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SACRIFICIAL PASSION
"Universal Compassion"

The Mountain of Care has to do with gratitude, compassion, responsibility, and motivity. What I want to talk about today is Compassion.

I really think the details of the incident I am about to describe, which occurred not long ago, is a mixture of real and non-real factors. It has to do with an old man on an airplane; I never did get his name, so I think I will call him "Mountain" (later you'll see why). I was travelling from one city to another in a hurry to make a meeting where I was to give a talk, and I was hoping it would be a bit quiet because I felt that the talk I had given in the last city needed some improvement. So I decided to spend the time I had on the plane strictly on polishing that speech. In getting on that plane I was careful to look over the situation. I asked for a certain seat and got it.

The first thing I always do when I get on an airplane is to see if the stewardess is friendly. The stewardess of this plane was visibly friendly. I had my collar on. I thought everything is going to be fine. I found my seat; it was on the side of the plane where there are three seats in a row, with a man by the window, nobody in the middle, and the aisle seat mine. We were just a minute delayed and I was glad for that, because it meant a little more time. I asked this same stewardess for something to write on; I didn't have my paper with me. She immediately went and got some stationery and I sat down and started working on my speech. Other passengers arrived; you know how they look to see if that is their seat next to yours, and you hold your breath hoping its not. They came by one by one, but nobody took that seat. I heard the door of the plane shut and I thought, "O boy, I have plenty of elbow-room."

Then here came the other stewardess, whom I hadn't seen yet; bringing with her an old black man. (I later found out that he was 80 years old.) He was obviously ill, because he was having difficulty walking even with her assistance. She came and stood him up in front of that seat beside me, and glanced at my collar. I thought, "Yes, I know what she's thinking!" So I helped him into his seat out of sheer hostility. I just sort of turned him around and let him fall into his seat. Then the stewardess looked at me with a phony smile and said, "Thank you, Father." I started trying to get to work, but I kept looking at that old man out of the corner of my eye. I couldn't keep my eyes off him. I didn't want him to see me looking at him. He had a strange look on his face, and I couldn't tell if he was watching me watching him or not. The stewardess came very quickly with a soft drink. I looked him over and figured out he would want a soft drink and, sure enough, he said about the stuff they were giving the other people, "I don't fool with that stuff." So we had soft drinks.

It wasn't very long before he tapped me on the arm and said, "Where is the bathroom?" Now, we were clear in the front of the coach compartment, and the only bathroom is in the back of the airplane. I said to him, with an irritation that he could probably notice, "It's in the back of the airplane." Then he said (his voice was trembling a bit; he was so old), "I just recently had a prostate operation and I have to go to the bathroom rather often." Well, I knew from watching the stewardess trying to get him on the airplane in the first place, that she couldn't take him to the restroom. And I thought, "I've got to take this man all the way through this airplane with this damn collar on. With all those people saying, "Oh yes there's the Father who cares for old

men, and for the old ladies too." But I thought, "Well my grandfather had this problem, and I know the old man really means it." So I got up and, with defiance, I got him by the arm. I was so angry that I didn't notice that this cowboy pilot we had was climbing almost straight up. Furthermore, it was very rough, and the seatbelt light was on--I hadn't noticed it. So we started staggering down the aisle. I thought, "O, if he doesn't need to go to the bathroom, I'm going to kill him!" Then the stewardess who called me "Father" spotted us. She didn't call me "Father" this time; she said, "this is a very bad time to be taking him to the bathroom." I wanted to say to her, "If I'm your father, be obedient." But it got so rough that we had to find a vacant seat and sit down a minute.

I thought we ought to talk about something, so I said, "Have you flown very much?" "My first time", and I thought about the first time I flew. I had a seat right in the tail of the plane. I thought how the pressure bothered me and I had to go to the bathroom. After I got in there, things got rough because we ran into a storm. The light came on saying, "Return to seat." I thought I'd done something.

The light finally went off and things calmed down a bit, so the old man and I went back to the restroom. The stewardesses were both there; they looked at me and smiled in horror, because they thought, of course, that I was bringing him there to ask one of them to take him. So I said, "I think I'll just go in with him," and they replied, "Oh yes!" Now this is a 727 and the restrooms are not very large. I went in with him, closed the door and locked it and there was so little room in there, and it was rough again, and he'd never been in one of them before, and he couldn't stand by himself. So, the only way to help him was for me literally to embrace him while he tried to manipulate a badly damaged urinating system. I was laughing by then; it finally was successful. As we went out the door, she did it again: she said, "Thank you, Father."

As I walked back up the aisle with him, it wasn't like it was when we were going down. It was triumph--sheer triumph. What I really thought about doing, with all the people looking at me, was to look at them and say, "Yeah, not only did I take him in there, we got it done successfully." And so, we went back in triumph to our seats, sat down, and I got him strapped back in the seat again.

