

"An essential guide for anyone who cares deeply about the human condition, and how we can help each other through with love and guts."

—DANIEL GOLEMAN
AUTHOR OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The Compassionate Life



WALKING *the* PATH *of* KINDNESS

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF HEALING DREAMS AND REMARKABLE RECOVERY

An Excerpt From

***The Compassionate Life:
Walking the Path of Kindness***

by Marc Ian Barasch

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PREFACE

I am thankful that thorns have roses.

—Alphonse Karr

EVERY NOW AND THEN, I'LL MEET AN ESCAPEE, SOMEONE WHO has broken free of self-centeredness and lit out for the territory of compassion. You've met them, too, those people who seem to emit a steady stream of, for want of a better word, love-vibes. As soon as you come within range, you feel embraced, accepted for who you are. For those of us who suspect that you rarely get something for nothing, such geniality can be discomfiting. Yet it feels so good to be around them. They stand there, radiating photons of goodwill, and despite yourself you beam back, and the world, in a twinkling, changes.

I appreciate these compassion-mongers, even marvel at them. But I've rarely thought that I could be one of them. Sure, I've tried to live a benign life, putting my shoulder to the wheel for peace, justice, and Mother Earth. Like most people, I adore my offspring, even when they drive me crazy; love my parents, despite the corkscrew of childhood; dote on my siblings (though there *is* that scrapbook of old slights); and treasure my friends (even if they sometimes let me down). Conventional wisdom wouldn't fault me for saving the best stuff for my nearest and dearest and giving the rest of humanity the leftovers.

Thus it is, say the sages, that the harvest of kindness—of kindredness—is winnowed down to a precious few grains. For at the center of all spiritual traditions is the beacon of a truly radical proposal: Open your heart to everybody. *Everybody.*

Is this even possible?

Nelson Mandela once remarked that he befriended his jailers, those grim, khaki-clad overseers of his decades of hard labor in a limestone quarry, by “exploiting their good qualities.” Asked if he believed all people were kind at their core, he responded, “There is no doubt whatsoever, provided you are able to arouse their inherent goodness.” If that sounds like wishful thinking, well, he actually did it.

NOT THAT MANDELA, OR ANYONE IN HIS OR HER RIGHT mind, would claim it was easy. Compassion isn’t simply opening a spigot and coating everything in a treachy, all-purpose goo. It requires a gut hunch that whatever I do unto others, I do unto myself. It calls for appreciating not only what comforts us but what pierces us. (*Compassion* comes from the Latin *cum patior*, “to suffer with,” while *apathy*—literally, “not to suffer”—connotes a heart benumbed).

Even among those in what are known as the caring professions, I’ve seen a credo posted on office doors and bulletin boards:

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

The kindness you show today will be forgotten tomorrow

Be kind anyway.

Why bother? Sure, it’s better to offer a hand than turn a blind eye. And if you’re trying to get to heaven, it’s probably the route with the fewest traffic delays. But there’s another reason: A compassionate life is more fulfilling. It’s only when the ego bows out that the curtain rises on real life. That it’s more blessed to give than

to receive is not some moral nostrum, they say, but a prescription for authentic joy.

Did I really believe that? I'm ever on guard against disillusion; I don't want to be shocked if my better angels turn out to have size 12 clay feet. Today the world stirs with hope for some new upward arc, for a kinder epoch. The need to turn away from cynicism and toward each other has never been clearer. But we still live on a planet where thirty thousand kids die in poverty each day while we obsess over our calories. We go to work in the morning with every good intention even as our diligence stokes an iron giant that is grinding up the earth. The crises exceed the grasp of our polity, challenging the reach of our human potential.

This book began as a personal investigation. I wanted to know what it takes to overcome that I-me-mine I'm convinced ruins everything, to sweeten my tongue, change my jealous mind, think of other people first, just to see what happens. Spiritual teachers throughout history have insisted we each possess the requisite piece of equipment: one standard-issue human heart. It is not a case of being born with the right disposition but of cultivating, like diligent, sweat-stained gardeners, the kernel of benevolence that is our birthright.

I intended on my journey to break bread with the saints (or some reasonable facsimile). But I also needed to sit down with a man of violence because once, in a bitter argument with my ex-wife, I'd pounded the wall and was appalled to see I'd put my fist through plaster. Compassion is easy enough in a vacuum, but what happens when what's hardest to bear is right up in your face?

