

Sean McDonnell  
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## The Day of Compassion

I completed this Social Psychology Course last year, and the "Day of Compassion" Assignment was one of many reasons I took it again this year. In my writing for last year's assignment, I defined compassion as "the effort to empathize with another so deeply as to make their suffering your suffering." A year later, I still find this definition accurate, but I also find it dry, abstract, and empty. One of the greatest gifts of this course is that it provides the tools for transforming the idea of compassion from an abstraction into something concrete: living compassionately as a way of thinking *and* doing.

For me, living compassionately is more than just meditating in a remote cave or in a Tibetan monastery—an impractical life for an American with a wife and four children. It is traveling with my family to Ecuador to provide medical care to families in need. It is seeing the gifts that every family member and friend brings into my life instead of focusing on ways in which we disagree. It is starting a science club at my children's school to help empower kids through education—all things that I have done this past year after finding inspiration from this course.

Today, I define compassion as actively lifting the burdens of others whenever the opportunity arises, empowering those around me to find practical ways *they* can help others, and having my own burdens seemingly melt away as a result. As it so happens, during my Day of Compassion this year an opportunity arose for me to accept two young homeless children into my home.

I took it.

On the Day of Compassion, I met with the principal of my children's school to discuss the science club I had been planning for this upcoming school year and which I believed was going to be the main topic of this Day of Compassion project. When I arrived at her office, she was beside herself. She asked, "Do you know of any families that would be willing to take in two children who are in a lot of trouble?"

I immediately thought of the bystander effect and the inaction of strangers faced with ambiguous emergencies. The two children—Becca and Raymond (ages 7 and 4, respectively)—are students whose mother, Donna, has been raising them while their father was in prison after being convicted of theft. Unfortunately, Donna became unable to care for her children, apparently due to drug addiction, and the children were suddenly without a home or caregiver.



My wife, Judy, and I decided that this was a chance to strengthen our level of compassion, which we had been wanting to do since last year's Social Psychology course. Here is an important point I have learned about compassion: it is never about "me," but rather, is always about "we." In this case, for instance, it wasn't just about me, the two kids, their mother, and the principal, but also about my wife, my kids, and all of our friends and family. It is about reversing the "tragedy of the commons"—doing a little bit to help, and then trying to spread that idea to as many people as possible.

Thanks to courses like this one and being married to the most open-minded and open-hearted woman I know, I feel like the "Day of Compassion" me has become the "normal" me. Not only do I like that person more than the person I was five years ago, I am gradually seeing that person (me) improve in compassionate abilities. As I find out every day, the psychological factors that prevent me from being the most compassionate person I can be are largely misperceptions. These misperceptions, I find, lead to a distorted cost-benefit analysis.

There was a moment when my wife and I brooded over how Donna could be so irresponsible—marrying a man convicted of crime, having children without any way to support them, and getting into trouble with drugs while responsible for two young children. Then we considered situational factors. According to Donna, she grew up with an abusive father. She has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and cannot afford the proper medications and therapy. She is young, scared, and overwhelmed. Her heart seemed to be breaking without her children. We were humbled.

Interestingly, my wife and I have found that while we have learned to see the overwhelming benefits of compassion, it is others—often our loved ones—who bring the potential costs of compassionate living to our attention. The act of opening our home to Becca and Raymond has been no exception. "You're crazy; you can't save everybody," said a couple who send their children to the same school. "I'm really worried about your children; I don't want them to get harmed in any way," said my aunt. "You are putting way too much on your plate," worried Judy's sister.

My wife and I, however, have learned to focus on the benefits—to notice how compassion spreads both within us and around us: the families who, having heard of what we have done, have donated clothing and toys; my extended family accepting Becca and Raymond as family members at my sister's housewarming party yesterday; and most importantly, how my four children have taken a break from trying to maim each other to make Becca and Raymond feel welcome. This cost-benefit analysis involves understanding that saying "yes" to an act of kindness is only the beginning. If it is going to work, I must be ready to do more laundry, clean more dishes, and take more trips to the grocery store. By remembering why I'm doing these tasks, the chores become far more enjoyable than they would be otherwise.

Opportunities for encouraging others to live compassionately have been everywhere since my family has taken in Becca and Raymond. The psychological tools are covered in this course. Many people I encounter place my family in an outgroup when they hear about what we're doing. "You" are helpful and compassionate; "I" am not like that. The first thing I do is drag

them into the "compassionate persons" ingroup. A woman I work with just told me a few weeks ago about a young man—a friend of her son—who lived with her family "unofficially" for an entire summer because his mother was never around. I reminded her of this when she told me that she could never do what Judy and I are doing. "Oh, yeah," she said with a smile, after I reminded her of her own kind deed.

Similarly, I explained to my skeptical aunt that what my family was doing is not really a big deal for us. We already have four children who are only a little older than Becca and Raymond, and the resources are already there. The kids all go to the same school, we have the space, and we're on the same schedule and routine. A few increased chores, minus the added help we get from our own children, and that's it. My aunt sees our act as a big deal because she's 85 years old, has never been married or had children, and lives in a 500-square-foot apartment in an expensive city. But, I pointed out to her, when people ask her to make sacrifices that are within her capability, she accepts with barely a thought.

What about the future? I will definitely be a changed person in a week, a month, and a year. I truly believe I will be better, and I will have, among others, my wife and my children to thank, because they are seeing the benefits of compassionate living and making sure I am not traveling alone. Here is my 12-year-old daughter, Claire, helping Becca and Raymond improve their lives by choosing healthy snacks and working on skills to improve their school experience:

