

Homily: February 21, 2010

You just never know what's going to bring on a religious experience. They can crop up in the unlikeliest places. Let me tell you about one I had last October.

Our son Isaiah studies capoeira, which is often referred to as a Brazilian martial art. Capoeira was first created by slaves in Brazil who wanted to practice combat skills, but were of course forbidden by their masters to do so, so they created this sort of dance form with kicks and turns and handsprings and cartwheels all accompanied by music, with percussion instruments, clapping and singing, so the slave owners just thought they were doing some sort of strange African dancing when what they were actually doing was training their bodies to be strong, well-tuned fighting machines.

Every year at Isaiah's capoeira school, there is an event called a "Batizado" which translated means "Baptism." Capoeira masters from all over the world come to Berkeley for this event, and almost all the students in the school participate, demonstrating the skills they've learned that year in order to win their next belt – first you get a green belt, then a yellow and green belt, then a blue belt, and so on.

So we're in this big room with mirrors all along one wall, and there are chairs and benches set up on the other three sides for the parents to watch, and, oh, maybe 30 capoeira masters, both men and women, are along the mirrored wall playing instruments and singing and clapping while the students are all sitting in a circle, called the "roda," taking turns entering the roda with one of the masters to play capoeira. It's very exciting to watch, especially when the players are skillful. You never know what's going to happen. The players make it up on the spot, and react to each other's moves. So Peter and I are sitting on a bench, watching. The teachers and kids are all dressed in white, which is traditional in capoeira. There's oh, maybe 50 kids in the circle, and probably 150 various adults around the edge, watching. So the drums are thumping, so you can feel it vibrating in your chest, and there's this sea of white clapping, and bodies in the center twirling, leaping, and kicking, and I, for some reason, suddenly shifted my focus from the two players in the middle of the roda to look at everyone in the room, and I suddenly had the thought, "We're all on the road to death. We're all gonna die." Not the "We're all gonna die!" you might be thinking as your plane is about to crash, but simply the realization that everyone in that room with me was going to face the pain of losing their loved ones along the way, that they would feel their hearts break as they lost parents, spouses, friends, children, and would all face the mystery and fear of their own deaths.

Tears suddenly sprang to my eyes, as I felt such an overwhelming compassion and tenderness towards this motley crew of folks. I felt so connected to them by this bittersweet sadness, this realization of the inevitable suffering we all were going to most assuredly endure along our separate paths. Everyone suddenly became so dear, so human, so full of fear and spunk and courage and *life!* Such pulsing *life* was here. I just quietly cried and cried, but at the same time had this feeling of, it's hard to explain, lightness, freedom, expansiveness, joy, and deep connectedness.

Then, I had to leave early because I coincidentally had a Live Oak children's RE committee meeting I had to get to, but before I left, I encountered first the father and then the mother of one of the boys in Isaiah's capoeira class who are also friends of ours. When Carl saw me he stopped, did a double take, put his hands to his face, held them out to me, and said, "Beautiful. You look so beautiful!" Well, I felt flattered, and then a couple of minutes later I went over to Elissa to tell her goodbye and she, too, exclaimed at how beautiful I looked. Well, I had to see what they were talking about, so I quick dashed into the ladies room to peek in the mirror and man! There was a radiance looking back at me that I'd never seen before. I was sorry I had to go. I would've liked to look at myself longer. But it felt like the parting gift of this whole experience, which probably lasted for no more than 15 minutes or so in actual time, but lingered with me for days.

And then I forgot about it until I started working on this service, and was reading books by Buddhist teachers like Sylvia Boorstein and Sharon Salzberg and B. Alan Wallace, and being reminded again and again that to understand that suffering is an unavoidable part of the human condition is part of the backbone of Buddhist thought. The Dalai Lama says "we can conceive of the general experience of suffering acting as a unifying force that connects us with others. Perhaps that is the ultimate meaning behind our suffering. It is our suffering that is the most basic element that we share with others, the factor that unifies us with all living creatures."

