with a big smile and wide open arms.”³ We need to change our script regarding the welcome of the Other.

Such is the role of the host in true hospitality. S/he throws open the door and with a big smile says: “Come on in.” Now it is important to keep in mind that when a guest comes, this means extra work. Extra beds have to be made, extra food prepared; we often arrange for some sort of entertainment for the amusement of our guests, and the question becomes: who is responsible for the extra work? All too often that work falls upon the woman of the house, but in cases of true hospitality the extra burden is shared.

However, hospitality carries with it a risk. What happens if the stranger at one’s door does not intend only rest and recovery until s/he can move on to another destination? What happens when the stranger wants to come into one’s home and do harm, to steal or to kill? Such is the risk of hospitality, the risk that hospitality requires. What happens if the stranger wants to come into one’s home to stay and does not know when to go home? When is it appropriate to send the stranger on h/er way or at least hand h/er a mop or a broom so that they may contribute the maintenance of the household? Some cultures where hospitality is a well developed aspect of the culture have developed rules. There are expectations of welcome and generosity and

² Jacques Derrida, Acts of Religion (New York: Routledge, 2002)

³ I am grateful to Rev. Janet Peterman for this story. I heard her tell it in a Christmas Eve sermon at St. Michael’s Lutheran Church in Philadelphia.

protection, and there are expectations that the guests will behave well in their temporary home. These expectations are not always met, so offering hospitality is a risk. Some cultures, the ancient Greeks among them, understood hospitality to be an important virtue of a heroic culture.

The host is the s/ hero that can at once welcome a stranger and protect h/er home. Still the element of risk remains. The host may become hostage. The host may become a sacrifice. The host may also become the conduit of divine grace upon the stranger, upon the guest who may be angels or messengers of the divine, or who may be a lost and lonely soul looking for solace. However, from the perspective of Christianity, the host is obliged to take these risks, to welcome the stranger and to care for the least because Jesus says: "as you have done to the least of these, you have done it unto me." (Matthew 25:40) Such now becomes the yardstick for measuring our devotion to Jesus; it becomes the way we demonstrate our faith; it becomes the way to temporal salvation; it becomes the method for creating and for maintaining the right relationship with the divine and with the Other that helps us to create and to enhance our own humanity. Hospitality is a kind of justice.

Justice is the virtue that requires that we give each one h/er due. It is fairness, rightness, righteousness, equity, recompense under the law. Very often we think of justice that is understood as retribution or punishment for breaking the law. Some just war theorists these days argue in favor of some wars for the sake of punishing an enemy. Violence perpetrated against individuals and nations for the sake of retribution, or for the sake of revenge is violence that opens the door to more violence. It pulls us into a cycle of violence and retaliation for violence that has no end. There are other aspects of justice that are important for us to consider. There is commutative justice, the one-on-one obligations we owe each other according to both written

and unwritten contracts. There is distributive justice where everyone on the planet has access to a just portion of the world's resources for the sake of human flourishing. In today's world we fail miserably at this aspect of justice. Far too much wealth is in the hands of far too few people. Too many people across the globe live on less than a dollar a day; far too many cannot feed or educate their children. Life is so fragile and so precarious for far too many people that they have to try to leave their home and go to a strange land to live and to work among strangers so that they can make enough money to send home to their families. It is important to think about contributive justice. This is what each individual owes to their family, society, nation and world for the sake of both individual and of collective survival. It is the dues we owe for the space we occupy. Contributive justice means that it is equitable, that it is right to know one's own gifts and graces so that one may develop them to share with the world. And restorative justice is the justice that produces a legal system whose aim is to restore relationship, to restore an offender back to community, to restore humanity.

We often hear the slogan "No justice; no peace" when people take to the street at anti-war rallies or when ordinary people protest police brutality or some violation of an individual or community through unjust acts. It is a slogan that carries within it a profound truth. It is true that justice is a constitutive element of peace. **Peace** is deeper than the absence of violent conflict between individuals and groups or people. Peace is a serenity born of clarity. It is a calm that abides in the center of every storm that understands that the storm will pass. It is the serenity born of clarity that can see there is no cause for alarm or for fear. Such individual calm is the first moment of peace. It is the peace that is important for every individual to cultivate through the breath of right relationship with the transcendent. Peace comes from a fearless clarity. Such

fearlessness requires faith that disconnects us from the will to power and the fear of death.