My inquiry grew into a years-long quest to develop that persuasion of mind that paves the way for authentic conviction. I found myself being persuaded—maybe more than I'd expected—by examples and exemplars, by theology and neurobiology, by my

own forays into the deep backcountry of human kindness. Conviction crept up on me, almost without my noticing. It went from a fairy tale, a just-so story, to what-if, to a tentative but persistent yes. I felt, after a while, I'd been given a pair of magic glasses with lenses that see only the good in people—if I could just remember to put them on.



THE CIRCLE OF COMPASSION

*If one completes the journey to one's own heart,
one will find oneself in the heart of everyone else.*

—Father Thomas Keating

WHEN I WAS IN MY TWENTIES, MY BUDDHIST TEACHER tricked me into taking a vow of universal compassion. Using some spiritual sleight of hand, he made it appear that I could aspire to a tender concern for everybody, even putting their welfare before my own.

Fat chance, I thought. But in his wily way, he framed this vow—the *bodhisattva's* promise to live for others—as a case of enlightened self-interest. It was not, he told me, a matter of wearing a one-size-fits-all hair shirt. I was taking the vow for my own good. It would give me some leverage to pry loose, finger by finger, the claustrophobic monkey-grip of ego, would give the heart a little breathing room. By treating others generously, I might find them responding in kind. I felt I was being made privy to an ancient secret: *To attain your own human potential, be mindful of everyone else's.*

At some point in my vow ceremony, a casual affair held in a rocky field, it *did* seem as if my vision suddenly cleared. I glimpsed, like a sky swept clean of clouds, everyone's innate okayness. Years

later I still marvel at the spiritual chutzpah of the liturgy: *However innumerable are beings, I vow to save them all.* Hardly knowing what I was doing, I'd planted myself in a millennia-old tradition that claims you can love all without preconditions, exclusionary clauses, or bottom lines, that says life isn't *quid pro quo* but *quid pro bono*.

To my surprise the vow hadn't made me feel obligated, but liberated from my own suffocating strictures, from the narrowness of my concerns. It was as if I'd been waiting for a signal, a green light to step onto the crosswalk to the opposite curb, some goad to be compassionate not out of blind craving for virtue but because it seemed the only genuinely interesting thing to do with my life.

I had so often assumed life was about magnifying myself (for the greater good, of course), but now that seemed like the wrong end of the telescope: It made everyone else look small. I soon took a job running a residential therapeutic community in exchange for room and board, surprised at my ability to care for the walking wounded. I stopped thinking so much about how others had let me down, broken my heart, failed to anticipate my needs or take my oh-so-unique sensitivities into account. I began striving to see—and even nourish—other people's possibilities, receiving in return those surprise concoctions the human spirit dishes out when it feels accepted and at ease.

But there came a point on my journey when I stumbled badly and fell far: a dire illness, an interminable recovery, penury, loneliness, and despair. Friends clucked in sympathy but stepped gingerly over the body. Family didn't do much better. I had a soul-curdling realization: The people you love (and who ostensibly love you) may not be there when you need them most. I got through it—the kindness of strangers and all—but I was soon back to squinting at people through my cool fisheye, seeing their preening vanity, their intellectual shortfalls, their ethical squishiness. It took time

to realize that my shortsightedness was taking a toll, let alone that there was anything I could do about it.

Finding my way back to meditation helped. Nothing like getting a good, long look at myself (and funny how much I looked like everyone else). I noticed how often my social trade-offs were more about getting than giving, how many of *my* thoughts revolved in geosynchronous orbit around Planet Numero Uno. Still my teacher had insisted that one thing was certain: Despite seeing all the ego's pitfalls and pratfalls, real *bodhisattvas* make friends with themselves. Everyone, he said, possessed some worth past quantifying or qualifying, some value beyond judgment or fine-tuning—and that included oneself.

To love your neighbor *as yourself*, after all, is the great injunction of every religion. But what does loving yourself *mean*? It's one thing to say it; it's another to know it in your bones. The spiritual consensus seems to be that it's like learning to love anyone: You start by getting to know them. The side benefit is that to know yourself is also to know the person sitting next to you and the one halfway around the world. "Read thyself," wrote philosopher Thomas Hobbes. "Whosoever looketh into himself...shall know what are the thoughts and passions of all other men."

