

# **A Shelter from Compassion**

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## **A Shelter from Compassion**

A madwoman has no reason to be on Chestnut Street—not during the noon rush hour when the busy people who get things done in the world are hustling to and fro taut with self-bounded importance. But there she was, shuffling dreamily along in her little aura of obliviousness to the chaotic tempo all about her.

Her hair jutted in wild gray wisps under the frayed brim of a shapeless hat that once was black, but now took its color from several decades' accumulation of filth. Her clothing, an incongruous assortment of outmoded fashions, hung listlessly upon her, frankly reinforced in several places with conspicuous safety pins and bits of string. On her left foot she wore a black sneaker and on her right a white one, both of them held together and anchored in place with heavy twine wrapped several times around the insteps. Her grimy stockings sagged loosely over her shoetops. In one hand she carried a bulging shopping-bag, almost dragging on the sidewalk; with the other she clutched a bundle of yellowed newspapers close to her bosom.

On she shuffled through the milling crowd, her puffy red face turned skyward, singing, bawling in a strident voice that still suggested now and then a residual trace of sweetness —

*My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;  
No merit of my own I claim,  
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.  
On Christ the solid rock I stand  
All other ground is sinking sand  
All other ground is sinking sand.*

There was something in the madwoman, something in the surging crowd, something deep in my own soul, that seized upon me, dismissing all thought of the errand that had sent me hurrying down Chestnut Street. I paused in the doorway

of the shoestore, close by the lavender vendor, and watched with a momentary sense of apartness.

Most of the passers-by were too engrossed in their own pursuits even to notice the madwoman, and swished by in frowning preoccupation, never to know they had seen her at all. The sight of her startled a few out of their self-absorption. They scanned her furtively and quickly averted their eyes. They had learned long ago that it isn't nice to stare at exceptional people.

A rank of young stenographers who had clipped themselves whole from the pages of the latest fashion magazines sauntered glamorously by until they noticed the madwoman. Then they broke rank and shed their glamour to whisper, titter, and giggle among themselves and make a few gestures of mimicry. A half-dozen office boys, who had left high-school a few months ago because they wanted to earn more spending money, leaned casually against the building wall, smoking with the nonchalance of men of the world. When they saw her they burst into hoarse guffaws and hootings, and slapped each other violently on the back, partly in derision, but mainly to attract the attention of the giggling girls.

There were those whose faces were veiled with pity, who lowered their eyes and shook their heads in puzzled sadness. "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Two well-dressed men standing at the curb eyed her sagely, and bent their heads together to exchange a few significant comments. Several mink-clad matrons stepped confidently along, radiating poise and charm, until her weird song

invaded their composure. They drew themselves up a little taller, exchanged disapproving glances and a few guarded words, and moved more briskly. “Really!! Something should be done about this sort of spectacle. There are proper places for people like that!”

A small child hung back to stare, while his mother tried to drag him along. “Mommy, what’s the matter with that funny lady?” he demanded over and over again, despite her impatient efforts to hush him. A shabby old woman paused briefly to stare at the madwoman, snorted and sneered with cold hostility, and walked on muttering inaudibly. A modish poodle strained on his leash, and reared up, yapping menacingly while his petulant mistress tugged and scolded.

A newsboy jibed at her, “Hi-yo, Maggie—how’s business?” and looked laughingly around to see whether his wit was adequately appreciated.

She was almost up to Seventeenth Street now, and was lost to sight in the pulsing crowd. I had to strain to catch the last fading tremors of her eerie song over the din of traffic —

*When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me!*

I slipped back into the stream of pedestrians, and moved pensively on the inner side, wrapped in my *own* little aura of obliviousness, toying with unaccustomed feelings. I was not shocked, nor indignant, nor repelled at anything I had witnessed in the brief drama. I wasn’t even shocked that I wasn’t shocked. Strangest of all, I felt no pang of pity for

the madwoman. The time to pity her had passed; she no longer had any need for it. She had already been hurt far beyond all capacity to endure and had bought, at a staggering price, an imperviousness to any further hurt, an invulnerability to all scorn and derision, all loveliness and indifference, all unresponsive blindness and callous cruelty, all blundering pity, all degrading condescension. Under the burden of some disabling woe she had met face to face the Big Fear from which we all turn our eyes and run in cold terror—the dread of total separation from human fellowship. She was on the other side of fear now, and free even from the fear of madness, for as only by dying do we evade the fear of death, so only in madness do we elude the fear of going mad.

