

Joy and Compassion

In this teaching from the Joy series, we look at how compassion plays a role in cultivating more joy in our lives. We will learn a bit from spiritual giants about what they thought, taught, and modeled to assure us that they believed compassion holds a key to joy. Yet we cannot leave it to our intellect alone. Compassion requires empathy, so we will spend some time considering ways to foster a different perspective regarding those we share the planet with. Also, at least in my experience, sometimes our internal struggle impede our ability to live with greater compassion, so we will address that, too.

The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu extol the role of compassion as a pillar of experiencing and cultivating joy. [*The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*](#), recounts their weeklong dialogue between the two long-term friends who, despite facing enormous obstacles, crises, and challenges on a personal and global scale, live with joy. They identified the seventh of eight pillars of joy as compassion born from empathy resulting in the service of others.

These two spiritual giants have, of course, devoted the bulk of their lives to serving others in their respective capacities, and speak from experience. Throughout the book, the Dalai Lama referred to his identification with his audience as equal human beings. Understanding that he is no different than anyone else fostered deep empathy with all people, which then compelled him to act with compassion to do what he could to alleviate suffering.

Research indicates that compassion is hardwired into sentient beings, in part, because it has contributed to the survival of one's species. Studies of mice have shown that when one mouse is injured, another will come and lick it, improving the healing time (246). Insights from evolutionary science note "reciprocal altruism" has allowed for creatures to work together to thrive. Very early in human development, children prefer toys that will help others over hindering them. In addition to mere survival, those who show compassion toward others are rewarded with a "helper's high" with the release of endorphins. It feels good to do good. The release of oxytocin when we engage in altruism not only warms our hearts but serves to enhance our health with anti-inflammatory benefits. "Compassion literally makes our hearts healthy and happy." In addition, compassion is contagious, influencing people with 2-3 degrees of separation (258).

Jesus was all about compassion. Those familiar with the life and teaching of Jesus know that compassion was central to his understanding of what it means to be aligned with God as people of faith. His two most famous parables – [*The Good Samaritan*](#) and [*The Prodigal Son*](#) – are shocking because of the prodigious compassion that was displayed on the part of surprising heroes. A Samaritan would have been thought incapable of being good by Jesus' contemporaries who hated the entire people group, and the deeply offended father would never have been expected to do anything but reject his worthless son. Toward the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus used a parable to clearly articulate how people's lives would be assessed by God ([*Matthew 25:31-46*](#)). Those who showed compassion were rewarded with the presence of God. Those who did not, were not. The recipients of compassion were "the least of these" that Jesus identified with – to serve (or neglect) the people in need was to effectively do it to Jesus. He clearly understood that humanity is one, which is why Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed that injustice for one is injustice for all.

Throughout his teaching and ministry, Jesus modeled compassion born from empathy – seeing beyond the labels, recognizing everyone as equal humans being despite what religion and culture were saying to the contrary. To choose not to live and breathe with compassion is to choose not to follow Jesus, to not be faithful. Faithfulness is ultimately not about belief statements, number of prayers prayed, number of songs sung, number of bible verses memorized, church membership or worship services attended. Being faithful comes down to how we live our lives. Being faithful to Jesus means living like Jesus.

Jesus' closest followers got the message. Not long after Jesus' death, one of his followers, Phillip, sensed the nudge of God and found himself in earshot of a high-ranking official from Ethiopia who had just visited Jerusalem and was returning to his home country. He was reading a passage from a scroll he bought at the Temple Gift Shop (maybe – the Greek is unclear – smile). Phillip boldly offered to help make sense of the passage through the lens of Jesus. The Ethiopian was overcome by the explanation and asked if he, too, could become an official follower of Jesus, marked by baptism. Phillip agreed and baptized him on the spot. Why is this an act of compassion? First, the new convert was not Jewish – he was from Ethiopia! The table of Christianity was big enough to welcome non-Jewish people right from the start. Also, most passage headings in English bibles offer an additional piece of information: this particular Ethiopian was a eunuch. We can assume the genitalia-altering surgery was done so that he could be trusted to serve Ethiopia's Queen without concern for sexual impropriety. Millennia before its time, the community of believers fully welcomed a person who had surgery which greatly affected his sexuality. Why was Phillip able to do this? His eyes were shaped by empathy, which led him to act with compassion.

The Apostle Paul got the message, too. To a region of churches called Galatia, which was struggling to be gracious and egalitarian due to conservative, rigid Jewish voices demanding otherwise, Paul famously declared: **There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus** (Galatians 3:28 CEB). What does it mean to be “in Christ Jesus”? It is not about signing off on a belief statement. It is embracing the Spirit that anointed Jesus. Again, to embrace Jesus is to embrace all human beings as equally loved and equally divine, because that’s what the Spirit of God does all the time.

What I’ve shared is just a primer. There is so much more that could be written. Yet I wonder if a clear, logical understanding of the need for compassion is the primary speed bump or roadblock keeping us from practicing it. Perhaps the central issue – which the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu emphasized throughout their time together – is our capacity to see others as equals, with empathy.