Still, having looketh'd into myself, I can't say I loveth all I see. I *have* read myself, and there in oversized type it says: *petty, suspicious, greedy, vain, jealous, lazy, stingy, dull* (and that's just on the page; there's more between the lines). That I also reckon myself magnanimous, conscientious, loyal, thrifty, brave, and intermitently humble is beside the point. It's not enough to offset scourging self-judgment with some roll call of compensatory pluses. We have to take ourselves (and one another) whole. The Dalai Lama points out that the Tibetan term for compassion, *tsewa*, generally means "love of others," but "one can have that feeling toward oneself as well. It is a state of mind where you extend how you

relate to yourself toward others.” If it’s true that what goes around comes around, compassion is about nothing if not love’s tendency to circulate.

And radiate. Alexander Pope (poet of the “eternal sunshine of the spotless mind”) envisioned compassion as a series of concentric circles rippling outward:

*Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake,
As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;
...Friend, parent, neighbor, first it will embrace;
His country next; and next all human race.*

It sounds great. (It is great.) But for many of us there’s a nagging doubt that this whole compassion routine could edge into self-effacement—into loving others *instead* of ourselves, giving away the store until the shelves are bare. The usual formula is first to stockpile some extra self-esteem—*then* you can afford to be generous. That isn’t quite how nineteenth-century religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard saw it. The commandment to love thy neighbor was to him a divine burglary that “as with a pick, wrenches open the lock of self-love and wrests it away from the person.” *Oh, great.* What about looking out for number one? Isn’t it prudent to follow that flight attendant’s advisory: “First place the mask over your own nose and mouth, tightening the straps to begin the flow of oxygen”? We’re of no use to anyone if we’re passed out in our seat from hypoxia.

It’s a hard balance to strike. If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? There is a growing sense in our society, left, right, and center, that the balance has woozily tipped, that our obsession with seamless self-contentment has occluded our caring. Our cultural default setting has become *get your own needs met*. Our psychosocial mean temperature, I’ve heard clinicians say, is “people-friendly narcissism.” Our thera-

peutic model focuses so much on strengthening the ego-self that it omits what psychologists call the “self-in-relation.” (One group of mostly female psychologists has proposed “openness to mutual influence” as a more reliable barometer of mental health than self-esteem.)

Self-esteem remains our all-purpose buzzword, a stock phrase in therapists’ offices, corporate training modules, even elementary school curricula. Psychologist Abraham Maslow coined the term in 1940 after observing a monkey colony in a Madison, Wisconsin, zoo. He was fascinated by the cockiness of the troupe’s dominant alphas and the social benefits they accrued, reminiscent of socially successful people. His concept of self-esteem had its origins in the alpha’s great cry of triumphal self-love: *I am somebody—and you’re not*. Far from simple self-affirmation, this self-esteem was more akin to that sense of self that made Frank Sinatra sing how swell it was to be king of the hill.

What Maslow failed to stress was the social dimension. Even in a primate colony—especially so—no ape is an island: Modern primatologists point out that an alpha animal, contrary to its reputation as solitary lord of all it surveys, is thickly enmeshed in a social web, dependent on the reciprocities of group life. Maslow’s paragon of the “self-actualized” person (“authentic, individuated, productive” with “a surprising amount of detachment from people in general”) begins to sound less like a social creature than a self-pollinating flower.

Taking potshots at Maslow may be a little unfair. At a time when psychology was obsessed with what goes wrong in the psyche, Maslow championed the things that go right. He was an exuberant advocate of human potential when most shrinks spent their fifty-minute hours chronicling pathology. And he did posit that self-actualization would inevitably produce a sense of

responsibility for others. But his emphasis on personal growth as the be-all helped spawn a national cottage industry devoted to building a better me, an enhanced self-to-the-tenth-power with a full entitlement of psychospiritual fabulousness. Not such an awful idea, I suppose, but, as the song goes, *Is that all there is?*

I dropped in on a human potential workshop recently. There was plenty of talk about self-empowerment and self-realization, self-efficacy and peak performance, but compassion didn't rate a second billing on the marquee. It made me wonder what sort of selfhood we're seeking: the self that gets its needs met but is never fulfilled, or the self that gives abundantly yet is never empty? Instead of self-discovery, what about *other*-discovery, our real terra incognita?

