

Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a “compassion story of the month.” This is the fifteenth. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

THE RELIGION OF LOVE

by

Anthony E. Acheson

(Several particulars of the below story, including the names of all involved have been changed to insure anonymity.)

I’ve met many fascinating, indeed extraordinary persons in the churches I’ve served in this area – and I’ve witnessed some remarkable relationships.

One of the most memorable involved Timothy, the son-in-law of the proverbial “pillar of the church” in one of these congregations. Sadly, Tim developed intractable addictions to alcohol and gambling, and the results were predictably disastrous. After having two children, his wife divorced him.

His life has become a seeming mess. He lives in what most of us would think of as a shack, with minimal income—and very few teeth. After several DUI arrests—and one near-fatal car accident while driving drunk—he no longer owns a car, or has a license.

That is a tragic story. But within it there are some gems of gold. Tim has been sober since that accident—for more than five years now. Unruly as his life became, it has also been ennobled, partly through his own bettered choices, but also through the faithful helping hands that have been steadily available to Tim in his recovery group. Of all those helpers, the one I know is Gus, the former custodian of the church I've mentioned.

Gus often told me he was “not religious.” And (since Gus happened to be a master gardener) I would often respond: Gus, anyone who creates gardens as gorgeous as yours, has to be religious by *definition*.

But it wasn't until I had been the minister of that church for more than six or seven years, that I learned how “religious” Gus really was: he had been an “angel” for Timothy for years. They had been close friends as kids; had played sports together in high school—and *partied* together. A great deal. Both became alcoholics. Gus got sober years before Tim did.

When Tim's life collapsed, almost everyone deserted him. That included his former father-in-law, Jonathan (the “pillar of the church”), and his former sister-in-law, Anna (a prominent minister), both of whom were “religious,” but who ignored him when the need was greatest. But throughout Tim's darkest times, Gus was the one person who was always “there” for him. Repeatedly—including during Tim's drinking years—Gus has driven Tim to doctor's appointments, brought him food, included him in holiday events, advocated for him with social service agencies, talked him through times of temptation, and

trudged through the snow down his long unplowed driveway to check on him when the power went out in winter.

Is it true that Gus is “Not religious” as he insists? It depends, I suppose, on how you define religion. If religion is holding predefined beliefs, and joining up with a specific group, then maybe not. But if religion is opening one’s heart in compassion; and if it is doing tangible acts of love, then Gus is one of the most religious people I know.

To my eye, the church of lovingkindness is the best religion I’ve come across so far, to truly believe in, and try to practice.

Anthony Acheson is a retired minister ordained in the United Church of Christ. He is currently completing a book he plans to publish in 2019.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, c/o Robert Oeser, PO Box 6001, Brattleboro, VT 05302. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.