Plato once advised, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” In 1948, **Andrew Wyeth** painted the famous work, [Christina’s World](#), based on his young neighbor who lost the use of her legs. She refused to use a wheelchair and instead drug herself around the farm where she lived. The painting has moved millions who have viewed it to not only feel Christina’s struggle, but to recognize their own. [Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem, Kindness](#), suggests that empathizing with others is the key ingredient that allows compassion to grow – we recognize that all people everywhere struggle and carry sorrow. When we see others with such eyes, we are much more inclined to act compassionately:

*Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.*

*Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone*

*who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.*

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.*

In our binary, everything-is-either-right-or-wrong-world, we need remember the wisdom of **Jalal al-Din Rumi**: “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.” When we block out the noise of the world around us and see that we are all the same, all sharing the same human experience with all of its struggles and complexities, we are afforded a new heart – our divine heart, perhaps – which becomes the source for compassion, leading to a deep joy that cannot be explained.

Exercise: Have You Ever? Make some space and time to answer the following questions.

1. Have you ever been lonely?
2. Have you ever been lied to ?
3. Have you ever been in a challenging relationship?
4. Have you ever worried about having enough money?
5. Have you struggled with some form of self-esteem, wondering if you were ever good enough, smart enough, good-looking enough, young enough, old enough, wise enough, funny enough, perfect enough, religious enough, etc.?
6. Have you ever lived in a season of great stress?
7. Have you ever suffered loss and had to deal with the grief it brings?
8. Have you ever been afraid?

9. Have any of the above impacted you from time to time, affecting your decision-making process, the way you enter the world, your resilience, your attitude?
10. Did you find yourself saying yes to some of the above?
11. Do you realize that every other human being on the planet, including the ones that annoy you, says yes to the above as well?
12. How does realizing your shared humanity change your view of the people around you?

Self-Compassion. Sometimes we face an unexpected speed bump or roadblock that keeps us from loving others more fully. Sometimes we do not practice empathy or compassion toward ourselves. Sometimes we deride ourselves for not being enough, for not doing more, which robs us of joy. When we are in such a place, empathy becomes more difficult and compassion feels more like a loathed chore than a wonderful privilege. I've struggled with this in my life. When I first heard the phrase, "You are enough," I honestly didn't have any idea what it meant. I couldn't fathom it. It didn't make sense because most of my life I have assessed my worth based on my performance. If my performance did not meet or exceed my goals, it meant I was never enough. Unfortunately for me, I also tend to add to my goals questions about how *it could have been so much better if...*, which made it hard to celebrate even the victories.

Chore or Privilege? Roger Ebert, film critic and author who suffered the debilitating effects of thyroid cancer treatment, wrote: "I believe that if, at the end of it all, according to our abilities, we have done something to make others a little happier, and something to make ourselves a little happier, that is about the best we can do... We must try to contribute joy to the world. That is true no matter what our problems, our health, our circumstances. We must try. I didn't always know this and am happy I lived long enough to find it out" (*Go Gentle Into That Good Night*, 2009). **Sister Teresa of Calcutta** famously said, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." **Anthony Ray Hinton**, who was wrongfully accused for a crime he did not commit and served 30 years before his conviction was overturned, noted that for the first four years he was filled with rage. He closed in. He didn't speak to anyone. *For four years!* Things changed when he heard weeping from the cell next to him. His prison neighbor had just learned that his mother had died. He was inconsolable. Hinton's heart softened. He offered words of comfort, and even made a joke to lift the spirits of the mourning inmate. The next day, Hinton's approach to life and his countenance radically changed. He stopped focusing on his own pain after he realized everyone has pain, everyone has sorrow. Instead, he decided to bring love and compassion into every interaction and relationship. It changed his life. After finally being released, 26 years of practice allowed him to focus on the joy of being free rather than the bitterness of life and time lost.

Whatever your experience, may you feel seen, loved, and encouraged to be who you fully are in a world that needs your story, your experience, and your love, May you find growing joy even when it doesn't or shouldn't make sense. May **Mary Oliver's poem, [Wild Geese](#)**, serve as Joy's calling:

You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
 are moving across the landscapes,

over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the book, [The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World](#), Kindle Edition.

Helpful resources on self-compassion:

<https://www.discoverforgiveness.org>

<https://www.evworthington-forgiveness.com>

Christina's World by Andrew Wyeth, 1948

Set in the stark landscape of coastal Maine, *Christina's World* depicts a young woman seen from behind, wearing a pink dress and lying in a grassy field. Although she appears to be in a position of repose, her torso, propped on her arms, is strangely alert; her silhouette is tense, almost frozen, giving the impression that she is fixed to the ground. She stares at a distant farmhouse and a group of outbuildings, ancient and grayed in harmony with the dry grass and overcast sky.

Wyeth's neighbor Anna Christina Olson inspired the composition, which is one of four paintings by Wyeth in which she appears. As a young girl, Olson developed a degenerative muscle condition—possibly polio—that left her unable to walk. She refused to use a wheelchair, preferring to crawl, as depicted here, using her arms to drag her lower body along. “The challenge to me,” Wyeth explained, “was to do justice to her extraordinary conquest of a life which most people would consider hopeless.”