"The American way is to first feel good about yourself," says Benedictine monk Thomas Keating, "and then feel good about others. But spiritual traditions say it's the other way around—that you develop a sense of goodness by giving of yourself."

I'VE BEEN AN AUDREY HEPBURN FAN SINCE I WAS A BOY WITH my first major movie-star crush, all the more when I discovered that the adorable gamine of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was also a great humanitarian. I once came across a nugget of her philosophy while waiting in the dentist's office. A fashion magazine had asked for her beauty tips, and she'd replied with her favorite poem (by the great wit Sam Levenson):

*For attractive lips, speak words of kindness.
For lovely eyes, seek out the good in people.
For a slim figure, share your food with the hungry.
For poise, walk with the knowledge you never walk alone.
If you ever need a helping hand, you'll find one
at the end of each of your arms.*

This homily, a sort of Saint Francis prayer for the Maybelline set, is a graceful rebuttal to the fetish of self-improvement. Instead of being all about me, it's about us; instead of getting and having, it's about giving and then giving some more. Saint Francis himself went beyond mere charity. The son of a rich clothier, he gave up wealth and privilege to dress in rags and hang out with lepers. This was taking kindness to an extreme few of us would find attainable, let alone remotely appealing. But compassion has a certain down-and-dirty quality and a more than casual familiarity with the soul's darker, draftier labyrinths.

At its root meaning of "to suffer with," compassion challenges our tendency to flinch away from life's too-tender parts, whether those parts belong to us or to others. I know this much: When I acknowledge my own pain, I am much less squeamish about drawing nearer to yours. I seem to acquire my compassion piecemeal, hurt by hurt. After a bad sprain and time spent on crutches, I became more sympathetic to those who hobble with canes and walkers.

Perhaps Saint Thomas Aquinas was not so far off when he claimed that no one becomes compassionate unless he suffers. I take this less as a mandate for medieval masochism than a call to embrace our own actual experience. I've become suspicious of the unblemished life. Maybe the heart must be broken, like a child's prize honeycomb, for the real sweetness to come out. Although something inside us yearns to walk on air, never touching the ground, compassion brings us down to earth. It has been likened to the lotus, whose exquisite, fragrant blossom grows out of the muck and the mire.

The Buddha, the jewel in the lotus himself, didn't start out in the mud. He was raised like a hothouse flower, living the cosseted life of a pampered young prince. His royal parents, fearing a prophecy that he would grow up to become a spiritual teacher instead

of a king, confined him within high castle walls, surrounded by every luxury. The lame, the sick, and the down-and-out were banished from sight. It wasn't that his parents were afraid that their son would be shocked by the sight of suffering (after all, he was to be a battle-hardened feudal monarch) but that he would *respond* to it. They were afraid, in other words, that their son might become compassionate.

One day the prince secretly ventured outside. He stumbled first upon a diseased beggar, then a dead man. The walls that had separated him from the world-as-it-is crumbled. Indeed, the castle might be thought of as a metaphorical ego-structure: Don't we often try to secure happiness by fortifying ourselves against imperfection? When the Buddha proclaimed his First Noble Truth, *dukkha* ("dissatisfactoriness"), he was pointing to the dissatisfaction of ego-driven existence. In the end his enlightenment was to accept everything and everyone as they are, not in relation to some feel-good agenda; to sit down for the full meal of life; and to stop trying to eat around the broccoli.

When I first took my vows and embarked on the path, I assumed that after x years of diligent meditation I'd be a wise man with a small secret smile, wafting clear and calm through my own inner space. Lovingkindness would be a spin-off technology from my private moon shot. But after some time spent trying to attain escape velocity, I noticed that most spiritual teachings regard compassion as the main event—*the* path to enlightenment, the way to slice through self-deception and small thoughts. "Spiritual practice is not just about feeling peaceful and happy," a Buddhist lama once told me, "but being willing to give up your own comfort to help someone else. Unless there's some sacrifice for others, it's just meditation by remote control!"

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COMPASSION? THE WORD ITSELF is one among many used to describe the profundity of human connection, but it's the only one, I'd submit, that implies kindness without condition. *Empathy*, for example, refers to our ability to feel and perceive from another's viewpoint. But acutely sensing someone's feelings can also be disturbing (the plight of the "oversensitive"), leading as easily to drawing back as to reaching out. *Sympathy* is famously tenderhearted but can remain at arm's length (think "sympathy card" or "I sympathize with your concerns, but..."). Even when it comes to altruism, the noblest self-sacrifice can be merely parochial, reserved for one's family or the insiders of one's religion or nation, too often at outsiders' expense.

