

## **Where will your compassion lead you?**

Convocation Address – FSU College of Social Work

Delivered by

Dr. Kathleen Regan Figley ~ April 29, 2016 ~ Tallahassee, florida

Thank you Dean Clark for the introduction. I'm delighted to be here, at my alma mater. I'm also delighted that I could wear garnet and gold, FSU's colors and the colors of my school – Graduate Theological Foundation.

To the Parents - Congratulations! This is a day for you to celebrate!

To the 2016 graduating class - I am so happy to be sharing this day with you. Your joy at the completion of this phase of your education and your life reminds me of the joy I felt when I sat where you are. Thank you for allowing me to address you on this peak moment day.

My question to you today is “Where will your compassion lead you?” Henri Nouwen<sup>i</sup> was a priest who studied Psychology. He also was a professor at Notre Dame, and he taught at the Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools. Here is what he had to say about compassion.

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of the being human.

Like Compassion, Empathy is a key element in a therapeutic relationship. In *The Wounded Healer, Ministry in Contemporary Society*<sup>ii</sup>, Nouwen addressed Empathy. He wrote:

Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of mind? In short: “Who can take away suffering without entering it?”

So, as you start your career I invite you to think about the above quotes. Then consider this question: “Where will your compassion lead you?” When I was sitting where you are today, I wish someone had told me that my compassion would lead me straight into suffering! Trauma is universal. It's in the nature of our work. It's in the news, entertainment, the arts, and many other disciplines as is seen in *The Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide*.<sup>iii</sup> Memorial Architecture is an example. Consider the memorials that were designed in the aftermath of Oklahoma City bombing (1995) and the September 11 terrorist attack (2001) and the emotions that we as a country faced. These monuments are designed to help us grieve. Memorial architects experience the emotions necessary to memorialize the overwhelming grief we all felt.

Khalil Gibran<sup>iv</sup> said:

***Pain is an unseen and powerful hand that breaks the skin of the stone in order to extract the pulp. ~Kahlil Gibran***<sup>v</sup>

Pain can lead you to what is called the Dark Night of the Soul. When I was in my early 30's I experienced a Dark Night of the Soul.<sup>vi</sup> I wrote this poem:

The spring of my life  
has a cold damp winter chill  
I hate the morning

When I was sitting here you are now, I wish I had known about Compassion Fatigue. I did not understand the pain of my work and did not know what to do about it. Compassion Fatigue is a state of emotional and physical exhaustion that can cause a gradual desensitization to clients' stories; a decrease in quality of care; an increase in clinical errors, including breaches of ethics; and an impact on personal relationships resulting in decreased empathy and ability to connect. Those who suffer from Compassion Fatigue may be subject to increased rates of household stress, divorce, and social isolation.

These are dire predictions. But that's not the whole story. Compassion and empathy also lead to the joy of our work, which can help counterbalance the downsides of working with people who are suffering. Compassion Satisfaction is characterized by those days when everything feels right – the therapeutic bond is strong, the client gets it, the course of treatment works, the research findings are significant and relevant, and/or your caring and hard work are recognized and lauded. At these times we feel our purpose in life is being fulfilled and our lives have meaning. So how do we prevent Compassion Fatigue and maximize Compassion Satisfaction?

To serve others better, I wish I knew

- How to manage the compassion stress that comes with the work
- How to better care for my body so it would serve me well in my work, e.g.,
  - Eat nutritious food
  - Get sufficient restorative sleep
  - Exercise daily at a pace that can be maintained over time.
- How to balance work/personal life more effectively
- How I could be more gentle with myself when I made mistakes

I learned that a good place to start with a plan is to embrace the concept of Self-Compassion.<sup>vii</sup> If you are a perfectionistic overachiever as I am, the concepts of Self-Kindness, Common Humanity, and Mindfulness become an important factor in maintaining the joy of the work.

As a result of experiencing Compassion Fatigue or Dark Night of the Soul, positive changes can occur. This is called posttraumatic growth or spiritual transformation. This can be an exciting time that ultimately leads to improved interpersonal relationships; greater appreciation of life; new opportunities or pathways in life; a greater sense of personal strength in ability to cope with crises; and/or spiritual changes or development including meaning and purpose in life. In the words of Henri Nouwen, we become Wounded Healers

Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people whether, physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not "How can we hide our

wounds? So we don't have to be embarrassed, but "How can we put our woundedness in the service to others?" When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

Some years back I wrote this poem when I was instructing marriage and family counselors in the Compassion Stress Management to underscore the importance of attending to one's Self

The joy of your work  
is tarnished by their stories  
their pain is your pain

flashes, images  
still with you when you're sleeping  
do not serve you well

you know what to do  
to rejuvenate at depth  
take care of your self

The latter leads to another thing I wish I knew about when I was sitting where you are. I wish I had a plan. We are wounded healers. And as such we need a plan to take care of ourselves. To get you started in your new profession, I offer you this graduation gift.

