

Search for Meaning
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“Justice, equality and compassion in human relations.”

Lately, I've found my well of compassion running low as I've experienced being 'nibbled to death by ducks,' in the daily ins and outs of living. It's that feeling that comes to me when life dishes up too many small, seemingly insignificant moments of being treated unkindly, with too little respect, treated as somehow less than deserving of unconditional love. It adds up over time. When applied liberally to the self and others, however, compassion soothes and heals.

Modern sources such as our own UU principles, and ancient teachings remind me to practice finding compassion for myself, so that I may have it for others.

This contemporary poem by Naomi Shihab Nye made compassion arise within me, and so I share it with you.

Gate A4

Naomi Shihab Nye

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours,
I heard the announcement:
If anyone in the vicinity of gate A4 understands any Arabic,
Please come to the gate immediately.

Well—one pauses these days. Gate A4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress,
Just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.
Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her
Problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and
she
Did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly.
Shu dow-a, shu-biduck habibti, stani stani schway, min fadlick,
Sho bit se-wee?

The minute she heard any words she knew—however poorly used—
She stopped crying.

She thought our flight had been canceled entirely.
She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the
Following day. I said no, no, we're fine, you'll get there, just late,

Who is picking you up? Let's call him and tell him.
We called her son and I spoke with him in English.
I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and
Would ride next to her—Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it.

Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic
and
Found out of course they had ten shared friends.

Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian
Poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2
hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering
Questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little
powdered
Sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag—
And was offering them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a
Sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California,
The lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same
Powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge
coolers—

Non-alcoholic—and the two little girls for our flight, one African American, one Mexican American—ran around serving us all apple juice

And lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar too.

And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—
Had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing,

With green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition.

Always

Carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought,
This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion
stopped

—has seemed apprehensive about any other person.

They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.
This can still happen anywhere.

Not everything is lost.

The ancient Pali commentaries translated from Buddhist teachings said that compassion, or karuna, is that which makes the heart of the good move at the pain of others. Compassion crushes and destroys the pain of others, sheltering and embracing the distressed. It is the desire to remove harm and suffering from others.

Recently, I worked with a kindergarten boy who carries the diagnosis of autism. ‘Joe’ had challenging behaviors, often preferring to engage in activities of his own choosing without much flexibility towards being part of the group. I watched Joe, turned away from his peers on the carpet, pulling books off of a shelf as his classmates practiced interacting with each other in pairs. I brought puppets that day but Joe had not seemed very interested. Then I had an idea. I pick out a boy puppet that looked a lot like Joe and I slipped it on my hand. I sat next to him and quietly held up the puppet for him to see. Joe looked up at the puppet and smiled. “Would you like to hold

him?" I said. Joe continued to smile, answering "Yes," as I offered him the puppet. I picked up a girl puppet for me, and Joe and I played together for several minutes, our puppets moving towards and away from each other as we spoke simple, quiet words together. At the end of the activity, I made arrangements with Joe's teacher to have this puppet be available to him for other social activities. From that day on, each time I walked into the classroom Joe looked up and gave me a long, warm, loving smile.

I remind myself:

Compassion crushes and destroys the pain of others, sheltering and embracing the distressed.

"This can still happen everywhere. Not everything is lost."