I mean, this is not a new idea, right? I'd certainly heard it before. Years ago I was even part of a Buddhist Sangha for awhile but still, I think the idea had somehow persisted in my understanding of the human condition that suffering was, I don't know, a mistake in the design concept. But working on this service has helped me see it differently. Not that I would now call suffering a privilege, mind you, but I see that it can unlock this deep well of caring in each of us when we're open to each other's suffering, and that experiencing compassion, which is that innate desire within us to alleviate other's suffering ("Are you hurt? Can I help you up?") is deeply satisfying and meaningful. Maybe the best part of life.

Certainly a part that pulls us out of our navel-gazing aloneness and connects us to others, and we're all thirsty for that juice of human connection.

On the other hand, much of our hardwiring keeps us from easily opening our hearts to each other. We're so easily hooked by that primal urge to dominate and protect our own territory. I love this passage from Field Notes on the Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness by Marc Ian Barasch:

It does often feel like we're a misconfigured product of the same Darwinian novelty company that brought us the platypus and the dodo, long overdue for a factory recall. We're not so much designed as jerry-rigged, using spare parts from earlier models. Our state-of-the-art neocortex is set atop an old mammalian limbic system brimming with volatile emotion, wrapped around a hissing, fight-or-flight, reptilian walnut-brain. Slapdashedly solder it all together and you get a species at once sublime and scurrilous, generous and genocidal, kindly and concupiscent. We want to be loving to each other, share our breadfruit, put down our big sticks, but we're just a brainpan simmering on an instinctual hotplate.

This reminds me of the time I was driving on that hazardous stretch of road by the UC Berkeley sports arena next to Strawberry Canyon. Coming towards me was a car that, to avoid another car parked on the practically non-existent shoulder of that road was, in the process, half-way into my lane and not moving back quickly into his own. Unless I swerved strongly to the right, we were destined for a head-on collision. I was cussing out that driver, probably damning him to hell (I always assume drivers who piss me off are men) until we actually passed each other (without colliding) and then I saw it was my good friend Colleen Farrell who was driving the car. "Ahhh, that was Colleen!!" My indignation vanished. All that changed was my perception of who was behind the wheel, and I went from gut-churning anger to blissful delight. Hmmmmmm.

What is the lesson here? Could I cultivate a heart that automatically sees a beloved friend instead of getting into an overwrought tizzy at the drop of a hat? Or even more challenging, could I learn to respond with compassion to the occasional driver who actually does seem intent on driving me off the road?

A woman once asked the Dalai Lama for a succinct definition of compassion. She prefaced her question by describing how heart-stricken she's felt when, earlier that day, she'd seen a man in the street beating a mangy stray dog with a stick. "Compassion," the Dalai Lama told her, "is when you feel as sorry for the man as you do for the dog."

Whoa. I've got a lot of work to do. Because the truth is, I want to have the kind of heart the Dalai Lama has. It's easy enough to feel compassion for AIDS victims and Haitian earthquake victims and friends going through painful divorces and stray dogs, but to be willing to open my heart to the victimizers, to those folks who, through their own particular form of blindness, are doing harm to others or to the planet, that takes a more advanced form of love and compassion than I've normally got on tap. But I can't think of a more valuable use of my time than to try and cultivate that sort of compassionate heart. And besides, when I'm coming from "Are you hurt? Can I help you up?" I enjoy my life so much more than when I'm in my "You idiot! Are you blind?!" frame of mind, which, truth to tell, has me in its clutches more often than I'd care to admit, and besides, I find it never improves the behavior of whoever I'm yelling at.

The Buddhist path to cultivating compassion relies on the practice of meditation. Now, I've resisted meditating for years. Dabbled in it a bit here and there, but mostly found it annoying. Well, what I've found annoying is my chattering brain. Duh. But in these past few weeks, I've been practicing a bit, not much, but enough to finally "get" it. The payoff has been showing up in my life. I'm getting hooked less, and feeling calm and loving more. Who knew? I want more.

So we'll be meditating together a little later. But first the choir will be sharing a Rumi poem that most of us are familiar with except for the second-to-the-last line, which got left out of the version in our hymnal. Too bad, because I think it's the most important line of the poem.

For all of us, I think, want to love more perfectly, to have compassion for every fellow traveler in this journey of life, and we sometimes glimpse that's all we're here to do, and then we vow to do it better. But somehow, once again, we get bumped by a blind man, and compassion goes out the window.

Though you have broken your vows a thousand times, come yet again, come.