

# **The Compassionate Listening Project for Schools**

## **May 2009**

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This school program and the procedures described were inspired by the Compassionate Listening Project and developed by Fred Whittaker, teacher at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School in Louisville, Kentucky, as an award-winning program entitled "Familiae Pacis: The Compassion Project."

The guidelines have been modified by the Compassionate Listening Project to be used in public or private schools.

**St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School • <http://www.ccsfa.org/identity.html>**  
**The Compassionate Listening Project • <http://www.compassionatelistening.org/>**

***"Virtue cannot be taught; it's something you catch from someone who has it." —Plato***

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## Introduction: The Compassionate Listening Project in Schools

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This new chapter for the Compassionate Listening Project has emerged from the work of many people who recognize the alienation experienced by our young people as they grow up with less guidance and connection to family and community and less guidance and clarity about their values. Many young people feel isolated and do not always see meaningful ways that they can enjoy life. More and more they turn to escapist activities, such as drugs and alcohol, risk-taking, gangs, sexual acting out, and bullying. It is not new for teens to experience these raw feelings and lack of direction, but we are in the second or third generation of a culture that has become meaner and increasingly more isolated. Even in caring families that promote strong values, young people may feel a larger loss of culture and sense of purpose in modern life. With the realities of global climate change, financial meltdown, and ongoing wars, many young people may feel as though they cannot escape an increasing sense of uncertainty.

Fortunately, both research and practice is showing us what is most important—connection, community, communication, and values. Often when we speak of values, it implies a set of rules. An even more important definition of “value” is who and what we find important and how this is expressed. The core of many success stories for young people includes one teacher, one friend, one stranger who was kind and helpful at a critical turning point—someone who really cared, who really spoke and acted with kindness. If we look beyond our families, how can we have community if we are too busy, or if no one is committed to the concept of community building? If we look around the world, how do we work with others unless we are committed to finding ways to cooperate and approach differences with respect?

Underlying these questions, we are asking: what are the roots of violence? For example, why is bullying so rampant?

Some answers are made clear by noticing what does not work. Some of our most disturbed children are diagnosed with attachment disorders. This may be a result of not having the opportunity to bond with family and friends, which sometimes happens with serial foster care or negative family experiences. We know that children who fail to thrive are just as much at risk from lack of attention as from lack of food.

In my experience working with art therapy violence prevention programs in elementary and middle schools, it became evident that children rarely have someone to whom they can safely talk. There are many myths about children— a prominent one being that they recover quickly from trauma, such as divorce or a death in the family. Because their own pain is so deep, often parents don’t talk about such events with each other, much less with their children. It is also evident that most of us don’t possess the skills or confidence to share feelings of minor wounds, much less traumatic loss.

Teens can be especially vulnerable, since this is the age at which they often don’t trust adults, particularly their parents. They are struggling with peer pressure, sexuality (another too-often taboo subject), and the call of individuation in preparation for adulthood. Divorce or death of a parent or other family member is especially difficult for teens. With no one to talk to, teens will often act out their feelings of rage and abandonment with oppositional or high-risk behaviors. Moving frequently and having absentee parents, who work in occupations like sales or the military, can be very hard on children. It sometimes takes extra work to stay connected.

Regarding bullying, we must first ask how people feel connected to one another? One way is to belong to a club; sometimes this club is called “everyone does it.” In this social game, one can feel superior and part of the “in” group by reaching agreement on whom they identify as “the losers.” Unfortunately, adults often do not step in and say, “This is unacceptable, and it has to stop.” In fact, this is another societal ill that carries into adulthood, where the game of winners and losers continues—ranging from strongly-differing opinions, to TV shows such as “Survivor,” to corrupt business practices fueled by the desire to succeed at any cost.

Traditional school rules maintain these disconnections. Silence is golden. There are few if any opportunities for open conversations about anything, whether it is about schoolwork or social or home problems. In general, when something goes wrong, the student is judged to be in the wrong, even though teachers can sometimes provoke problems perhaps without realizing it. Human needs and shortcomings are just as present on school grounds as anywhere else.

For children who are disconnected at home, then act out at school, and then become marginalized, it is a very painful time. Hard times in school as well as home become grist for later therapy. It has also become clear that school bullying and disconnection contribute to teen suicides.

As Daniel Goleman says, “we are wired to be social.” Busy-ness, long commutes, drug abuse, and the escalating diversions of shopping and entertainment opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century life work to unwire families.

Compassionate Listening is one way to reconnect. It is not difficult to learn, but it takes practice to develop the skill and feel safe enough to open our hearts. It is as necessary as eating—we need to be fed and therefore to feed others in terms of authentic communication and relationship in our everyday lives.

We can make a commitment to better ways of relating by learning and practicing good communication skills with families and neighbors when we are guided by compassion and cooperation rather than competition and manipulation.

Kathryn Keve, PhD  
Psychologist/Educational Consultant  
Compassionate Listening Project Board Member

## The Compassionate Listening Project

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Leah Green,  
founder/director,  
The Compassionate  
Listening Project and  
Gene Knudsen Hoffman,

Compassionate Listening was originated by Gene Knudsen Hoffman - international peacemaker, founder of the US/USSR Reconciliation program for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and student of Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. The concepts were further developed by Leah Green, Carol Hwoschinsky, and a group of dedicated individuals who are now facilitators of the work.