Then, of course, there's the heart's miracle potion of *love*. "All, everything that I understand," exclaimed Leo Tolstoy, "I understand only because I love." Love to him was not just romance's quickened pulse but the plangency of some universal heartbeat—a distinction that, in our eagerness, we often brush right past. We crave love's fierce attachment, its irresistible force of gravity. Next to the possessive throb of desire (*yo quiero* in Spanish means "I love" and "I want"), kindness can sound like weak tea.

But with great love often comes great exclusivity. In the chivalric love story of Tristan and Isolde, Tristan's heart is said to be "sealed and locked from all the world save her alone." Kierkegaard referred to erotic love as "the very peak of self-esteem, the *I* intoxicated in the *other I*... This united *I* selfishly cuts itself off from everyone else." Yet just as self-love can lead to either self-absorption or the discovery of common humanity, so can romantic love spiral inward or blossom out, make us hoarders of private happiness or philanthropists of the heart. To talk of love as a singular phenomenon reflects more the parsimonious limits of language than the complex facts on the ground.

I once fell in love with a beautiful, brilliant young woman who came into my life like Cupid's sledgehammer—right between the eyes. I was like a dazed cartoon character with twittering bluebirds circling my head. Amazingly, my feelings were reciprocated—or so it seemed. As she later explained with remarkable patience, what I'd taken for the romantic real deal was to her just budding friendly affection. When I'd gotten over my embarrassment, I had to laugh. I'd misinterpreted her every gesture, word, and look, seizing on parts to construct a whole picture more to my liking.

This kind of love is a long day's journey from compassion (I certainly hadn't taken *her* feelings into account) and from those emotional commitments we share with those we love and who, thankfully, love us back. But I am amazed, reflecting on it, at the complex palette of emotions with which I had painted this non-affair. It wasn't just lust at first sight. I'd felt a profound sense of cherishing toward someone I hardly knew. I'd seen in pristine focus a perfect (and I mean *perfect*) stranger's unique goodness. William Blake's observation, "Love to faults is always blind / Always is to a joy inclined," was on full display. (In one British study, when a person in a brain scanner was shown a photo of his beloved, the neocortical regions associated with judgment shut down, going dark as a Broadway theater on a Monday.)

This bestowal of value on another, seeing him or her in a supernal best light, is a strong component of not only romance but compassion. Faced with love's many nuances, the Greeks wisely concocted a whole spectrum of terms to describe it, from *storge* (tenderness) to *erotike* (sexual desire) to such fortunate grace notes as *eunoia* (benevolence). Science is bearing out the distinctions. A study of college students in the grip of hot new romances showed unique activity deep in the limbic system—activity that differed

markedly from the neural signatures of long-term relationship and friendship. (In other studies lust, passion, and long-term attachment have been shown to have differing brain chemistries.)

When I was in the throes of my big crush, I'd also noted a yearning to care for, to do for—that sense of almost maternal nurturing that lovers, male and female alike, feel toward each other when they call each other “baby.” Indeed, the type of love most often cited as an analogy for compassion is mother-love itself. The Hebrew word for compassion, *rachamim*, is the plural of the word for womb. Christianity's most tender image is the pietà. Said the Buddha: “Like a mother who protects her child, her only child, with her own life, one should cultivate a heart of unlimited love and compassion toward all living beings.” Science has recently shown how the interactions between mother and child—all the soft stroking, gazing, vocalizations, and nurturance of infancy—become the basis for all subsequent relatedness. (Says Allan N. Schore of the University of California [UCLA]: “Our brains are physically wired to develop in tandem with another's through emotional communication, beginning before words are spoken.”)

Researchers who study maternal attachment have zeroed in on oxytocin, a master hormone in mother/infant bonding. Intriguingly, oxytocin is also implicated in the experience of falling in love. Released when we touch, it also functions as a sex hormone in both females and males. Does oxytocin make the world go round?

