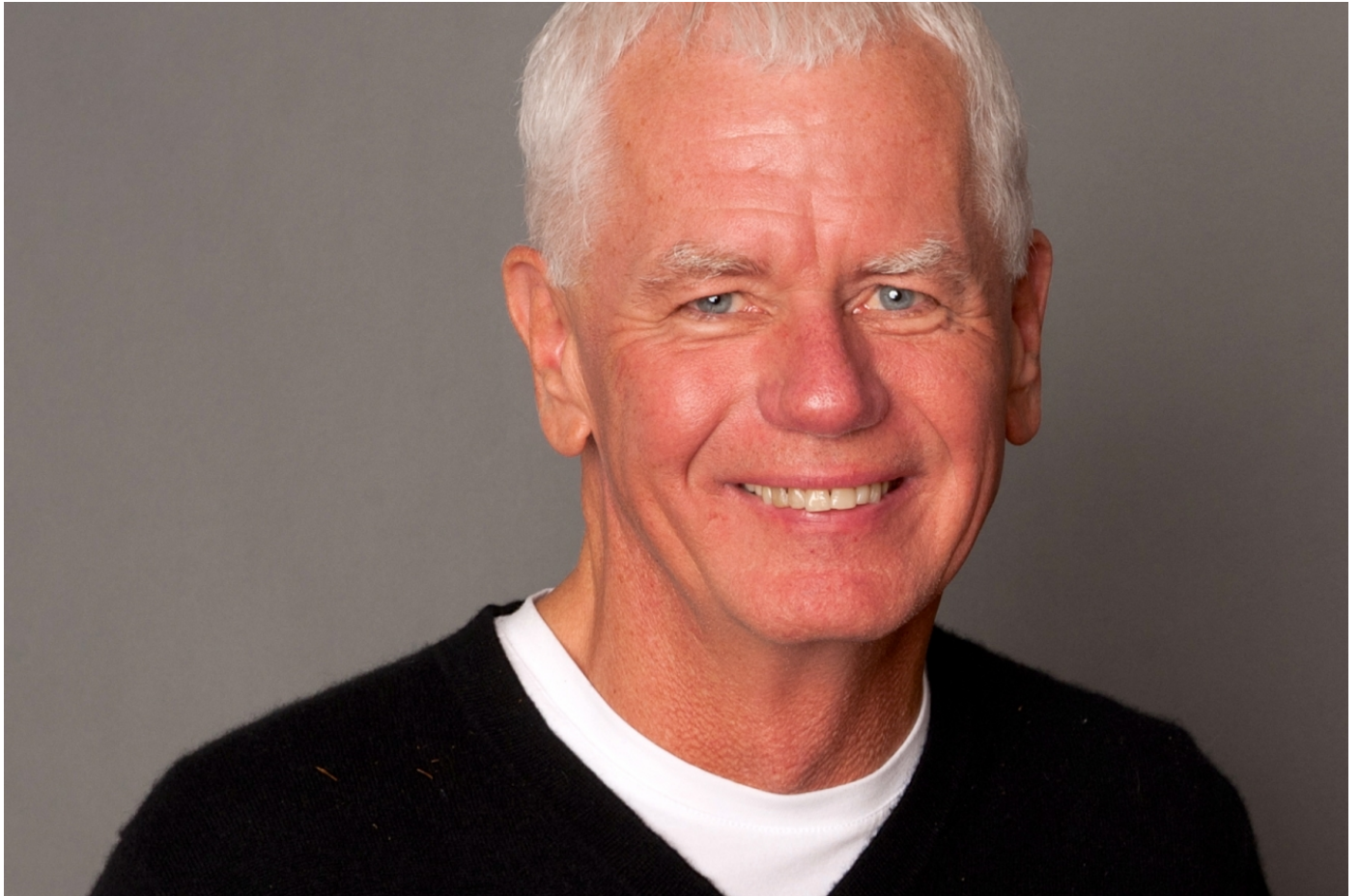


Compassion: Frank Ostaseski



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By:

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*In our spiritual luminary series, we feature someone who personifies a key spiritual value. Frank Ostaseski is a pioneer in contemplative end of life care and author of soon-to-be published book *Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*. This week, he will be a speaker at the [Buddhist Contemplate Care Symposium](#) (Nov 3-6, 2016).*

Was there an experience early in life that led you to the work you

do now with end of life care?

There is a beautiful short story by the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore who describes the meandering paths between villages in India. Skipping along, guided by their imaginations or a winding stream, a detour to a beautiful overlook, or stepping around a sharp rock, barefoot children wove zigzag trails through the countryside. When they grew older, got sandals, and began carrying heavy loads, the routes became narrow, straight, and purposeful.

I walked barefoot for years. I didn't follow a linear path to this work; I meandered. It was a journey of continuous discovery. I had little training and no degrees save a Red Cross lifesaving certificate that is surely now expired. I followed the Braille method, feeling my way along. Staying close to my intuition, trusting that listening is the most powerful way to connect, bringing forward the refuge of silence, and letting my heart be broken open. These are the ways I discovered what really helps.