Gene wrote, "Some time ago I recognized that terrorists were people who had grievances, who thought their grievances would never be heard, and certainly never addressed. Later I saw that all parties to every conflict were wounded, and at the heart of every act of violence is an unhealed wound." In her role as a counselor, Gene recognized that non-judgmental listening was a great healing process in itself.

As Gene originally conceived it, Compassionate Listening requires questions that are non-adversarial and listening that is non-judgmental. Listeners seek the truth of the person questioned, seeing through "masks of hostility and fear to the sacredness of the individual." Listeners seek to humanize the "other." Listeners accept what others say as their perceptions, and validate the right to their own perceptions. Compassionate Listening can cut through barriers of defense and mistrust, enabling both those listened to and those listening to hear what they think, to change their opinions, and to make more informed decisions. Through this process, fear can be reduced, and participants will be better equipped to discern how to proceed with effective action.

The Compassionate Listening Project built upon Gene's ideas by developing a training curriculum. While holding listening as the core of our practice (and the precursor to dialogue and reconciliation), we also added "Speaking from the Heart" as a central skill in our training.

Then we must listen. We must listen and listen and listen. We must listen for the Truth in our opponent and we must acknowledge it. After we have listened long enough, openly enough, and with the desire to really hear, we may be given the opportunity to speak our truth. We may even have the opportunity to be heard.

For no one and no one side has the sole repository of Truth. But each of us has a spark of it within. Perhaps, with compassion as our guide, that spark in each of us can become a glow, and then perhaps a light, and we will watch one another in awe as we become illuminated. And then, perhaps, this spark, this glow, this light will become the enlightening energy of love that will save all of us. —Gene Knudsen Hoffman, from her essay, "Speaking Truth to Power"

*An enemy is one whose story we have not heard.*  
—Gene Knudsen Hoffman

*"Perhaps every terrible thing is in its deepest being somehow something that needs our love."*

## Listening From the Heart: From Protection to Connection

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*Listening: to attend closely for the purpose of hearing*

Many people in many walks of life, in any culture, and at any age, rarely have an opportunity to share their wonderful dreams or deepest pains, or even day-to-day worries. Relationship worries are often discussed as gossip, but rarely face-to-face. Our modern lives are busy, filled with activities and entertainment. There never seems to be enough time available for talking and listening. This is especially true in schools.

**Compassion:** A feeling of deep empathy, sympathy, or sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.

The practice of compassion is central to every faith as well as universal standards of morality. It is the seed from which the abilities to practice all other virtues are grown. Those who practice compassion are those who are also capable of bringing to life a morality that safeguards the dignity of all.

Suffering is universal. One way to step outside of our own pain is to become aware of the suffering or indignities experienced by various other groups or individuals. The Compassionate Listening School Program provides opportunities for students to learn how to become aware of suffering in the world – in community members as well as their classmates. Then, if the students choose, they may also explore how that suffering can be relieved.

**Compassionate Listening:** A process of relationship-building which has at its heart the powerful idea that we are all called upon to be peacemakers. We must begin the work of healing first by knowing how to listen with empathy, and then by knowing how to listen for the truth of another person's story. Compassionate Listening provides a safe container for sharing your concerns and emotions and to be heard. Participants will feel free to share the truths about their lives and struggles.

### Five Core Practices of Compassionate Listening

- Cultivating Compassion for ourselves and others;
- Developing the Fair Witness by remaining open in conflict situations;
- Respecting Self and Others by developing boundaries which protect yet include;
- Listening with the Heart to allow divergence and find a deeper point of connection;
- Speaking from the Heart with language that reflects a healing intention.

*It is better to be kind than to be right. —unknown*

*Love is the silent conversation between two hearts. — Paramahansa Yogananda*

*I do not want the peace which passes understanding; I want the understanding which brings peace.  
— Helen Keller*

# **The Compassion Project, St. Francis of Assisi School, Louisville, KY**

**By Fred Whittaker**

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Studies have shown that young people benefit tremendously from a relationship with a consistent, caring, non-parent adult. Studies have also demonstrated that middle school is a critical time for guiding the moral development of students and increasing their abilities to make value-based decisions. Hence, a mentoring program was developed to expose children to a caring adult staff member in a consistent, structured setting.

The severity of recent world events highlights the need to focus specific energy and effort into teaching our children to be caring and compassionate. Our school will be adopting a variety of programs to increase peace and justice awareness and experiences. In these times when bullying and alienation seem so prevalent, we hope that students will readily if not eagerly listen to messages presented by caring adults, not just their peers. The practice of compassion enables and encourages students and adults to be able to connect more easily at the deeper emotional levels required for a full personal ownership of peaceful actions based on authentic insight. The first step for any of these programs to succeed at the middle school level is learning to listen, and to spend time with people who have experiences not encountered in daily life. To learn about and understand others requires practice listening, which is an art as much as a skill.

The idea that middle school students need guidance in moral development and that success can be achieved in school using non-parent adults who consistently model value-based behavior and thinking was the impetus for the development of a peace program for grades 6, 7, and 8 called *Familiae Pacis* (which is Latin for “Peace Families”) at St. Francis of Assisi (SFA) Catholic School. This program recognizes that success in any peace education program will be heightened if the participants are aware of both when and HOW to listen.