I saw too, why it is that men go mad. It is because they cannot be those things they have to be. It is the one way that they can escape from their humanity and still remain alive. Madness and death are the only exits, and if they select the way of madness, the reason is that deep within they wanted all the things of death, but could not choose to die.

Perhaps if I could have sensed her inner condition, I would have envied her. Perhaps her madness was saner than the sanity of those who recoiled from her disquieting appearance, whose precarious self-assurance teetered on the brim of peril at the sight of one who was the phantom of their own worst fears. Who knows? —perhaps while they had merely sight and senses, she had visions so celestial to tempt all men to madness. Who knows? — perhaps she alone shared with God the power to remold her

own world “nearer to the heart’s desire,” a world of unfettered fancies, of buoyant dreams that lifted her to the very feet of God, unloosed from all earth’s petty tyrannies. Although man’s judgment would have said that the Almighty had dealt very bitterly with her, in some way that wisdom could not understand, she may indeed have been that day with Him in paradise.

The claim to pity belonged rather to those who passed uneasily by on the other side. The real pathos was in them, not in her. They still struggled in the bondage of a thousand chains from which her madness had freed her. They were the driven ones, the confused ones, the prey to a myriad hounding guilts and anxieties, and mocking uncertainties.

There was no cause to judge them, nor to condemn them, that they shrank from the haunting spectre of a crazy old woman lumbering along the gray pavement; that they cast out, each with his own frightened gesture of rejection, the huge challenge she laid upon them. If they did seem not to care about her, surely she cared even less for them. Beyond this, I saw that it was not that they did not care, but rather that they cared too much and could not bear to know they cared. Having once acknowledged solicitude toward her, they would be confronted with the monster of their own helplessness to comprehend or to change her situation. They would be engulfed in a sense of impotence and guilt, useless both to themselves and to her. Their only sin, if any sin there was, lay in a certain pathetic lack of integrity, an unawareness of disloyalty to higher instincts which they never knew they had.

Once having opened the gates on compassion, they would be in danger of being led much further out of themselves and into the madwoman, and those circumstances which had made her mad, than they could let themselves be led. Once started down that dangerous road, they might go deeper into sympathy than any man had yet gone, and discover that they could not find the way back. Their own noble intent might lose them in a pathless jungle, might strand them in an unexplored Antarctic of the spirit, to perish in unsung sainthood.

If anyone in all that crowd had left himself, had left his past to bury its own dead and his future to take thought for itself, and had gone with her beyond the second mile, he might at length have glimpsed the face of God, which frail mortality could not survive. Along the way he would have encountered such more-than-human knowledge as would stun the senses, shatter the heart, and fragment the intellect, a toll which sound reason would never consent to pay.

Better never to unlock those gates. Better never to start down that road. Better to fashion masks to shut our own pain in, and armor to shut out the pain of others. Better to wall off the clamorous demands of the world's woes. So every man has built himself a shelter from compassion, a moated castle of the Self, drawn up against besieging claims of sorrows not his own.

But the stoutest armor and the most cunning masks, the thickest walls and the deepest moats have not secured man from invasion by the Trojan horse of pity. For compassion, like love and hunger, is an inward urgency which no

external armaments can silence. Poor deluded, foolish man! He trusts an outward shield to blunt the inward edge of pain, and stands bewildered and betrayed to find himself defenseless.

## II

A shelter from compassion! A refuge from mankind! A sanctuary where hurt and need cannot be seen, nor heard, nor felt, nor in any real way permitted to intrude upon our self-preoccupation—this is the haven of our aspiration. The building of the shelter, its scrupulous maintenance, is part of the chief business of our lives. Each one of us according to skills and materials at hand fashions his own little fortified retreat.

If we are of a rational bent, we rely on the honest intellectual conviction that everyone has a right to concentrate his principal energies on satisfying his own instinctual and social needs. To affect too much thought for the strivings of others is unnatural, neurotic, or at worst hypocritical. By the very structure of our being, as individual, finite creatures we are bound to virtually complete engrossment in personal and family interests. We may reach out to include a periphery of friends who fit neatly into our little circle of caring, but for those whose lives merely touch it tangentially we have only the crumbs that fall from the table.

And how can it be otherwise? How can we weep for every woe, and what would be the good of it if we could? “After all, I have my own life to live, and my own problems to

so lve.” The size of the world’s sorrow is far too vast, and its sources too deeply rooted in the labyrinth of human experience for us to comprehend it, let alone truly feel it. Clearly the one realistic choice for us is to fall into the confraternity of the priest and the Levite, the uninvolved ones, and to pass by in dispassionate silence, congratulating ourselves upon our mature objectivity.

Those of us who are of a generous but apologetic nature will withhold solicitude through fear of embarrassment, rebuff, or appearing awkward. True, we are limited in the skills of comforting God’s people. True, we are so unschooled in the arts of human-kindness that we have little to say or do when confronted by a distressed soul. Or else we stumble along with some inept and inappropriate remark which, however commendable our intention, will only serve to inflame his wound, because in our spiritual blindness we are guilty of a sort of innocent brutality. Through ignorance we are cruel to one another.

Even our own intimate encounters with grief have little power to instruct us in the technique of translating our experience to others and gaining thereby a more sensitive insight into their needs, and a more sincere desire to speak to those needs. All in all, it is probably better that we do seize upon any opportunity to evade a demand upon us to be consoling, since we do it so inexpertly.

Admittedly the finding of a means of ingress into the interior caverns of another person’s soul is a genuine problem. He is determined that we shall not penetrate his defenses, and we are not particularly inclined to try to. Nor

do we have the emotional stamina to surmount the trying personality defects that people throw out as roadblocks to prevent our moving toward them. But it is only by breaking through mutual barriers and learning to see others as they see themselves that we can establish a true ground for compassion. Only by becoming part of one another can we loosen our hold on the fearfulness that immures each of us in his tower of sterile security.

Surely “no man is an island, entire of itself,” but it is open to question that “every man is a piece of the continent.” Rather we are all peninsulas, touching “the main” along one border only, but otherwise surrounded by seas that cut us off from each other, although they sweep our shores with common winds and tides. And who can say whether it is within our power to change the geography of human relationships?

When we are not quite honest with ourselves, we can hide out from the basic demands of compassion by dressing up our egocentricity in altruistic costumes that fool us most successfully, and may fool the rest of the world just a little too. For one thing, we can throw ourselves zealously into the large, vague causes that bear the clear label of magnanimity but never bring us too objectionably close to the hurt that is starkly written in one man’s eyes. There are plenty of superficial channels for draining off our excess pity, most of which offer the added appeal of easily-won accolades. Generally they will navigate us nicely past the Scylla of self-abnegation and the Charybdis of the Christian demand.

Of all the fashions that the shelter takes, this is the most insidiously deceptive because it works not by convincing us that there is no need to feel compassion, but by assuring us that we do feel it and are acting it out, when we are merely adjusting our halos in the mirror of self-commendation. It is patently easy to equate charity with “liberal contributions,” “political action,” “social awareness,” “human equality,” “world peace” and so forth. But what about a mad old woman on Chestnut Street? What about the appalling spiritual desolation of the well-fed and unexploited? What about the inward poverty and distortion that will never appear on the agenda of the social conscience but will nonetheless go on eternally warping the total picture of human society?

Here we are forced into yet another asylum, which can be classified as the plea-of-innocence shelter. Either we cannot or we will not recognize the part we all play in cornering our fellows, and driving them into desperation, criminality and madness. Rarely do we measure any word, action, or attitude as it radiates beyond our own perimeter. “I had nothing to do with driving the old woman out of her mind. I have no power to help her.” And so we are all innocent, and all guilty! The ultimate responsibility for her condition lies in every circumstance, whatever its source, that makes it intolerable for a human being to see his life as it is, that forces him to jettison his noblest faculties, even his hold on reality itself; that makes him rather fly to ills he knows not of than bear those ills he has.