A friend of mine, a specialist in international conflict resolution, described an incident that made me wonder. He'd been summoned to a meeting of political opponents whose bitterness was virtually paralyzing a government. Communication had broken down completely along with all trust. The high tension in the

room, he said, was enough to electrocute you. But in the midst of one angry exchange, a baby who had eluded the child-care services crawled out onto the floor between them.

“Suddenly these men who were on the verge of throttling each other got this *awww* look in their eyes,” he recalls. “I’ve never seen a situation turn around faster. Hardened positions seemed to melt. People made concessions. It was like someone had slipped them a drug.”

This in effect might have been the case. “In the presence of a baby,” notes neuroscientist Sue Carter of Chicago’s Psychiatric Institute, “both males and females will produce oxytocin, leading to tender, maternal-like feelings.* How might this translate into other sorts of social attachment?” Given that, as Carter points out, a single exposure to oxytocin can make a lifelong change in the brain, it’s not a trivial question. Some suspect that oxytocin is the genesis of “helper’s high,” those glowing feelings of warmth and well-being described by almost everyone who does volunteer work. A group of UCLA researchers is studying the link between oxytocin and the emotion they call “love of humanity,” wondering if the hormone might be the actual milk of human kindness.

Here science approaches the view of love proclaimed in the mystical traditions. According to the Sufis, the feelings we have for family, friends, and lovers all are aspects of divine love. The narrowest affection can lead even to the universal mystery they call the Beloved. In an essay titled “My Heart Can Take On Any Appearance,” Islamic sage Ibn El-Arabi proclaimed the highest love to be “like the love of lovers, except that instead of loving

*Interestingly, it has been reported that when male chimps are on the verge of mutual aggression, one will sometimes snatch a baby from its mother’s arms and brandish it before his rival, which seems to abruptly defuse the conflict. Is it a form of hostage-taking or an instinctual gesture that catalyzes a sort of hormonal truce?

the phenomenon, I love the Essential. A purpose of human love is to demonstrate ultimate, real love.” High romance or doing-the-laundry love, simple affection or mad crushes, maybe all are prismatic beams of a single transforming light.

I HAVE A FEW FRIENDS WHO EMBODY THIS BRAND OF BENEFICENT love some researchers refer to as “generativity.” I got to know Alicia and Paul (not their real names) when I was teetering at the edge of a private cliffhanger. Though they barely knew me, they showed up one day with a check that pulled me back from the brink. No strings, they assured me as I stammered my thanks. I didn’t have to do good with it, reciprocate in any way, or even, they joked, have dinner with them. It wasn’t just the sum—several months’ food and rent—that startled me but the clear sense I got of the givers’ unencumbered hearts.

Over the years we’ve become close friends. Alicia and Paul live on a hilltop bordered by redwood forest with their three kids, a cockatoo, an ancient desert tortoise, a once-feral cat, a snake, and a pet rat—all of whom gather around their large breakfast table each morning and seem to get along famously. The family is both well off and deeply well intentioned. They save swatches of rain forest; they build schools and teach in them; they take political refugees into their home; they plant community gardens. The last time I saw her, Alicia had just received her massage certification so she could give hospice patients the tenderness of her touch.

I sat in their kitchen one recent morning, looking out on a vista that was almost absurdly breathtaking—mist-shrouded valleys undulating like bumps in a lush green carpet, rolling to the edge of a silvery sea. Paul wandered in for breakfast. Soon, so did a pet rooster, its spurs clicking regally over the ochre tiles until, abandoning all dignity, it leaped onto his lap. “It’s spooky,” said Paul. “Even our animals are nice.” He wasn’t bragging, just

bemused. He doesn't see himself as particularly compassionate, he tells me, just lucky: lucky to have made enough money to be able to give some away; lucky to have met his wife.

"Philanthropy's not that hard," he said. "Learning how to be really kind to people—that's more elusive. Alicia's sort of a genius in that department."

I can attest to it. She makes you feel so favored—as if you'd done something extraordinary by simply existing—that you can't help but osmose a little of whatever she has and try to pass it along. Alicia, I'd always assumed, was one of those from-the-cradle love-bugs, born with some extra endowment of solar warmth.

