

Reading:

Our reading this morning is from *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, by Father Gregory Boyle.

On a Saturday in 1996 I am set to baptize George at Camp Munz, a juvenile probation camp outside LA. George also wants to schedule the event to follow his successful passing of the GED exam. He sees it as something of a twofer celebration. I actually know 17 year old George and his 19 year old brother Cisco. Both are gang members from a barrio in the projects, but I have only really come to know George over his nine-month stint in this camp. I have watched him move gradually from his hardened posturing to being a man in possession of himself and his gifts. Taken out of the environment that keeps him unsettled and crazed, not surprisingly, he begins to thrive at Camp Munz. Now he is nearly unrecognizable. The gangster pose has morphed into a thoughtful, measured man, aware of gifts and talents previously obscured by the unreasonable demands of his gang life.

The Friday night before George's baptism, Cisco, George's brother, is walking home before midnight when the quiet is shattered, as it so often is in his neighborhood, by gunshots. Some rivals creep up and open fire, and Cisco falls in the middle of St. Louis Street, half a block from his apartment. He is killed instantly.

I don't sleep much that night. It occurs to me to cancel my presence at the Mass the next morning at Camp Munz to be with Cisco's grieving family. But then I remember George and his baptism.

When I arrive before Mass, with all the empty chairs in place in the mess hall, there is George standing by himself, holding his newly acquired GED certificate. He heads toward me, waving his GED and beaming. We hug each other. He is in a borrowed, ironed, crisp white shirt and a thin black tie. His pants are the regular, camp-issue camouflage, green and brown. I am completely wiped out, yet trying to keep my excitement at pace with George's.

It is the most difficult baptism of my life. For as I pour water over George's head, I know I will walk George outside alone after and tell him what happened.

As I do, and I put my arm around him, I whisper gently as we walk out onto the baseball field, "George, your brother Cisco was killed last night."

I can feel all the air leave his body as he heaves a sigh that finds itself a sob in an instant. We land on a bench. His face seeks refuge in his open palms, and he sobs quietly. Most notable is what isn't present in his rocking and gentle wailing. I've been in this place before many times. There is always

flailing and rage and promises to avenge things. There is none of this in George...He manages to hold all the complexity of this great sadness, right here, on this bench, in his tender weeping. (84-86)

GIVE ME LOVE
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
All Souls NYC
July 18, 2021

Martin Pistorius developed a brain infection when he was 12 years old. His body shut down, bit by bit--he lost his ability to speak and control movement, including his eye movements. Medical tests for mental awareness showed no response though his body was otherwise functioning. His parents were told to take him home and make him comfortable until he died.

Martin continued to live in this unresponsive state. Caring for him was relentless work. He had to be turned in his bed every two hours, day and night.

No one realized that at some point Martin recovered awareness. He could understand everything that was happening to him, but he could not control his body so he could not communicate.

His family continued to care for him lovingly, and he stayed in a care home during the day while his parents went to work. At the care home, he was perceived as an object to be moved and fed. Over the course of ten years at the care home, some of his attendants abused him verbally, physically, and sexually.

At the care home Martin lived in fear. He wanted to defend himself against his abusers. At home Martin felt despair for his overwhelmed family. He longed to express his gratitude and sympathy to his exhausted parents. He longed to talk cricket with his father and play video games with his younger brother.

But Martin was only what people projected onto him: he was unresponsive, barely alive, with no thoughts, no feelings, no worth. Martin wanted to die.

In *Tattoos on the Heart*, the book from our reading this morning, Father G tells dozens of stories of gang members like Chico who are perceived as having no worth. But the moment a gang member walks through the door

at Homeboy Industries and asks for help, Father G makes it his mission to acknowledge their worth. He writes, “There are no demons here. Just young people, whose burdens are more than they can bear and who are having difficulty imagining a future for themselves” (212). Homeboy Industries has supported thousands of young people, believing in their inherent worth and dignity and inviting them to see it for themselves.

The inherent worth and dignity of every person is the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism. It assumes the innate goodness in each of us. This aligns with the Buddhist principle of Buddha Nature—our essence, no matter how many mistakes we make, is not fundamentally flawed. Buddha Nature is the opposite of original sin. The basis of Universalism is also the opposite of original sin. Universalists believe that we are not born sinful and unredeemable, we all share the same access to God or truth.

Living according to this principle means vigilantly viewing ourselves and all other people with faith in our worth. We live this principle by relaxing our judgmental stories and opening our hearts to everyone including those who appear to be better off than we are, those with whom we disagree vehemently, those who seem to have nothing to do but stir up trouble.

Though we may be quick to assent to the idea intellectually, it’s not so easy to act it out in our everyday lives. We can make this happen through practice, through creating new habits in the way we think, speak and behave. I have three suggestions for how we can go about this: smile actively, notice generously, and ask personally.

Smile actively, to ourselves and to others. First to ourselves. Imagine the kind of smile we see on the faces of Buddhas. It’s not a smile for the sake of others to see, it’s a smile that reminds us of our sovereignty over ourselves, that we can be masters of our own minds. If you smile during meditation, you can feel your mind shift. But even if you don’t meditate, you can try it when you’re alone. It’s not a smile to force happiness, it’s a smile that acknowledges your own worth and dignity.

Smiling to others. We can connect with others if we offer a subtle smile of acknowledgement. It’s true that not every person will respond favorably, and most of the time you won’t know the effects of the connection you are offering.