The high level of detail Wyeth gave to every object in his paintings encourages intense inspection, but his titles reveal the inner significance of their outwardly straightforward subjects. The title *Christina's World*, courtesy of Wyeth's wife, indicates that the painting is more a psychological landscape than a portrait, a portrayal of a state of mind rather than a place.

Publication excerpt from

[MoMA Highlights: 375 Works from The Museum of Modern Art, New York](#) (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019)



Naomi Shihab Nye (born March 12, 1952) is a Palestinian American poet, essayist, and educator whose work bridges cultural identities and emphasizes empathy and connection. Celebrated for accessible yet profound verse, she is recognized as one of the most influential voices in contemporary American poetry.

Key facts

- Born: March 12, 1952, St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.
- Heritage: Palestinian father, American mother
- Education: B.A., Trinity University (1974)
- Notable roles: Young People's Poet Laureate (2019–2021)
- Recent award: Wallace Stevens Award (2024) ([Home](#))

Early life and education

Nye's upbringing spanned St. Louis, Jerusalem, and San Antonio, Texas, shaping her bicultural and humanitarian worldview. Her father, Aziz Shihab, was a Palestinian journalist; her mother, Miriam Shihab, was an American artist. Nye earned a degree in English and world religions from Trinity University, grounding her later work in cross-cultural understanding and spirituality. ([The Poetry Foundation](#))

Literary career

Nye's first full-length collection, *Different Ways to Pray* (1980), introduced her characteristic focus on everyday detail and cultural dialogue. She has published over 30 volumes, including *Words Under the Words*, *Fuel, You and Yours*, *Transfer*, *Cast Away: Poems for Our Time*, and *Grace Notes: Poems about Family* (2024). Her young-adult novel *Habibi* (1997) and picture book *Sitti's Secrets* (1994) brought Arab American experiences to new audiences. ([Barclay Agency](#))

Themes and style

Nye's poetry blends the personal and political, often exploring identity, displacement, and belonging. Her language is conversational yet lyrical, finding depth in ordinary encounters. Influenced by William Stafford, she describes herself as a “wandering poet,” emphasizing travel, listening, and human connection as creative practices. ([Poetry Center](#))

Recognition and impact

Nye has received numerous awards, including the Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award, the NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature, and multiple Pushcart Prizes. She served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets (2009–

2014) and teaches creative writing at Texas State University. Her cross-generational appeal and advocacy for peace have established her as a vital ambassador of poetry and cultural understanding. ([The Poetry Foundation](#))



Mary Oliver (1935–2019) was an American poet celebrated for her lucid, accessible verse rooted in close observation of the natural world. Widely read beyond literary circles, she brought lyrical attention and spiritual insight to everyday encounters with nature, winning major literary honors and a devoted readership.

Key facts

- Born: September 10, 1935, Maple Heights, Ohio
- Died: January 17, 2019, Hobe Sound, Florida
- Major awards: Pulitzer Prize (1984), National Book Award (1992)
- Notable works: *American Primitive*, *Dream Work*, *New and Selected Poems*, *Devotions*
- Partner: Molly Malone Cook

Early life and influences

Oliver grew up in a difficult home environment near Cleveland and sought refuge in nearby woods, an experience that became central to her poetic voice. Though she attended Ohio State University and Vassar College, she did not complete a degree. In her twenties, she lived briefly at Steepletop, assisting with Millay’s papers. These early influences—Millay’s lyricism and the Romantic and Transcendental traditions of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman—shaped Oliver’s style and themes. ([The Poetry Foundation](#))

Poetic themes and style

Oliver’s poetry draws spiritual and moral insight from the natural world. Her signature works, such as “Wild Geese” and “The Summer Day,” invite readers to embrace presence and belonging: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” She combined direct diction with musical cadence, favoring clarity over abstraction. Critics often compared her to poets like Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, while noting her unique blend of reverence and plainspoken wonder. ([The Washington Post](#))

Career and recognition

After moving to Provincetown with Cook in the 1960s, Oliver established the Cape Cod landscape as the setting for much of her work. *American Primitive* (1983) earned the Pulitzer Prize, and *New and Selected Poems* (1992) won the National Book Award. She later published *Dog Songs* (2013), *Blue Horses* (2014), and *Devotions* (2017), which anthologized five decades of poetry. Her prose works, including *Upstream: Selected Essays* (2016) and *A Poetry Handbook* (1994), articulate her philosophy of attention and discipline in the creative life. ([The On Being Project](#))

Legacy

Mary Oliver’s writing remains among the most widely read and quoted in contemporary American poetry. Her voice—earnest, observant, and infused with gratitude—has comforted readers seeking meaning in solitude and renewal in nature. Critics note her enduring influence in environmental and spiritual writing, where she transformed personal observation into a universal meditation on how to live attentively and lovingly in the world. ([commonreader.co.uk](#))