"You've got to be kidding," she says. If anything, she insists, she was "born sad, not sweet," an anxious, self-enclosed kid. It was her mother, a "kind of saintly" woman with an eighth-grade education, who got through her shell. "She flat-out taught me compassion. She said that life's greatest joy was to 'pull the beauty out of people' because that makes your life beautiful, too. She was rock-solid in her devotion to other people. She'd be there for the superannoying person no one else wanted to be around, take care of the one who'd landed in the biggest mess." At age eighty-five, Alicia's mother still corresponds weekly with dozens of people in varying degrees of muddle and distress, people who, Alicia says, "count on her letters to help them hold on.

"I'm not at all like her," Alicia claims. "I'm much more critical of people. Mom kept saying the secret was just to take a genuine interest in others—just ask them questions, want to know how they are, really. I'd try that and it would feel good, so I'd do it some more. Step by step I got to see how wonderful that sensation is of serving others." Alicia also credits her kids, a few books, and sundry gurus. But she says it wasn't until she met Tommy that it all came together.

Tommy had AIDS. He had no money, no place to stay, and less than a year to live. “Well, it seemed so obvious,” says Alicia. “Not just to say, ‘Gee, I’m so sorry, good luck’; but, ‘*Duh!* you can stay *here.*’” Alicia and her family and a group of friends agreed to divide up the tasks. “I assigned myself to care for him physically—give him massages, that kind of thing. I found I just loved it. When you see the suffering a person’s enduring, there’s no way you *can’t* respond. It takes you beyond yourself. Suddenly, all those judgments you’d make if you just met them at a party evaporate. You’re stripped down to two people doing their best to partake of this mystery.”

Tommy had been walking with a cane when they first met him. Six months later he was a quadriplegic. “But,” says Alicia, “god, was he fun! He had this sparkly, devilish, bad-boy quality. Even when he was really sick, he’d want to go down to Baja and throw some big *soirée*, so we’d organize this whole elaborate caravan of his friends and our friends and IVs and wheelchairs and just *do* it. You think you’ve loved before, but this kind of thing opens your heart a thousand times.”

Alicia’s weekly hospice work grew out of that experience. At fifty-two she still has that lean, blond California-girl look, her shoulders tan and muscular from paddling in the surf. It’s easy to imagine her strong hands kneading the failing flesh and comforting the helpless. But aren’t there times, I press her, when she wonders why she’s putting herself through this, when she thinks of other things she could be doing—times she feels repulsed?

“I would have thought so,” she says, “but the worse it got, somehow the more I felt attracted. After all the surgeries, the bodies look like battlefields. You feel the loneliness of that person whose skin is falling off, who has tubes coming in and out of everywhere. And still, behind this war-torn shell, you feel the incredible strength of

humanity. It may sound strange or corny, but there's nothing more heavenly than connecting with that."

Alicia's no sentimental pushover. She describes one of her charges who was "frankly an asshole, and the fact that he was dying hardly softened that one bit. He ticked me off something terrible." But she's learned to do something when she feels cornered: to "clear away evaluation and just rest someplace that doesn't have all those opinionated *voices* in it. When you do that, out comes this love that melts people—not melts who they are but who they *aren't*. Finding that is just like finding yourself. It makes you feel great." She laughs. "I swear, it's a totally *selfish* thing."

While we've been talking, the phone has been ringing—and ringing. Somebody wants something. Alicia gets up to answer. "If we can't help each other, what's the point?" she says. "Everything else gets kinda old after a while."

I'm not trying to sell you on Alicia and Paul as Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi. They've had rough patches like any couple; they're spiritually unfancy folk. They enjoy their bounty with a contagious joie de vivre. You could quibble that, sure, it's easy to open your heart in the lap of luxury; but I've met insanely wealthy people who are more miserable than Midas.

Besides which, I know another family that's just like Alicia and Paul's except they're living a gritty existence barely above the poverty line. If 90 percent of life is showing up, they go the other 20. Their door is always open, even though the weathered porch is sagging. There's always a pot of chili on the stove. Their small living room feels crowded with conviviality. You can stay a few nights on the fraying couch if cat dander and dog hair don't bother you too much. They take care of jobs and kids and ailing grandparents and friends' troubles and community causes, and when I ask them how they do it, they say, "Do what?"

Folks like these have basically eliminated any option of pretending that I don't know what we can be for each other. I know I could stand to be kinder, more generous, fiercer in cleaving to the good, true, and beautiful. I've been pondering something Saint John of the Cross wrote: "Where you find no love, put love, and you will find love." It could be worth a shot.

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