At Tulane University I teach Making Meaning of Trauma. In my course students create a Case Study based on Self-Assessments geared towards a psychospiritual approach to healing. The workbook is posted at my website: [katfigley.com](http://katfigley.com). There you will find self-assessments, score pattern analysis, and a self-care planning worksheet. You are free to use these personally so you, and professionally as long as proper credit is given. I invite you to take a baseline measure now, then retake selected measures when you are feeling a bit off. The data will help you focus your self care plan towards reasonable, measurable goals which can help you stay on track.

In conclusion: If you're like me there will be a day when you look back and say to students who are sitting where you are now: Follow your passion and your compassion to the transformative life lessons they can teach you. Allow your personal work to enrich your professional work, and vice versa. My compassion has led me to places I never dreamed of when I sat where you are today. And all I can say as I look back is –

It's been a heck of a wild ride!  
I wish you a wild ride!  
Congratulations Class of 2016!

---

<sup>i</sup> Quoted from [henrinouwen.org](http://henrinouwen.org).

---

The internationally renowned priest and author, respected professor and beloved pastor Henri Nouwen (pronounced Henry Now-win) wrote over 40 books on the spiritual life. He corresponded regularly in English, Dutch, German, French and Spanish with hundreds of friends and reached out to thousands through his Eucharistic celebrations, lectures and retreats. Since his death in 1996, ever-increasing numbers of readers, writers, teachers and seekers have been guided by his literary legacy. Nouwen's books have sold over 2 million copies and been published in over 22 languages.

Quoted from <http://henrinouwen.org/about-henri/his-historical-impact/>

Nouwen ranks as one of the most significant spiritual leaders of our time. Nouwen was a priest, academic, psychologist, teacher, author, gifted public speaker, spiritual member, faithful correspondent and friend, wounded healer and a passionate seeker. With an uncanny ease he moved in and out of these different roles, never allowing himself to be fully contained or categorized. In so doing he showed, and continues to show, a generation of ministers, teachers and seekers how one's gifts are to be placed at the service of those whom God places in our path.

<sup>ii</sup> Nouwen, H. J. M. (1994). *The wounded healer: Ministry in contemporary society*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

<sup>iii</sup> Figley, C. R. (Ed.). (2012). *Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Reference Publications.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted from [www.biography.com/people/khalil-gibran-9310556#synopsis](http://www.biography.com/people/khalil-gibran-9310556#synopsis)

Khalil Gibran: Philosophical essayist, novelist, poet and artist ...Khalil Gibran was born on January 6, 1883, in Bsharri, Lebanon. He immigrated with his parents to Boston in 1895, and later settled in New York City. His works, written in both Arabic and English, are full of lyrical outpourings and express his deeply religious and mystical nature. *The Prophet* (1923), a book of poetic essays, achieved cult status among American youth for several generations. Gibran died in New York City on April 10, 1931.

<sup>v</sup> Sheban, J. (Ed.) (1966). *The Wisdom of Gibran: Aphorisms and Maxims*. Philosophical Library Inc., New York, New York.

<sup>vi</sup> Quoted from <https://www.eckharttolle.com/newsletter/october-2011>

The "dark night of the soul" is a term that goes back a long time. Yes, I have also experienced it. It is a term used to describe what one could call a collapse of a perceived meaning in life...an eruption into your life of a deep sense of meaninglessness. The inner state in some cases is very close to what is conventionally called depression. Nothing makes sense anymore, there's no purpose to anything. Sometimes it's triggered by some external event, some disaster perhaps, on an external level. The death of someone close to you could trigger it, especially premature death, for example if your child dies. Or you had built up your life, and given it meaning – and the meaning that you had given your life, your activities, your achievements, where you are going, what is considered important, and the meaning that you had given your life for some reason collapses.

<sup>vii</sup> Quoted from [self-compassion.org](http://self-compassion.org)

Having compassion for oneself is really no different than having compassion for others. Think about what the experience of compassion feels like. First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. If you ignore that homeless person on the street, you can't feel compassion for how difficult his or her experience is. Second, compassion involves feeling moved by others' suffering so that your heart responds to their pain (the word compassion literally means to "suffer with"). When this occurs, you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly. Finally, when you feel compassion for another (rather than mere pity), it means that you realize that suffering, failure, and imperfection is part of the shared human experience. "There but for fortune go I."

---

Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards yourself when you are having a difficult time, fail, or notice something you don't like about yourself. Instead of just ignoring your pain with a "stiff upper lip" mentality, you stop to tell yourself "this is really difficult right now," how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment?