

Excerpt from The Rhythm of Compassion

PREFACE

As far back as I can remember I've been searching for my tribe—those people who feel equally passionate about the care of their souls as they do about the care of the world. I've been blessed to find many of them, including my husband. Along the way I've dedicated much of my life's work to teaching people about the rich and complex intersection between the inner life and the life of service. I've come to think of this relationship between soul and society much like following the in-breath and the out-breath, as in meditation practice. There's a natural time for the in-breath of caring for self and family, and a natural time for the out-breath of caring for the needs of the world. The challenge is to become skillful in following our rhythm—knowing when it's time to go inward and when to go out into the community.

My personal story clearly reflects this quest to balance my inward search with my commitment to society. From early childhood my mother inspired my spiritual search and my father instilled me with a social conscience. As a teenager I was equally inspired to attend religious conferences and tutor inner-city children. During the 1960s I had a growing interest in Buddhist meditation and was involved in nonviolent resistance against the Vietnam War. In the 1970s I joined the Peace Corps eager to explore the diversity of the human condition. My years in Africa combined much personal growth with social contribution. On my return, the Women's Movement deepened my dedication to both inner work and community organizing. My husband, David, and I recognized each other as soul mates through our passion to integrate our spiritual and worldly efforts. In 1981, we created our business,

Empowerment Training Programs, to teach people both self-actualization and social conscience. It seems my whole life I've been learning to balance the inner and the outer.

And it seems that so many people are yearning for this balance. As we enter a new century people are taking a long, hard look at the state of their souls as well as the state of the world. In hundreds of letters and personal encounters, students have asked me for guidance in facing their own challenges and the pain of the world. They long for a sense of moral purpose and a way to "give back" to society. They aren't asking for easy answers, nor are they afraid to walk into the heart of human and ecological suffering. My students come from all walks of life and span several generations, ranging from twenty to seventy years old. Some are seasoned activists experiencing burnout and compassion fatigue, and they need the in-breath of personal reflection. Others have done years of self-awareness work and yet feel empty and disconnected, and they need the out-breath—finding their place within the larger social fabric. What they all have in common, however, is their spiritual hunger and a recognition that their own health is inseparable from the health of the world.

As more and more people make this vital connection, they begin the delicate act of juggling soul and society. This book is written to help you balance these two worlds, offering a seamless set of values that unites the inner and the outer. You will learn how to integrate your rhythm so that your inner self-care helps you serve the world, and your caring for the world contributes to your soul. Some of you will find you've been working too hard out in the world, and it's time to move inward, caring for your interior. Others who have worked on your inner life may discover you need to move out and engage with suffering beyond yourself. We will examine themes important to everyone: how to deal with guilt, shame, overwhelm, and burnout. How to answer the important and ever-present questions: Am I doing enough? How do I find the time for more commitments? We will describe the qualities of mature compassion, which diffuse these anxieties and allow us to balance our own needs with the needs of the planet. At the heart of this inquiry is a

move away from moral obligation, toward a joyful and spontaneous generosity—the deepest place from which to live and serve.

The process of balancing inner and outer is highly individual and changes with the different cycles of life. In our twenties we are brimming with idealism and long to channel our moral passion out into the world. Later, for some, come the children and a frantic attempt to work a full-time job and meet the needs of a family. As the children grow older we find there are many ways of serving as a family—in a nursing home, a soup kitchen, or planting trees in the community. When the kids have left home and we have climbed the career ladder, we decide to mentor. At midlife and at retirement people from all walks of life are discovering a yearning to give back to their communities.

This book will help you find your own rhythm of compassion caring for yourself and the planet. It is structured by two overarching stories—the personal and the social/ecological. Within these two sagas there are many small stories—my story, my students and colleagues’ stories—that tell how we’ve balanced our own needs while contributing to the world. This book is also an invitation to actively tell your own story and to see how intimately connected it is to the larger tales of the human family and the earth. We live and breathe and learn through stories. The stories in this book don’t prescribe how you should be; rather they offer poignant glimpses of life that you can reflect upon and add to your own unfolding saga as you choose.

To bring continuity to the two overarching stories we’ll use the metaphor of an archaeological dig. You will unearth the symbolic artifacts that help you tell your own story and connect to the story of society and Earth. In Part One, *The In-Breath: Caring for Self*, you will excavate your life story as a means to self-understanding and self-care. As you uncover the joy and suffering in your personal story you’ll see how it parallels the beauty and heartbreak of the world. In Part Two, *The Out-Breath: Caring for the World*, you’ll unearth the qualities of mature compassion that allow you to respond skillfully to the complex challenges and pain of the world

while maintaining your own well-being. We'll see clearly that the insight from your own story is crucial for engaging with the larger story of the human family and the earth.

Each section contains exercises, many of which are designed as ongoing practices that you can incorporate into your daily life. A few thoughts on how best to use the exercises in this book. It's helpful to have a journal and drawing materials as you may discover both words and images as you answer the questions. If you find that gentle, relaxing music helps you quiet your mind and work more deeply please select your preferred music for each exercise. Because many of the exercises are part of ongoing practices often you will return to them more than once. Your answers will change and deepen over time. If you are working with a therapist or support group these exercises can enrich and complement those endeavors. Integrating the practices from these exercises into your life is ultimately what will allow you to sustain your rhythm of compassion, the natural cadence within you that balances inner and outer.

Today we face an unprecedented challenge as we tend to our own spiritual health as well as the soul of a troubled world. We are pioneers in what the Dalai Lama calls "universal responsibility," learning compassion for self and society and Earth. The chapters ahead will demonstrate that both our well-being and the well-being of the planet depend on how skillfully we balance caring for our souls and caring for the world. Without the in-breath of self-care and reflection we can't sustain our involvement with the suffering of the world, nor do we have the clarity of heart and mind required for the complex challenges we face. On the other hand, without the out-breath of compassionate engagement with society our inner work implodes upon itself leading to the dead end of narcissism and spiritual emptiness. To sustain life on all levels we need to breathe in, and we need to breathe out.

This book acknowledges that we live in a broken world and that we're longing for a way to express our highest values. It is a book about the ethics of caring, an ethic that recognizes that the health of

the human psyche and the health of the world are inextricably related. It is my deeply held conviction that we cannot truly heal one of these without healing the other. My greatest hope is that in responding with compassion to the brokenness in ourselves and in all living beings, including the earth, we will become whole again. Such big-hearted caring is our greatest challenge. Perhaps it is also our deepest fulfillment.