When other ways of sublimating our urge to pity fail, there is always the flight into fantasy to fall back on. What better

escape can there be than the simple device of peopling a little world of dreamfolk, on whom we can lavish sympathy without restraint! To be able to weep freely over the synthetic tragedy in a book or play, when the selfsame situation confronting us in the flesh would send us scampering for cover behind our favorite defense, is indeed a sweet relief. And how much easier it is for us to feel a tender and positive sympathy toward those who have died and are safely pigeon-holed in history than toward those who live on and may yet prove in some way threatening to us.

The turtle-shell refuge is perennially popular because it is easily portable and ready for occupancy at a moment's notice. It is built up of the hardened scars of our own old half-forgotten wounds, and was originally developed to protect us from further injury. By now its imperviousness has thickened into indifference to pain in the world outside, and inability to identify with other people. The upper shell grows from the belief that our own troubles are very heavy, that the world is very hostile toward us, and that danger looms in every human encounter. The lower shell is formed of all the little devices we have evolved for being nice to ourselves to atone for the shabby way that life has treated us. Snugly ensconced in our cozy shell, we have no incentive for traffic in commiseration.

The house of mirrors is much in demand. It functions by reflecting back, with numerous distortions, the attitudes of the crowd around us. It persuades us that no more is required of us than is standard for "other people." It also prefers to divert any penetrating rays of light away from

ourselves, and to focus them glaringly onto someone else's defects and failures.

For the pious the shelter may take the form, not of a fortress or a dwelling, but rather of a temple, long recognized as a sanctuary for the fugitive. The ritual in the cult of non-compassion centers on the doctrine that religion is largely a matter of personal salvation. Our passport to paradise will be issued or withheld on the basis of whether we profess belief in certain facts which have been asserted about God, rather than on the scope of the role we have permitted God's will to play in our pattern of living. What happens to people is up to God, and not our affair. Passivity toward affliction and injustice is a fundamental tenet of the creed. Its devotees view the sufferings of others as a well-merited consequence of their transgressions, and their own tribulations as a testing by God.

The methodical-minded, those with a flair for arranging things in neat little piles, will have a predilection for the device of categorization. People can readily be sorted into those groups which merit our sympathies and those which do not. Then they can be carefully packaged, catalogued and filed away. Strange it is, too, that almost always the criteria on which we base our acceptance or rejection are those facets of their nature over which they have little or no control. Physical or economic heritage, age, sex, personal appearance, native intelligence, social status, inherent personality traits are the factors which regulate the flow of our feelings towards others rather than the magnitude or the urgency of their need.

The storm-cellar brand of refuge is the lowliest of them all. The principle element in its development is the view that all people are our competitors and rivals, actual or potential. It would be weak-minded of us to assist them in any way that might enable them to get an advantage over us, or leave us behind in the race. If we should so much as pause through anxiety over one who has fallen along the roadside, we might forfeit our hard-won place in the running.

There is, moreover, a secret wicked delight that can be drawn from the failures and miseries of other people. In proportion as they appear to fail, we appear to succeed. Or at least they will be shortening the measuring-rod by which the crowd will scale our success. And they will deliver us from the wretched state of supposing that we alone have fallen short, or have lacked our due portion of life's satisfactions and happiness.

No shelter is more frequented than the halfway house of pity. It is founded on our failure to recognize the dual nature of sorrow, for grief is not one, but two. The first, which might be called the lesser sorrow, is that of having lost something immeasurably precious, something virtually essential to our love for living. The second, or larger woe, is that of never having had anything the loss of which could occasion any suffering. The first is the sorrow of the deprived; the second, the sorrow of the empty-hearted.