In our initial planning stage, our evaluations of our peace initiatives revealed that while students demanded that peace, compassion, and justice be a part of their own lives, they were unable to connect to ideas of ownership. The idea that students themselves could be a potent source of justice and peacemaking seemed to be a foreign notion. Likewise, many students were wholly unconnected with the people they hoped to serve.

The development of *Familiae Pacis*: The Compassion Project has addressed these needs. It is a program that exposes middle school students first to the power of compassion and then to the power they have as individuals when they put their ideals into practice based on authentically experienced compassion. As such, the Compassion Project utilizes the skills of *Compassionate Listening™* to ensure that wisdom gleaned from personal experiences, lesson plans, or guided activities will be processed by both the mind as well as the heart.

The Project emphasizes the personal investment of students in interactions with individuals outside of their normal social experiences. We know that many students suffer in their families, or in school, from poverty, frequent moves, family illness, divorce, racial tension or disability. Recognizing the commonality of suffering and joy can lead to recognition and the development of individual strength by increasing compassion for oneself and others. Compassion empowers students to reach across social boundaries that previously supported division and disconnection.

## Program Overview

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### Summary

The Compassionate School Project is designed for junior high / middle school students. It is an experiential program that explores values and empathy. The framework allows for the gentle, but challenging, initiation of students into the awareness that they can and are called to be wonderfully powerful practitioners of compassion. It provides a bridge of learning and connection for an age group in search of themselves and their role in the world, who are often idealistic, certainly energetic, and who often lack a sense of belonging in a new school with a new educational format that provides less individual attention. It acts as an invitation to greater maturity and personal responsibility.

### Development of Compassion Awareness

Compassion is widely recognized as the core of all moral values--an ideal that seems to give life to all other values. A single act of compassion can promote a cascade of events and awakenings in students who are then more open to including other values in their daily interactions, such as justice, honesty, tolerance, and kindness. The practice of compassion is inspired by both social and religious values.

Awakening compassion also means that one must not tune out or turn away from suffering in order to awaken the ability to have a sensitive, empathic response to another's pain and the desire to do something to help.

The program begins by providing students with unique opportunities for hearing individual stories told by people in their community who have experienced significant disruption or suffering.

Students gain insight and wisdom into their understanding of compassion by listening to first-hand stories of those who have suffered or who have attempted to alleviate the suffering of others. Then they are invited to explore the emotional geography of lives that have been impacted by suffering and by acts of compassion. Through the actual experience of knowing someone who has endured great pain, there is often a beautiful diffusion of values. Students become aware that their own suffering is not unique; rather, it is something that is common to all people. More importantly, they discover that compassion is a living value. It is an awareness whose secrets must be discovered personally. We each learn compassion only by witnessing it in action and by practicing it or by receiving genuine compassion from others. As witnesses to acts of compassion and courage, students become inspired and soon understand that they can and should ACT to help end or prevent the suffering of others.

These face-to-face experiences rarely fail to become a call to action to their participants. Students are given opportunities to express and explore themselves as people of action who can develop, manage, and engage in service projects and campaigns designed to address compassion awareness and action. Students learn about the immense power of simple acts of compassion and of their responsibility and ability to be the authors of such acts. They become involved in the lives of those

who were once strangers and see the universality of human concerns, needs, and pain and the importance of being a person who must reach out to others.

They become capable of relating empathetically to any person undeterred by differences of skin color, race, or religion. Even better, they become aware of their ability and responsibility to help make painful situations better.

The 'single key' to the success of this program is direct contact with those who are vulnerable, with everyday heroes, and the modeling of Compassion by teachers, mentors, and parents.

What is the mark of success? Students become the teachers, teachers become the students, and teachers try to stay 'out of the way' of the enthusiasm and passion.

## **Compassionate Listening: An Essential Tool for the Development of Compassion Awareness**

None of this growth could occur if the students were not equipped to listen with both their minds and hearts to the stories, anecdotes, wisdom, pleas for help, and prayers which become the students' teachers. Compassionate Listening is the vital tool that brings students to this end.

With the practice of Compassionate Listening, students learn that their silence can be a gift to anyone who has a concern to share or a life story to tell.

The practice of staying silent but deeply attentive allows the listener's mind and heart to be open and be deeply affected by the pain or courage of other lives. It can be a radical change from not listening—interrupting, tuning out, or thinking about what one wants to say when the other has finished speaking.

Within the silence provided by Compassionate Listening, there is an amazing opportunity for both the teller and listener to make connection, to foster understanding and solidarity, and perhaps to initiate the healing.

## **What Does a Compassionate School Project Bring to a Classroom? – A Few Considerations**

The goal is to foster the creation of a school-wide atmosphere marked by an uncommon tolerance of differences and a dedication to the preservation of the human dignity of each person.

- Students come to an awareness that they can be potent in both the creation and alleviation of suffering.
- They learn the power of words, of listening, and to cease being indifferent to the vulnerabilities of others.
- Students come to appreciate the solidarity that they have with ALL people who are suffering. Their own suffering is no longer seen as unique. They notice and understand the pain of others.
- Students come to a new understanding of what it means to be 'cool' or to have true 'power.' A concern for the social, emotional, and physical safety of others becomes a hallmark of those who would consider themselves powerful.