Death and I have been longtime companions. My mother died when I was a teenager and my father just a few years later. Buddhist practice, with its emphasis on impermanence, the moment-to-moment arising and passing of every conceivable experience, was an early and important influence for me.

How do we come to be where we find ourselves? Life accumulates, exposes us to opportunities for learning, and if we are lucky, we pay attention.

I was the cofounder of the Zen Hospice Project, the first Buddhist hospice in America, a fusion of spiritual insight and practical social action. We believed there was a natural match between the Zen practitioners who were cultivating a "listening heart" through meditation practice, and those who needed to be heard—people who were dying.

What helps you be present when you are sitting with someone who is passing?

When I am sitting with dying patients I am in contact with my own grief, my only fear. It is the exploration of our own suffering that allows us to make an empathetic bridge the suffering of others. That means to bring our strength and vulnerability to the bedside. And to recognize that people who are dying continue to need very intimate and natural and honest relationships. We can't serve from a distance, this is intimate work and we have to be part of the equation.

Even when we've devoted our life to compassion action, we will at times become overwhelmed by suffering. In such moments we need to temporarily pull back and engage the resources that are needed to meet the situation in front of us. I might need to recall experiences of compassion offered to me or from me. I might need to stabilize my attention so that I have the capacity to meet the emotional overwhelm. I might need to immerse myself in a life-affirming activity.

At the height of my hospice work many people died in the course of the week. At times the grief was overwhelming. I did three things. I made a point of getting regular bodywork. Often spending the better part of a session crying on the massage table. I regularly returned to my meditation cushion and the practices that stabilized my attention, regulated my emotional states and cultivated pro-social qualities like loving-kindness. And, I would visit my nurse friends who worked on the unit at the General Hospital caring for babies who have been born to addicted mothers. I'd sit in a rocking chair, hold these babies and rock them to sleep. There was something about the innocence of the babies and the satisfaction of being able to soothe them that enabled me to reconnect with my compassion and meet the daily suffering that was part of my hospice experience.

You talk about listening as a deeply healing practice, can you share an experience of that?

Listening without judgment is probably the simplest, most profound way to connect. It is an act of love. Listening can be so devout and generous that it can help draw out the truth from the speaker. In this way listening is like a healing salve. I strive to meet people with acceptance, listening from the heart, withholding any judgments about their mannerisms or confusion. I cultivate don't know mind. Most healthcare professionals are taught about the importance of good listening and attention. However they are rarely taught how to pay attention. Our mindful attention and compassion are the most available, least expensive, and most effective tools that we can utilize literally in every aspect of our work...yet they are often undervalued, sadly sometimes even viewed as inappropriate and so... frequently shelved for another time.

Once I was sitting with the brother of one of our hospice patients. He was a rough tough cowboy who rode the rodeo circuit. His sister was days from death. I said, "You know, Travis, if there's anything you need to tell her, you should do it soon. Blaze hasn't got much more time."

"Not good with words," he replied.

I said, "If you can't tell her, why don't you tell me?"

A long story poured out of Travis. He told me about how he and Blaze were abandoned as kids. They had grown up in orphanages and foster homes all over the West, sometimes together and sometimes apart. It had been pretty miserable. Travis, who was a year older than Blaze, had hurt his sister badly a few times. He had done some really awful things to her, he said. He had been abusive to her in many ways. That was why they hadn't seen each other in so many years.

My initial reaction was, *Who am I to hear this confessional? I'm not a priest. I'm not a therapist. I don't have a psychology degree.*

But I remembered once meeting the great humanistic psychotherapist Carl Rogers, who was the grandfather of a good friend. Later, I studied films of him working with patients. I noticed that he rarely spoke, but that his listening was so devout it drew out the truth from his clients like a healing salve. Something he had written had always stayed with me:

“Before every session, I take a moment to remember my humanity. There is no experience that this man has that I cannot share with him, no fear that I cannot understand, no suffering that I cannot care about, because I too am human. No matter how deep his wound, he does not need to be ashamed in front of me. I too am vulnerable. And because of this, I am enough. Whatever his story, he no longer needs to be alone with it. This is what will allow his healing to begin.”

You speak of the Wounded Healer archetype. How does compassion come into play when working with this idea?

The wounded healer is an archetype of human experience that Carl Jung talked about. The basis of the archetype, and the way people come to an interest in healing, is through their own wounds. When we get sick and when we experience some deep loss in our lives, we can get stuck in depression and grief forever. But there is another way. Our wound opens us, essentially, to a greater awareness of our souls, and of a greater reality behind the everyday reality. When someone we love dies, when we develop an illness, when we have a great loss, the shock of that loss opens us to a higher reality-or it can.

A teacher of mine once said, “You will help people most who are going through things you’ve gone through yourself.”

The most exquisite caregivers are the ones who use their own woundedness as tuning forks; in other words you feel it in your body that something is going on in the room, in the conversation with that person you're serving.