Although a soul may agonize, may even crumble, under the burden of the lesser, it is out of triumph over this sorrow that the sublimity and greatness of the human spirit have sprung. The redemptive element is always there. But there

is little or no redemption in the larger sorrow. From it has come no greatness, no exaltation; only the slow corrosive decay of bitterness and frustration, only a numbed and crippled being, only isolation and madness.

This is the more poignant of the two not merely because of its own venomous nature, but because of the world's inimical reaction to it. People can understand and sympathize with loss. They are somehow fascinated with the dramatic intensity of the feelings attached to it, and with its graphic "human interest angle." They can identify with the stereotype sufferer, can "put themselves in his place," and appreciate "how he must feel." But they dare not identify with the situation of the empty-hearted. They can only despise and reject him, and brand him culpable for what he is, without the dimmest insight into the emotional starvation that has shaped him. Those who fall under the shadow of this extreme affliction will dwell in the last outpost of human brotherhood. They are the poor in spirit whom only Christ has blest.

### III

A shelter from compassion! A sepulchre for love!—not only for the power to love, but also for the capacity to be loved, for the walls that shut men out will also shut men in. The very fortifications that shield us from the world's tears will doom us in our turn to weep alone.

By the thickness of our walls and the magnitude of our efforts to reinforce them we can gauge the latent force of our instinct for compassion. Our ceaseless vigilance, our

constant patching and buttressing, our piteous finger in the dyke, all have failed to hold back the portentous pressure, threatening to engulf us in we know not what.

A shelter from compassion! A barricade from God!  
“Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and eat with him, and he with me.”

If any man would learn God’s name, let him join the kinship of God’s concern, infinite and infinitesimal, that cares for the realms beyond the stars, and cares for the plight of a lonely man and a fallen sparrow. The God within us *is* compassion; the one valid communion with him is through the sacrament of devotion to some love beyond our own small sphere. The living bread of his desire is the touch of quiet tenderness and silent reassurance. More precious to the heart of God than wine in a jeweled chalice is a single tear in secret shed for another creature’s sorrow.

## **About the Author**

Ruth Emma Durr (1920-2003) was born in Philadelphia PA, where she graduated from Philadelphia’s High School for Girls before enrolling in the University of Pennsylvania’s architecture program. There she distinguished herself as a student, with several awards for design between 1941 and 1942. She graduated with distinction from that program in 1942.

Among Quakers, she was active in the Young Friends

Movement. In 1955, she spent two terms at Pendle Hill, where she wrote *A Shelter from Compassion*.

She also wrote poetry, including a small book of whimsical poetry for children; she also published poetry in *Friends Journal* (1958). She served on the editorial committee of *Quaker Religious Thought* from 1961 to 1963.

After retirement, she moved to Foulkeways near Gwynedd Meeting, Pennsylvania.

## **Pendle Hill**

Located on 23 acres in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, Pendle Hill is a Quaker adult education, retreat, and conference center offering programs open to everyone. Pendle Hill's vision is to create peace with justice in the world by transforming lives. Since Pendle Hill opened in 1930, thousands of people have come from across the United States and throughout the world for Spirit-led learning, retreat, and community. Every year, people from many faiths and backgrounds come to experience Pendle Hill's educational programs in arts and spirituality, community activism and leadership training, and spiritual deepening.

Programs are offered in a variety of formats—including weekend workshops, extended online/on-campus programs, and evening presentations. Information on all Pendle Hill programs is available at [www.pendlehill.org](http://www.pendlehill.org). Pendle Hill's mission of spiritual education is also furthered through conference services—hosting events for a variety of

religious and educational nonprofit organizations, including many Quaker groups.

The Pendle Hill pamphlets have been an integral part of Pendle Hill's educational vision since 1934. Like early Christian and Quaker tracts, the pamphlets articulate perspectives which grow out of the personal experience, insights, and/or special knowledge of the authors, concerning spiritual life, faith, and witness.

A typical pamphlet has characteristics which make it a good vehicle for experimental thought. It is the right length to be read at a single sitting (about 9000 words). It is concerned with a topic of contemporary importance. Like words spoken in a Quaker meeting for worship, it embodies a concern, a sense of obligation to express caring or to act in response to a harmful situation.

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