## **The Compassionate School Project Provides a Specific Place and Time for:**

- Conversations with people who are intimate with suffering or with the courage and conviction required for alleviating it
- Reflection upon the direction a student's life is heading: What type of person is a student becoming? The impact that a student's life, words, and deeds has upon others.
- Activities and interactions with wise people or elders
- The development of a sense of unity or connection to all people
- The realization that isolation itself is painful
- The exploration of the meaning of other values
- Allowing students to begin to believe in the power they have as agents of change

Program leader Fred Whittaker often paraphrases Plato: "Virtue cannot be taught; it's something you catch from someone who has it." Judging from the overwhelmingly positive student and parent responses to the Familiar Paces program, compassion has become an epidemic among St. Francis of Assisi middle school students. May their contagious compassion, in turn, affect our world.

## THE GROUP FRAMEWORK

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- Groups: Students are divided into small (10-12 members) inter-grade groups and assigned an adult mentor. The mentor can be any community adult or teacher who is willing and capable of interacting with the students in a non-teacher / non-parent fashion.
- Groups meet every two weeks to process one of three modules. Groups are rotated so that each group has accomplished the activities designed at each module after six weeks. Modifications for more or less frequent meetings are entirely possible. Lessons, insights, and wisdom gleaned from bi-weekly sessions are easily transferable into the classroom for the creation of limits, rules, and expectations or for utilization as behavioral management tools.
- The three modules are: **Compassionate Listening, Service, and Mindful Inter-connections**. During these steps, students must be given the freedom to initiate activities, or to 'Take Wing.'
- **Compassionate Listening and Dialogue:** Students are first taught that very few people truly know how to listen to other people. Students learn that there is various types of listening that are used for different purposes. Compassionate Listening requires discipline and focus. Students learn HOW to listen by practicing the different types of listening with friends and mentors. Students reflect: what does listening look like, feel like, and sound like?
- **Questions:** After they learn how to listen with Compassion, they learn HOW to ask Compassionate Questions. They are REQUIRED to ask questions and to practice engaging in a Compassionate dialogue. They learn how to explore a life story for connections and meaning. Practiced students then listen to actual speakers. Students listen to a speaker who has direct experience with life's more serious challenges. They are suffering, have suffered, or have helped to alleviate suffering. Students learn what questions to ask their guest speakers; they may also learn how they have played a role in the suffering and how they can play a role in the healing. Compassionate Listening skills are also extended into the classroom as a tool for conflict avoidance and resolution.
- **Guest Speakers:** Use resources from your community! Where is the suffering? Who is suffering? Who are the heroes? Who are those who are spiritual leaders? Listen to your students! What needs do YOUR students have which they could explore?
- **Service:** Students come into direct contact with those who are vulnerable by planning and carrying out service projects, which may be an exploration with a specific focus, such as homelessness, poverty, immigration, care for the elderly etc, or not. By respectfully asking questions, students learn how **they may best be of service to the individuals they are serving**.
- **Mindful Explorations: Mindfulness is disciplined deep reflection** on the topic at hand. A wide variety of activities in this segment help students to explore and deepen their relationships with their religious beliefs, their community, their peers, their parents, and with themselves. Students practice using Compassionate Listening with themselves to develop an ability to listen to their own conscience and beliefs. Activities can be varied and include discussion and reflection, games, readings, yoga, or rock climbing. Topics explored in the past have included healthy diets, gossip, tolerance, substance abuse, and many other ideas pertinent to the social, spiritual, and emotional life of a middle school student.

- **Graduation / Epiphany Experiences:** Older students are permitted to participate in ‘really cool’ and intensive Compassion Education issues or programs, such as a Holocaust Education Program. They are encouraged to mentor and guide the younger students.
- **Mentoring:** Older students are permitted to participate in ‘really cool’ and intensive Compassion Education issues or program, such as a Holocaust Education Program. Older students are allowed to mentor and guide the younger ones.

## Suggestions for the First Meeting with Students

- In all group sessions, including when speakers visit, everyone stands or sits in a circle. Introduce yourself Welcome everyone to the group Explain that this will be the group the students will be meeting with all year.
- Introductions/ Icebreaker (Or use your own version!)
  - Have students stand in a circle (facing inward)
  - Ask them to think of a positive adjective that describes them that has the same first sound as the first letter in their first name. (Ex. Jovial Jack)
  - The facilitator begins. Use your first name. (Ex. Wonderful William)
  - The person next to you says your name and then their own. (“This is Wonderful Mr. Whittaker, and I am Jovial Jack.”)
  - This continues around the circle. Each person must start with your name and say the name of the previous person.
  - You go last to complete the circle.
- Thank the group for their participation and praise them for taking a risk.
- Talk about group rules and norms, such as the importance of confidentiality and not interrupting, a quiet sign, and the talking object.
- Introduce a few of the projects and goals planned for the year.