I am endlessly inspired by the capacity of human beings to heal and to be of unbelievable service in this suffering world. Unfortunately, some try avoid suffering or hold back from this discovery and as a result may unconsciously harm others in an attempt to cure and heal. These are "wounding healers".

Transformative is a word that comes up a lot in your teachings. How do you see death as transformative, other than the obvious transformation of our body?

In grief, for example, we access parts of ourselves that were somehow unavailable to us in the past. With awareness, the journey through grief becomes a path to wholeness. Grief can lead us to a profound understanding that reaches beyond our individual losses. Every time we experience a loss, we have another chance to experience life at a greater depth. It opens us to the most essential truths of our lives: the inevitability of impermanence, the causes of suffering, and the illusion of separateness. We begin to appreciate that we are more than the grief. We are what the grief is moving through

In the end, we may still fear death, but we don't fear living nearly as much. In surrendering to our grief, we have learned to give ourselves to life. Grief is a transformative process.

Normally, in our everyday world we only see the suffering of impermanence, the coming and going of constant change, the coming together and falling apart, without realizing that all this appears and disappears on the background of perfect harmony. When we take what in Zen is called the "backward step," we can look from the vantage point of open awareness, we know ourselves to be this background, this pure, bare awareness, against

which all personal and universal change occurs. This is what we surrender to.

I have witnessed an increasing radiance as ordinary people with no spiritual practice become transparent to their essential nature. It is similar to the process of transformation that occurs for meditation practitioners after decades of contemplative practice.

The potential of these experiences has shown me is undeniable. Without a doubt, dying holds an unmatched possibility for transformation. It can be inspiring and awesomely beautiful.

What are your personal practices that allow you to continue your work in end-of-life care?

I would have to say the cultivation of what we call “Don’t Know Mind”. Don’t know mind is beyond knowing and not knowing. It is off the charts of our conventional ideas about knowledge and ignorance. It is the “beginner’s mind” Zen master Suzuki Roshi spoke of when he famously said, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.”

Don’t know mind is not limited by agendas, roles, and expectations. It is free to discover. When we are filled with knowing, when our minds are made up, it narrows our vision, obscures our ability to see the whole picture, and limits our capacity to act. We only see what our knowing allows us to see. The wise person is both compassionate and humble and knows that she does not know.

This moment right here before us, this problem we are tackling, this person who is dying, this task we are completing, this relationship we are building, this pain and beauty we are facing—we have never experienced it before. When we enter a situation with don’t know mind, we have a pure willingness to do so, without attachment to a particular view or outcome. We don’t throw

our knowledge away—it is always there in the background, ready to come to our aid should we need it—but we let go of fixed ideas. We let go of control.

Don't know mind is an invitation to enter life with fresh eyes, to empty our minds and open our hearts.

After sitting with over 1,000 dying people, is there an overarching lesson that you have learned?

Over the past thirty years, I have sat on the precipice of death with a few thousand people. Some came to their deaths full of disappointment. Others blossomed and stepped through that door full of wonder. What made the difference was the willingness to gradually live into the deeper dimensions of what it means to be human.

To imagine that at the time of our dying we will have the physical strength, emotional stability, and mental clarity to do the work of a lifetime is a ridiculous gamble. I have a book coming out, *Five Invitations* that is an invitation to sit down with death, to have a cup of tea with her, to let her guide you toward living a more meaningful and loving life.

Reflecting on death can have a profound and positive impact not just on how we die, but how we live. In the light of dying, it's easy to distinguish between the tendencies that lead us toward wholeness, and those that incline us toward separation and suffering.

With the current political and global climate of fear and anger, how can each of us practice compassion on a daily basis?

There is endless suffering in this world. And, there is endless compassion to meet it.

When compassion is present, our defensiveness can relax. When our defenses

are down, we can look objectively at our situations and see the true origins of our suffering. Then we can intervene skillfully to address the real causes and not just the symptoms. So another aspect of compassion is the capacity to be with suffering as a means of coming to, and experiencing, more truth and greater freedom. When we look at reality from the vantage point of the separate self, we're constantly searching for what distinguishes us from others. All we see are things falling part. All we see is suffering. But if we shift to the vantage point of connectedness, we can feel the harmony. We don't completely abandon our personalities, but we adopt more inclusive points of view.

Compassion is what enables us to come close to suffering, to know through intimacy. When we get that close, the illusion of "I and other" falls away. We know ourselves to be part of this web of mutuality. Wisdom shows us that the small, bounded sense of separate self we have taken ourselves to be is no more than a limiting story. When separation falls away, we recognize that we are everything. Being everything, compassion is simply an appropriate response, the natural way to serve and love what are really our whole selves, and to express its freedom.

For more information please visit: www.mettainstitute.org.



Kalia Kelmenson founded Maui Mind and Body to support women's health. She is the creator of Core Strength Balance and Mind Body Booty Camp and enjoys moonlighting as the reviews editor at Spirituality & Health. Kalia explores the fascinating intersection of fitness and mind-body health. Find inspiration for your movement practice from research and stories that are emerging from this intriguing field.