

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 thirty-fifth. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

Let's be more like Alfred

by Paul Rodrigue

Have you ever wondered about the challenges that cars create when it comes to interacting with others? Leaving aside all the climate change issues, I've long worried that driving a car just makes it hard to practice compassion. My experience as a driver suggests that it's more difficult to connect with others from inside my vehicle. Cars make us feel bigger and stronger and faster and more protected. These attributes which work well in conflict, are just less useful in promoting peaceful coexistence. Cars and trucks, in fact, allow us to armor ourselves in a climate-controlled environment, giving us a sense of control and, maybe, even invincibility. Such qualities break down the potential connections between people, allowing ourselves to think we're safe and powerful, and, at times, emboldened towards aggression.

And it's easy to cause injury if we're not paying full attention to the task of driving. We can even run over small creatures without knowing it, again contrary to compassionate living. Overall, driving in Brattleboro, as anywhere, does little to encourage compassion in many drivers. The long delays with traffic lights and train tracks leave us sitting in our cars wondering if we'll reach our destination on time, too often leading to feelings of frustration and sometimes even panic, mental states which restrict our ability to practice reason and concern.

Compassion, on the contrary, requires a relaxed mind, one that is quiet enough to set aside its own concerns and, perhaps, even be curious about another person's state of mind and, ideally, wish to alleviate any suffering that may be present in that person.

I find this kind of mindset so much easier while cycling, or walking. These “alternative” ways of moving through one's environment invite attention to everything and everyone around us and provide ample opportunity for contact and kindness, in sum, a much more human means of transportation. I've chosen to use my bicycle as a primary means of getting from one place to another - sensible in so many ways including this one. It fosters a connection with everything around me: trees, small animals, pedestrians, even motor vehicles drivers. I find it particularly easy to connect with pedestrians. They move slowly, and usually maintain awareness of their surroundings. There's often time for a few words as we pass each other by (usually at a safe distance these days). In the case of persons who are struggling in one way or another – most of us - connection leads to caring... which leads to compassion.

My favorite Brattleboro pedestrian, known to so many around town as Alfred, is always waving and smiling. He's easily seen and recognized in part because he isn't shrouded by the metal carcass of a car. He's entirely approachable. He invites interacting with his smile, a smile that seems ever present. I feel better every time I see him. Whether intentional or not, his presence on the streets lifts my spirits. I assume many others have similar experiences of Alfred. His smile is like a compassionate embrace, even from the other side of the street. I've never seen him hurrying; always that same slow and measured gait.

The pace of his walking brings to mind another facet of compassion cultivation: being generous with time. Compassion requires a little extra time; time spent attending to the other, even if it's just a pause. It's a pause long enough to share some word, long enough to hear and attend to the words of the other person, perhaps to look into that person's eyes and actually *hear* the feelings between their words. A pause that carries genuine concern for that person's feelings.

Cultivating compassion is an option available to all of us - - even as we move around town, on our way to work or running errands. Walk there if possible. Try pausing now and then. Move more slowly if you can, listening and attending. Be like Alfred. (And if circumstance requires that you drive a car, just be aware of its risks to compassion. Give yourself more time. Drive a little more slowly, maybe. Smile at others...especially if you're passing me while I'm pedaling my bike. That way we'll connect, and I'll know you care.

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, PO Box 50, Marlboro, VT 05344. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.