## Regular Group Session Format

- Meet in your regular space. The Group needs to stand or sit in a circle even with the speaker.
  - Warmly greet the group; ex. "Hello, group (use the group name)! Welcome to "Compassionate Listening."
  - The guided meditation (below) can be modified to suit your needs. A simpler version will work well--a minute or so of silence with eyes closed, instructions for relaxed breathing, focusing on your breath, or trying to empty your mind.
  - The opening and closing rituals can be designed to fit local preferences.
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- Guided meditation: Say to the group: "Everyone gather in a circle and face outward. Be seated. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath, picturing clean, fresh, healing air filling your lungs. Breathe out. As you breathe, imagine your navel going in and out. On your next inhale; your breath will go all the way to your navel. Breathe in. Keep your shoulders down and back. Breathe out. Breathe in cool, healing breath. Breathe out. Imagine green healing light coming into your feet through the ground. Breathe in [pause]. Breathe out [pause]. Keep breathing deeply in this way. The calm, green, healing light comes up your legs and into the rest of your body like water filling a bottle. Keep breathing. You feel a sensation of wellness, joy, and peace [pause]. Now the light shines out of the top of your head and connects you to the Universe. The light shines from the bottoms of your feet and connects you to the Earth. The light shines in your heart and connects you to your best self. The light shines through your hands and connects you to each other. You have a wonderful feeling of interconnection with all creation that you will take with you when you go. Breathe deeply [pause]. Slowly, when you are ready, open your eyes. Stretch. Slowly stand. Turn and face the inside of the circle."
  - Opening ritual (cue one ritual leader): Ritual leader will begin to open the circle for each person by turning to the person next to him/her and saying, "I open the circle for (name)." that person responds, "Thank you, (name)." Then that person turns to the next person and opens the circle for them. This continues the circle has been opened for everyone. Instruct the members to be seated.
  - Housekeeping – Tell the group what is planned for the day and discuss any unfinished business from the last group meeting (good news reporter).
  - Review Group Rules – Cue referee and praise coordinator.
  - Discussion / Activity – today's discussion or activity.
  - Calendar – Distribute any information and permission slips.
  - Praise time and Closing ritual (second ritual leader): Ask the group to gather in a circle facing each other. Say, "Namaste is a Hindi greeting which means, essentially, 'The God in me sees and recognizes the God in you.'" Close your eyes. Hold your hands in prayer position. Honor by bowing to your best self and say 'Namaste.'" [Ritual leader leads this by bowing and saying "Namaste."] Group follows. Say, "Open your eyes. With hands still in prayer position, look each person in the eyes. Honor each other by bowing and saying 'Namaste.'" [Here the ritual leader bows and leads the group in saying "Namaste" to each person.] "Staying in a circle, turn and face the outside. Honor the community by bowing and saying 'Namaste' [ritual leader leads this]. Now go and be peacemakers in our world."

## Student Job Titles

- Attendance keeper – At each gathering, has each member of the group sign in on a sheet and makes sure the sheet gets to the group leader.
- Historian – Writes a summary of what happened during the group. Gives to the group leader before the next group meeting.
- Praise coordinator – Vocally praises everyone they see during the group who is following rules and directions, for participation, and for demonstrating compassion.
- Referee – Officiates activities and makes sure rules are being followed.
- Ritual leader – Leads everyone during the opening and closing rituals. (You will need two ritual leaders, one of each gender, for taking turns and during absences.)
- Orderly – Cleans and straightens the space you used and makes it better than you originally found it. This goes for off-campus trips, too. (You will need two or more orderlies.)
- Good news reporter – Reports any good news during housekeeping time.
- Gratitude coordinator – Arranges Thank You notes to be signed by everyone for the Guest Speakers. Gets them to the group leader to send.

## Asking Questions and Reflective Listening

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### Compassionate Listening is a Process of LISTENING and INQUIRY

In Compassionate Listening, the process and demeanor of the inquiry can either make or break the safe container. Speakers sharing their lives are placed in a very vulnerable position. Knowing how to ask questions is vital to maintaining the trust and participation of the guest. Questions must be asked from the heart in a fashion that helps further the understanding of the group and maintains a spirit of empathy. The speaker must not ever be made to feel that they are being judged.

**Remember: We ask so that we may get to know this person better. We ask to display our love. We ask so that we may at some point help this person. We ask so that we may change the way we feel about people. We ask so that we may REMOVE our prejudice and be of help.**

### REFLECTIVE LISTENING

Reflective Listening is the restatement by an individual group member of what he/she believes he/she heard a speaker say for the purpose of clarification and encouragement. This may help to thrash out feelings that were only semi-apparent when they were first said. Reflective Listening also helps us to verify feelings or facts that have been indirectly implied by the speaker.

### Here are some guidelines for asking questions or making comments:

- ALWAYS USE A CALM VOICE
- The purpose of the questions or comments is to UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT THIS PERSON
- Display empathy and compassion for the situation or the suffering of the speaker.
- Gain more understanding about the speaker's topic or events, situation, or beliefs
- Acknowledge the feelings (anger, grief, resentment, etc), needs, and values of the speaker.
- Reflect what you have heard
- Ask how YOU can be of service to the speaker.

### We are creating a place and time where the speaker feels safe to speak and knows that you are listening.

- Questions should be exploratory.
- Offer questions which cannot easily be answered with a "yes" or a "no" and that allow for a wide range of responses.
- We are ignoring our desire to judge, disagree, or agree.
- We are listening so that we can understand our speaker's pain, suffering, and/or concerns.
- Do your best to use a calm, even voice.

- Questions are not asked to satisfy your curiosity but are to facilitate the process of coming to an understanding of this person (i.e. “What did it taste like?” is a curious question).
- Exclude questions that expose weakness, show off knowledge, or linger on an obviously painful topic.
- Even though you may hear disturbing and uncomfortable information, please be careful about showing shock or dismay in a way that would be painful to the speaker (i.e. “Oh my God!” “Holy cow!” or inappropriate body language).

