

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 sixteenth. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

Offerings from the Heart: More Important than Words

By William Hays

My wife, Patricia died beside me in bed. The shock of her departure threw me into a whirlpool of emotion unlike anything I ever anticipated. The depth of my loss was beyond what I might have foreseen and surpassed all of my life's experience. I lost my direction, my future, my compass. My dearest friend was gone in the most profound manner.

My only good fortune at that point was that she was not my only friend. To others I turned. Suddenly, people I had laughed with, ate with, walked with and shared stories with were thrust into a position that they did not see coming. What could they do? What could they say? How could they express their own loss in the face of mine? What comfort could they provide? There was no script to follow.

They acted from instinct alone. And those instincts were summoned from love. Their first gesture was to bring me closer to them. They had me for dinner and they let me cry. They let me sob. They cried with me. They touched me. They hugged me. They offered no platitudes of comfort, only their genuine compassion, the shared suffering of losing Patricia.

Time does lessen the intensity of such a loss. This is my experience. But close to her death I swirled in that maelstrom of loss and pain. Comfort was far removed from my heart. When my friends came to me, "She's in a better place," was not said. "She's at peace now," never became words (only a hope). Her suffering was over but they somehow knew that my grief would not be relieved by hearing such things, even from those who loved her too.

Patricia had told me that grief was something you had to go *through*. She said that if I didn't, if I suppressed it, my grief would come out sideways later in a way that was not good. And so I resolved to turn myself over to grief and go through it.

In that grief my friends sat with me. They shared conversation, their own feelings and tears. They invited me to join them even though they surely would have preferred to escape the cloud of pain which followed me. They were there for me and gave me companionship and love more kind and understanding than what I

knew in them before. It could not have been without tremendous effort on their part. There are few circumstances in one's life which are more uncomfortable than death. Most of us just don't know what to say. Well I can tell you now.

What you say will most likely not be remembered. Avoiding the subject or avoiding the person who is experiencing such loss *will* be remembered. A touch or a hug goes deep and love is received with the greatest comfort of all. Eloquence goes by the wayside but a warm embrace penetrates and stays in the heart. Well chosen words are not required.

Compassion is the sharing of another's suffering. Such gentle gestures, being there, giving from the heart is the most precious gift of friendship. It is not easy. It is not pleasant. It is not comfortable. It is not about you alone. It is about sharing - you and your friend. A person you love.

Be brave and step up. Give from the heart. It will be well received and remembered. You will not just be offering condolences as a matter of courtesy. You will cement your love for your friend with your compassion. The gift of friendship and love will never be lost, never forgotten. Thank you, my friends.

William Hayes is an artist in Brattleboro

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.