However, such clarity is a luxury afforded to us when we are not hungry, when we are secure in our homes and persons. Such personal clarity is very much more difficult to come by when we live withing systems that perpetrate an economic violence against people. This takes us back to justice.

I dare say that inside every violent conflict in the world there lies an economic component. Someone is getting paid. Someone is left destitute. Beyond the obvious death and destruction that war leaves in its wake, beyond the seen and unseen physical and psychological wounds and amputations that happen to both combatants and to noncombatants, there is the devastation to the environment and to the ability of ordinary people in war torn countries to live healthy economic lives. Justice in all its iterations is violated, the social contract within and between nations is torn. Commutative justice is broken. People before, during and after the violent conflict have not been given a just portion of the world's wealth so that they can live healthy lives, so that they can flourish. Thus distributive justice is ignored.

When people are scratching to live from day to day, their contribution to the wider world is limited to keeping themselves and their families alive. What music, what poetry, what science, what art, what philosophy dies of starvation or of some preventable disease everyday in this world? What political science, what sociology, what medicine gets deported everyday leaving traumatized children behind? What new discoveries never come to being because they are locked inside the broken heart of a traumatized child? Further, we can only guess what wonders die on battlefields and on city streets that have become as dangerous as war zones everyday. In this regard, creation has exacted its own retribution against human obfuscation that leads to fear

and to lies and to the disturbance of our personal peace that leads us to violent conflict in our houses and in our neighborhoods and within our nations and between nations.

And so we return to our original question. What is a human being? What makes a good human being. Human beings are that animal that lives in relationship with all of nature and creation with a sense of transcendence. A human being is the divine animal. What makes a good human being? A good human being is one that develops the excellences, the virtues that build and maintain these relationships. When we think about the history of moral philosophy from the time of the Greeks, we understand that what is considered virtuous in a society grows from how that society defines itself. For all the good that the ancient Greeks left us -- philosophy, poetry, politics -- these things were born from a slave society where most men and women were not equal citizens. The classical Greek virtues -- justice, wisdom, prudence and courage -- were thought to be the virtues necessary for an excellent citizen. Men with property.

As societies change and develop, they promote certain virtues that they believe their citizens ought to develop so that the society can thrive according to its definition of itself. Once upon a time in the United States, a nation born of enlightenment values and a Protestant work ethic, leaders promoted the virtues of self-reliance, hard work and thrift. "A penny saved is a penny earned" Benjamin Franklin taught in his almanac. Now the United States has become a consumer culture where our virtues and our values are in flux. Conformity to the advertised need for this or that has replaced self-reliance. Hard work does not necessarily mean success anymore because of an economic system that rewards stock holders and Chief Executive Officers of corporations when productivity and profits rise. Workers see very little benefit from their hard work. Thrift and saving are not possible for far too many people when they find themselves

needing every penny of every paycheck to live to the next paycheck. Thus, we are left to ask what kind of society do we have? What kind of society do we want? What virtues are necessary to help build such a society and by extension such a world?

I want to propose compassion, hospitality, justice and peace as virtues that we want to develop for ourselves and that will necessarily translate into the values of a 21st century culture. A compassion that wills to end the suffering of the Other through a deep devotion, love and passion for the other will lead us to the healing aspects of hospitality. Hospitality that gives us the courage to take the risks associated with an open door and a joyful welcome sees the Other, both the known Other and the stranger Other as a human being worthy of respect and justice. Moreover, our conception of justice ought not only consider what is our just due but what is our just contribution, And finally the clarity that comes from both giving and receiving justice will lead us to serenity that goes beyond any purchase.

A world at peace is possible. A world where everyone is fed and housed and clothed and educated and respected and allowed to flourish is possible. A world where we have banished the obscenity that is war to history books is possible. A world where we honor the environment and live lives that are easy on the earth is possible. A world where we honor animals is possible. A world of compassion and hospitality and justice and peace is possible. We need only love ourselves, our humanity and the humanity of Others with a mad, passionate, outrageous, radical love to make it so.⁴

⁴ I am grateful to Paula Gile for the concept of outrageous love.