When in doubt, trust your heart. Concentrate on understanding what it would be like to BE the speaker. Your questions should help you step into the speaker’s shoes, respectfully.

### **Questions NOT to ask!**

- Questions must be timely. DO NOT interrupt the flow of a story.
- Questions must NOT be challenging or for the purpose of airing opposing views.
- Questions are NOT opportunities to express opinions that challenge his/her beliefs or actions.
- Questions must NOT serve as camouflage for your opinions or for the purpose of giving advice.
- Questions must NOT be attempts to get the speaker to discuss topics that are uncomfortable to him/her.

### **Examples of Questions to Ask**

- Could you say more about...?
- What was it like for you to...?
- How do you feel about...?
- What is something you wish you could change to make things better?
- What would you like to happen next?
- How have I played a part in your suffering?
- How has my group (faith, race, church, religion, generation, age group, team) played a part in your suffering?
- What can I do to help make your situation better?
- How can I help you?
- Do other members of your group suffer in this way?
- What is the #1 thing you would like us to know about you and your life?
- What is a strength of yours that has helped you get through your life?
- Who is someone you admire and why?
- What would your life be like if things got better?

## Instructions for Guest Speakers

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(Total time with students will be one hour, the focus of which will be your 20-minute talk.)

You have been cordially invited to speak to our group of young people to help cultivate their desire for compassion and peacemaking. A word about your audience: you will be speaking to a group of about 30 middle school students around 12-14 years old and with mixed ethnicity. The setting will be in a circle of seated participants and there will be no microphone. (Think fireside chat with no fire.)

This group is part of the Compassionate School Project based on the work and writings of the Compassionate Listening Project (see [www.compassionatelistening.org/](http://www.compassionatelistening.org/) for more information).

The task of your audience is to listen to the story of someone who has experienced suffering (you), possibly at the hands of someone like them. They are challenged to put themselves in your shoes and listen actively and compassionately.

Here is an agenda of what to expect from the talk and listening session:

1. A student will meet you in the school office and escort you to the meeting place.
2. An invitation to an opening ritual. (A circle of participants “opens” the circle to all present. You will be invited to be part of this opening ritual.)
3. You will be introduced and then invited to share your story with the young people. Please be prepared to talk for about 20 minutes.
4. Please consider the following when planning your talk:
  - a. Demographics – your name, age, current school or profession, faith background, cultural background, and any other information that you are comfortable sharing.
  - b. More about you – briefly mention some of your favorite things and pet peeves. What makes you smile? Describe someone you admire. What do you do in your spare time? Humanize yourself to this young audience.
  - c. Your suffering – talk about an experience(s) you have had with hatred, injustice, or exclusion. Include your feelings and what supported you during your struggle. Include what you know of similar suffering in the world. You may want to include historical background and a timeline. Then describe as best you can your personal story of suffering in the way that you and only you could experience it. Include feelings, fears, hopes, and disappointments. The kids will be trying to understand, without having actually been there, what it are like to be you. Your story will be their best means to this goal. Speak as candidly as you are comfortable speaking.
5. Discussion – when you are finished speaking, the students will have an opportunity to ask questions. Feel free to encourage discussion and ask them some questions of your own.
6. An invitation to the closing ritual. (This is similar to the opening ritual; only the participants honor each other by bowing and saying “**Namaste**” [see below]. You may select your own closing ritual and words.)
7. A student will then escort you back to the office where you are free to leave.

Thank you for your time and for your willingness to spread peace through education. Most importantly, thank you for being you and for sharing your unique story with us. May your words be a bridge to peace and compassion to all the hearts they reach. And may there be many hearts.

**Namaste** – A Hindi greeting which means, loosely translated: “the God-ness in me sees and recognizes the God-ness in you, and we are together in this God-ness.”

## The Practice of Service: Visiting the Elderly at a Nursing Home

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Students will exercise and explore their sense of compassion as they visit the elderly at a nursing home. A compassionate community should value and maintain connections with everyone of every age. Unfortunately in the United States of America, the elderly are often left with a deep sense of isolation and exclusion when they are forced to live insulated lives in nursing or assisted living homes. Enabling and even encouraging students to reconnect with members of our community who may feel forgotten or invisible is a powerful experience for both the elderly and the children. Students are given an opportunity to put into action the values of compassion, caring, and love as they explore what it truly means to give from the spirit without expecting a reward in return.

Meeting the needs of the lonely can be as easy as simply showing up in their rooms with a cheerful smile. It may, however, be more difficult, providing students with an opportunity to be guided by mentors as they attempt to learn how to practice the healing power of compassionate, charitable giving. Of tremendous value also is the opportunity students have to establish a relationship with an individual who can show that a long life often becomes filled with wisdom. The passing down of life lessons and keen insights from the older generation to the next was once an integral part of growing up. The elderly are still valued in many countries as an invaluable source of wisdom. Their life experiences become immediate sources of learning to those who would have the patience to listen. Students who are able to connect with the elderly will, in most cases, become immediately aware of the gifts which the elderly have in understanding life from a perspective of having lived a lot of it. Their insights truly are forgotten treasures!