We went on for awhile, and I worked. He asked me, then, "Are we getting close to Chicago?" I said, "Yes, pretty close." He was going on to Oklahoma City. He waited a few minutes, then he tapped me on the arm, and said, "I need to go again." Then I figured out what was going on. He had never been on a plane before. I remembered when I was a Boy Scout in 1950 when we travelled somewhere, and stopped at the station in St. Louis. We used the restroom in the station and flushed it; and I remember the trouble we got into with the train people for that. This old man thought, of course, that when you flushed the "john" back there, that the same thing would happen as in a train, and it would go on the airport runway. So he was worried that when it got landed there, he wouldn't be able to use the restroom. I assured him it would be all right; that maybe he could just wait until we got there.

When we got there, and I got up to leave, I was getting my coat, and I heard a voice say, "Thank you." Now I think he said that to me, but I'm not sure. Because, I think maybe I said it to him. In fact, I'm pretty sure I

did. If I didn't then, I would like to do so now. I would like to say it to that old man, because he stirred within me, without intending it at all, what, in the Other World, some people call "Primal Sympathy." He made me remember that the totality of human concern lives inside me. And that sometimes, dramatically, it gets called forth. It manifests itself in ordinary human compassion. What compassion means, I have ultimately come to see, is living through your experience with passion. It is given, yet it is self-consciously appropriated. This is, I think, the only thing that is finally essential in life---compassion.

When I looked into that old man's face, the reason I was embarrassed to look into it was because I saw every face that I had ever seen, and all the faces that ever had been or ever would be, and finally, I saw in that face, my own. His was a face with many deep lines in it, scars left by the wounds of time, I suppose you would have to say; black---black as the earth my father used to bring in on his shoes, out of the fields where he worked; mysterious--eight million years of human history were staring at me. And I was looking back at that. And that called forth within me, the depths of my being, something profound.

What I knew - not what I decided because somebody told me I ought - what I knew in that moment was that I cared. I just cared. I cared about him. I cared about myself. I cared about all men. I cared about that Mystery which brought us all to be, and which was at that moment, and is at this moment so surely taking us to our death.

As I looked into that old man's face, I wanted to live every life that has ever been lived in history, and every life that ever might be lived in history. I did not want to miss any of it. With no values at that moment about what felt good and what felt bad, what I liked or what I didn't like. I thank that "mountain" of an old man for giving focus in my life to Universal Compassion; for particularizing in my mundane existence, the release of love itself.

I know this already, but he told me again, without saying anything; that is, in the cry of elemental and inescapable human suffering - that which comes no less in the little irritations which spoil the most harmless and innocent pleasures of life, as it does in the massive impact of peoples being annihilated, such as Jews were. These little things, these little sufferings, draw forth from the person being encountered by it, the compassion that is there. Care is called forth.

In that moment, I remembered my brother. There went through my mind all the lavatorial slums across this world. More particularly, there went through my mind the first twenty-five years of my life, when I lived in a part of the country where a black man's bladder could burst because he was in the wrong part of town. And I did nothing, absolutely nothing to change it. I remembered that.

In that moment I became a fundamentalist for humanness. I decided that I would be unintimidated by anybody else--airline stewardesses or anyone, in order to see to it that a man could go to the bathroom in dignity. For I knew, at that moment, that taking that old man to the bathroom had no significance whatever except in my decision that it would be done on behalf of all men, that my life henceforth would be about nothing else whatever.

I thanked him too for making sacrificial passion necessary. He left me with no choice after I made a certain decision or two. It was his very objective helplessness which forced the compassion out of me. When we were locked in that little stainless steel cell together, it wasn't really his body I was embracing; I was embracing the absurdity of our common infirmities. I was laughing through my tears or I was crying through my laughter--I don't know which. I do recall, though, that I was totally impacted, at that moment, with the accumulated burden of all the suffering of mankind; and, simultaneously, with the hope of his possible alleviation.

Finally, I know I thanked him for a lingering glimpse of what is called in the Other World "soteriological existence." That it is just a hopelessly sinful, but miraculously forgiven, man who is capable of receiving the reward of serving all men in and through the Mystery which brings them here. Living life is not being carefree; living life is being care-full. It is not escaping from this mundane world, but assuming responsibility for it in every particular. Laying down life for the world is a decisional death far better than an unconscious fate.

I suppose that it is obvious that from that moment I had no longer any question about my assignment. Whatever particular form it might take, it will be living passionately, being compassion for the sake of all men. And I remember distinctly, how, as I got up and left the airplane, leaving that old man sitting there, that in my heart, in my being, I picked him up in my arms, carried him up the ramp, and held him on my lap to the place I was to speak. I stood before the group and spoke on another subject, but I was saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

--Charles Moore