I take a walk almost every day in Central Park, usually around 6pm. Almost every time, this person flies by me on an electric scooter, traveling at a speed that is well matched by the volume of the music and the vulgarity of the lyrics booming from the speaker hanging off their backpack. This person wears leather and a pointy motorcycle helmet, with a tinted shield so they look like something out of a sci-fi movie, one of the bad guys you want to hide from. I notice my strong distaste for this person and how my mind contracts around assumptions about them. I smile to myself as the vibration of their 20 seconds of noise floods my senses...Blessed be Sci-fi Bad Guy.

Then one day, Sci-fi Bad Guy is streaking past on an uphill slant, and the speaker falls off. I see it bouncing down the hill, and I feel a twinge of a sneer come on. But it's overruled by my Blessed Be Sci-fi Bad Guy refrain. Sci-fi Bad Guy is going so fast that it takes them a while to slow down enough to turn around, and during that time they've lost connection with the speaker so it's quiet now, not so repelling. I feel an urge to walk a few yards toward the speaker to pick it up. Once I have it, I hold it up so they can see it. As Sci-fi Bad Guy heads toward me, the speaker starts to come back to life. In a matter of milliseconds the speaker's vibrations are rattling my whole body. I hand off the speaker to this person who is completely obscured by the bad guy costume, I can't even see a face through the tinted shield and I sure as heck can't hear anything. Are they saying thank you? No idea. I smile and mouth sincerely, "You're welcome."

The habit of smiling actively means paying attention. The same presence of mind can lead to noticing generously, my second suggestion for a practice. The easiest way to work on this practice is to pick a discrete period of time, and notice other beings with a nonjudgmental, open hearted connection to their worth. If you head out to do errands, you can decide to try this for a few minutes while walking down the sidewalk, entering and exiting shops, riding the bus or driving. If you live in New York City or in another city, you'll almost certainly pass people who are asking for money on the street, many of whom may be homeless. Here is an especially powerful opportunity to practice.

Many of us experience people who appear to be homeless like many viewed Martin Pistorius, we don't bother to notice them. No worth. Or worse, if we do notice, we experience disgust.

Researchers Lasana Harris and Susan Fiske studied how we perceive people who appear to be homeless, what happens to us at a basic neural level. The researchers used fMRI scans to examine brain activity while participants looked at dozens of images including people with disabilities, older people, rich businessmen, American Olympic athletes, and homeless people. Within a moment of seeing the photograph of a homeless man, participants' brains set off a sequence of reactions characteristic of disgust and avoidance, similar to reactions to objects such as garbage and human waste. Moreover, the photos of the homeless people failed to activate areas of the brain that usually light up when we see other people.

The good news is that we can change the way our minds work. As we're doing errands with an intention of noticing generously, of seeing the worth in all humans, we can deliberately acknowledge people who are begging. This is not about pity and feeling we are fortunate and they are not (though of course this is true), it is about our shared experience of feeling ostracized, ignored, unsafe, uncared for. We have all experienced not being seen, not being heard. There is kinship here. You can try simply noticing people who look homeless, and silently saying "Just like me, this person wishes to be happy and avoid suffering."

Here's my final suggestion for a spiritual practice that helps us see the worth in others: ask personally. (I saved the hardest one for last.)

Ask people to connect with you. Make it easy for them. Ask for help. Ask for a hug. Ask for advice. This is a way of acknowledging the worth of others. There is a saying "If you want to make a friend, ask for a favor." Asking for a favor is a sign of trust, and it invites someone to show you how they can support you. If you're like most of us, you don't want to ask for favors. But what if you reframed the request through the lens of connecting with the worth of another. What if you made it a practice to try to think of ways to ask for help?

In his poem "With That Moon Language" 14th Century Sufi poet Hafiz invites us to do the asking:

"With That Moon Language"

Admit something:

Everyone you see, you say to them, "Love me."

Of course you do not do this out loud, otherwise someone would call the cops.

Still, though, think about this, this great pull in us to connect.

Why not become the one who lives with a full moon in each eye that is always saying,

with that sweet moon language, what every other eye in this world is dying to hear?

There is a great pull in us to connect, why not admit it? When we ask for help, ask for love, we are saying, "I see your worth. See mine." We also stand to benefit from allowing for our own vulnerability. Father G says that he doesn't help people in need, he helps people who ask for help.

Martin Pistorius wanted to die because no one believed he had any worth or dignity. He writes, "There were many moments when I gave up, sinking into a dark abyss. I remember one particularly low moment. My dad left me alone in the car while he quickly went to buy something from the store. A random stranger walked past, looked at me and he smiled. I may never know why, but that simple act, the fleeting moment of human connection, transformed how I was feeling, making me want to keep going."

Martin had no choice but to keep going, for 13 years no one detected that his brain was awake and aware. And then someone came along who didn't take for granted the way everyone else treated Martin. She was an aromatherapist at his care home who assumed Martin's worth and dignity. She became convinced that Martin could understand her. She advocated for him, and arranged to have him tested by experts in augmentative and alternative communication. The tests revealed his ability to respond, and he began the intensely arduous journey of learning how to communicate through a computer.

Martin is now married to Joanna, and he is a father. He is the author of *Ghost Boy: The Miraculous Escape of a Misdiagnosed Boy Trapped Inside His Own Body*.

Smiling actively, noticing generously, and asking personally can create habits of honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It only takes one simple act, one fleeting moment of human connection to transform a life.

Closing Reading:

Saint Francis and the Sow by [Galway Kinnell](#)

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing
beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.