As adult mentors, it is one of our responsibilities to provide opportunities for students to become part of a community of “doers” and “givers.” Many of us belong to a faith community that asks us to be in action or service at all times. We understand that in loving, caring, volunteering, and in doing for those who cannot do for themselves, we are answering a call to touch the hearts of all people. Students learn that despite being hidden behind doors of out of the way buildings, our elderly are vital, loving members of the human community who have much to give and who deserve to be treated with the utmost of dignity and compassion. Students grow to understand that giving from the heart is an action that is blind to the specifics of a life. Regardless of age, race, or religion, our humanity calls upon us to be ready and available as resources for hope and healing for all.

### Tips for Visiting

Before visiting the nursing home, it is vital that mentoring adults discuss both the purpose behind our visit and the physical realities of what the children may encounter. *Remind the students that we are on a mission of giving. We are, in essence, members of ministry which will try to bring a moment of joy to the residents we encounter. We are to give from our hearts and attempt to love the residents unconditionally.* In doing so, we may alleviate, if only for a moment, the burden of loneliness and isolation that many of the residents feel daily. As we give unconditionally, we are not to expect anything back and that “*it is in giving that we receive.*”

- Forewarn the students that there may be sights, sounds, and smells to which they may not be accustomed. Some residents may not be responsive or may be in mental states that the children have not witnessed before. Residents may be in wheelchairs or attached to medical

devises with which the children are less familiar. Residents may have changes of mood that are difficult to understand. Encourage the students not to be afraid, assuring them of their safety. Students should also be encouraged to discuss any feelings of being uncomfortable afterwards in an open, honest, and gentle fashion.

- The main job of the students is to be good LISTENERS! Students will not be able to solve the personal problems of the residents, but they can provide the gift of listening which may, at first, seem small but is truly a treasure to someone who feels alone.
- Never appear to be in a hurry, impatient, bored, or uninterested. Elderly residents are especially aware of body language and “Active Listeners” who pay full attention to the residents make the best guests. Residents can easily pick up on body language which indicates unease, shyness, or a lack of interest. Encourage students to appear relaxed, interested, and attentive.
- Remind the students the facility is a HOME for many elderly people. Students should be encouraged to behave in a fashion respectful of their awareness that they are visiting people in their home. There should be NO loud noises or running, etc. Respect the privacy of each resident in their home. KNOCK on doors and ask permission before entering a room. Thank the residents after the visit for allowing the students to visit.
- Begin a conversation with orienting information. Identify yourself and the school you are from and call the resident by their last name. Tell the resident why you are here. You may say, “Mrs. Smith, I’m Stan from St. Francis, and I am here to visit with you.” Use a soothing but enthusiastic voice.
- Do not overload the resident with too many visitors. A visit can become less than comfortable if too many students attempt to visit a resident at the same time.
- Remember to look the resident in the eye and be as personal as is comfortable for both visitor and resident. Gently touching or holding a hand at appropriate times can be emotionally comforting for some residents. Other residents may value a hug. Some residents will not wish to be touched at all. If a visitor is in doubt as to whether or not to do these things, he/she may ask the resident, their mentor, or a nurse.
- The hearing of many residents will be impaired, and it may become necessary to adjust the volume of your voice. Do so in an appropriate manner. Never scream loudly or forget that a louder voice must still sound gentle and compassionate. Speak slowly and enunciate each word carefully. It may be necessary to repeat yourself; do so with patience. Be clear in your pronunciation and do NOT treat residents as if they were tiny children. Use sentence structure and vocabulary appropriate for an adult. An inability to hear does not mean that the resident necessarily has diminished mental capacities. Be patient with those residents who may require extra time to understand what you are saying.
- Often the elderly are better able to understand you than they are able to communicate or express themselves. As such, do not always expect a response to your questions. Successful conversations may be more like monologues with opportunities for the resident to participate when they wish. Conversations based solely upon asking the resident questions and waiting for answers may provide opportunities only for silences. Avoid silences yet allow the resident time to search their memories or silently reflect when they are responding. Tell the resident about your day, life, the weather, sports, current events, your family, etc. Narrate a story or a funny incident that happened to you. Tell them about a hobby. If they wish to participate in the conversation, they will let you know. BUT be

prepared to be the sole source of verbal communication! Even if they are not participating, being with someone who is speaking to you about anything is a powerful way to break loneliness. It may be enough just to have someone in the room who cares!

- If you do ask questions, start with simple ones that may require only a “yes” or “no” answer. A visitor may gauge how responsive a person is and how capable they are of participating in a more traditional conversation.
- If you are “stuck” for conversation, make comments on things in the resident’s room, such as their clothes or pictures: “I love your pictures!” “Your shirt is my favorite color.” “Tell me about these pictures.” The weather is always a good place to start a conversation.
- Residents may participate in conversation in an enthusiastic but less than coherent fashion. You may not exactly be sure what they are saying. In these cases, listen actively with enthusiasm, anyway. Attempt to make comments that seem to go along with what they are attempting to say. Perhaps a question or two will clear things up, but if it does not, at least be a good listener. It is powerful to be listened to, and while you may not understand the words or the story of the resident, you must understand the need that the residents have to be heard. Be a respectful listener and treat all residents with dignity, even if they seem incoherent. NEVER laugh at a resident because they seem “out of it.”
- If you do not understand a resident and sense that you could if they would repeat a word or sentence, don’t hesitate to ask. Apologize first when you state, “I’m sorry, but could you repeat that sentence?” Do not be shy BUT always be gentle. You are in charge of the conversation.
- Don’t forget that the residents LOVE to laugh, sing, and tell jokes. Some will LOVE to talk about what life was like when they were young.
- If you are helping a resident with a craft or task, allow them the dignity of attempting to do as much of the task as they can on their own. Help them when needed but encourage them to try new skills or tasks. Be very gentle and patient. It is frustrating to the residents to be unable to control their bodies, hands, or fingers as they once could. Supply guidance and directions in a respectful, gentle fashion and never treat the residents as if they were children.
- Some residents may suffer from abrupt changes in mood or behavior. They may become agitated or irritated by the presence of visitors. The behavior of some residents may become inappropriate. If this occurs, politely and immediately excuse yourself and get an adult leader. If you sense a mood change occurring or feel uncomfortable with your visit for ANY reason, always politely leave the resident and get an adult.
- Some residents will not want to be visited in any fashion and may rebuff a visitor’s attempts at goodwill in an unkind fashion. Do not take this personally. Honor their request and keep them in your prayers as much as you would keep the residents whom you find friendly.
- NEVER make comments expressing disgust, dismay, or repulsion while you are in the home of the residents. There will be sounds, smells, and sights that may be difficult to handle, but these are a part of the landscape of the residents’ everyday lives. Negative verbal or non-verbal comments (such as facial expressions) can be horrendously painful and embarrassing to the residents or working staff. Honor the dignity and integrity of the residents and working staff by keeping ALL negative comments to you.

- Always remember to honor the human dignity that is in all of the residents. We can touch lives in ways that may seem small to us, but big to the people whom we are visiting. Learn to have a heart that fills your life with compassion for all.

## Practice Vignettes

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I am 12 years old. I live in Darfur, Sudan. I am the only person left in my family. One night last week, men from the Janjaweed, a group supported by our government, came in the night to my village and killed my father. Then they did terrible things to my mother and sister and killed them, too. I was hiding so they did not kill me, but I heard the screams of my family and could not help them. Now I am alone and do not know where to go. There is nobody in my village; the houses are all empty or burned. I am hungry and scared and so sad. I cannot ask the police for help because my skin is black, and they will not help me. How long will it be before someone does help?

\* \* \* \* \*

I am 10 years old. I live in Jerusalem. Today I made a new friend. We played together all day. My new friend is funny and kind and we laughed a lot. When I went home last night, my brother yelled at me and said I was bad for playing with my new friend. He said my friend was Israeli and not Palestinian like us. When he told my parents, they looked afraid and said I could not play with my new friend anymore. I feel sad and confused. I don't want to hate my new friend. How long before I can love anyone I want to love?

\* \* \* \* \*

I am 9 years old. I am a girl. I live in Afghanistan. I am going to school for the first time this week. I have never been to school because when the Taliban were in power, girls could not go to school. They could not even go out of the house without being with an older male and being covered from head to toe. Even our faces were hidden. Now I can go to school, but I am afraid. Last week, a girl in my town died from being poisoned because some people still believe girls should not go to school. The police did not do anything about this. Last month, a bomb blew up a bus that was filled with women who were on their way to register to vote. The police did not do anything about this either. Someday I would like to vote. Will I live that long? Will things ever be different? How long will I have to be afraid?

\* \* \* \* \*

I am 35 years old and I live under a bridge on I-65. At least that's where I slept last night. I woke up five times. The first time I was kicked in the side by somebody who wanted my spot. So I moved. The second time I was kicked in the leg by somebody who wanted my shoes. He was bigger and stronger so he got what he wanted. The third time was when the police came and I ran and hid until they were gone. The fourth time was when my stomach growled because it hasn't had food in two days. The fifth time I gave up trying to sleep and went walking. I did not imagine this life for myself. When I was in middle school, I wanted to be a doctor and help people. But some unlucky things happened and now I'm homeless, jobless, sick, and hungry. I'm tired of being hungry. Really, I'm just tired. How long will I be invisible to people who walk by me? How long before somebody helps me? How long before they just say "hello?"

\* \* \* \* \*

I am 16 years old, and I walk with the help of crutches. My classmates are learning to drive this year, but my doctor tells me I may never drive a car. I was born with spinal bifida, which means my spine did not form right and I will always walk differently than other people. Here are some of the things I like: I like ice cream and rain and a good movie. Here is what I hate: people staring -

grownups, people on the street, kids at school. Sometimes they laugh, too, and try to pretend they are walking like I walk. But it's the staring I hate. I want to tell them, "Just say hello." Or even better, how about trying to be my friend? How long will the way I look keep people from being my friend?

\* \* \* \* \*

I am in middle school here in Louisville, and I have a question. What does "cool" really mean? My mom tells me "cool" means being myself. But while I was busy being myself, my best friend told her other friends that I was not cool because I did not dress the way she did. Now I have no friends and all I was doing was being myself. So maybe I'll be somebody I'm not and dress in clothes I would not pick because I think nobody likes me when I'm ME. Why do friends say bad things about each other? Why is "cool" so important? How long will it be before I'm glad to be myself? When will "cool" mean being kind to each other?

### **Simply singing my own song**

I have nothing to say to you,  
But I have much  
To share with you.  
Speaking to you  
Is just an arbitrary method  
To be with you  
And to allow my heart  
And your hearts  
To dance in the same rhythm.

—The Sound of Silence: The Diamond in the Lotus,  
Osho Rajneesh, p. 205