

Fellow Feeling and Loving Kindness

Penny Mawdsley thinks about fellow feeling in life and literature, including the lack of it in George Eliot's rigidly religious Mr Bulstrode and the kindness of Syrian refugees in the Yorkshire floods.

The personal reflections on Fellow Feeling and Loving Kindness that I'm about to unfold on this 14th February 2016 have little connection, if any at all, with the mythical St. Valentine or Santes Dwynwen whose day Welsh lovers celebrate on 25th January.

'Fellow feeling' (German; *Mitgefühl*) was a subject of great interest to Max Ferdinand Scheler. Scheler (1874-1928), a recent discovery of mine, was a prolific writer, stimulating thinker and one of the leading members of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy school. He discerned five distinct affective labels for fellow feeling, which he visualised as standing in a strict hierarchy where the higher levels depend on the lower. In his *The Nature of Sympathy*, first published in English some decades after his death, Scheler argued that fellow feeling comes in at number 3, half way between (1) identification (with 'the other'), (2) vicarious feeling (empathy) and (4) benevolence (German: *Menschenliebe*) – humanitarianism or a broad love of mankind – and (5) unselfish love. For Scheler sympathy is basically underwritten by love.

Scheler argued that the character of an individual's entire affective life amounts to the degree of his or her loving engagement with the world. How much sympathy we have is consequent on how deeply we engage with the world with our love. So far, so good. Where do I relate to all this? I find myself somewhat at odds with this exclusively positive spin on 'fellow feeling'. To cut to the chase, the world is, and as far as we can discern always has been, pervaded by propaganda of one kind or another – easy to swallow and generally critically unexamined. It attracts us for being closely associated with some of the many subtle influences to which we have been exposed during our formative years – both positive and negative. Such influences may include some of which we may not be aware, or those fully conscious influences whose hold on

us is so strong that we want stubbornly to retain them, on the one hand, or utterly to reject them on the other.

The close identification of one person with the feelings of others may at best lead to person A behaving with compassion towards person B, but when, persuaded by the power of propaganda, any number from a small crowd of people to a sizeable section of the population develop strong fellow feeling *against* an individual or a vulnerable group of those judged pejoratively to be somehow undesirably 'different', this fellow feeling may become a very ugly, misguided and dangerous thing indeed.

I guess that in any society for all those who have developed an open readiness to both empathise and sympathise with the plight of someone else there are others – probably greater numbers – whose wariness and suspicion holds them back from identifying so readily with the afflicted. From what I know of myself I own to belonging to the cautious latter category. I need to be very strongly convinced that an initial sympathetic response to a horrific news item, for example, should be to follow it up with an appropriately compassionate action. Worse still, I too easily persuade myself that a knee-jerk compassionate response is at best naive – I don't know the other side of the story and I may indeed be making matters worse. Am I just trying to satisfy my *own* conscience by apparently doing the compassionate thing?

Thank heavens there are plenty of people around to model the compassionate response role! It would appear that the only chance for the world to become a better and happier place for us all is to encourage the healthy development of emotional intelligence in our young and to do everything in our power to prevent disillusionment, apathy and the deadening of sensitivity to the feelings of others setting in by the time they reach adult life. Our primary schools are currently working imaginatively to

encourage pupils to develop a greater awareness of and respect for others, going beyond teaching ‘good manners’ to help them learn how to read facial expressions, body language and to use their imaginations to ‘walk in another’s moccasins’. Those like me who are tempted to hold back from becoming involved with the plight of others – for myriad reasons including the fear of being taken for a mug or, worse still, an interfering do-gooder – surely miss not only the heartening experience of feeling that they have made a difference – for the better – but also fail to experience the genuine appreciation of others for kindness given.

It is to be hoped that the warm-hearted Syrian refugees who had been granted safe asylum in Manchester before Christmas have picked up on the huge gratitude of the people of Rochdale for so readily turning out to help residents clean up after the devastating floods over New Year. These refugees, who had clearly suffered a terrible journey as they made their way through Europe to reach Britain, included a certain Yasser al-Jassem, a 35-year-old teacher who had been carried on the back of a lorry from Calais in May. Yasser reported simply: ‘We saw the pictures on TV and wanted to help.’ Another group of seven Syrian immigrants helping with flood prevention in Littleborough were reported as saying that they wanted to give something back to the community that had generously welcomed their arrival.

Not only is it to be hoped that these willing individuals have boosted their self-esteem and felt good to have carried out helpful and essential tasks for members of their host community, but further, felt a surging uplift of hope for this new and challenging chapter in their lives – a valuable ‘resurrection’ after all the upheaval, misery and exceptional endurance of their recent past.

On an unhelpful and worrying note, however, looking at the online comments following the upbeat report of the refugees ‘mucking in’



Syrian refugee Yasser al-Jassem: Photo: Rethink Rebuild Society

alongside the benighted residents – sadly and probably to be expected – there was some negative response to the photo of the men filling the sandbags as part of the flood damage-limitation strategy. A certain ‘George Cross’ pasted:

This pic is a blatant set-up photo-opportunity propaganda... Watch the actual video and it's all white British people doing the work.

Such a response will have boosted the cause of those who are against taking in asylum seekers and it will have undoubtedly encouraged those with that xenophobic version of ‘fellow feeling’ which works so dangerously against all attempts to further and bolster community cohesion.

It often appears that genuine loving kindness is in all too short supply. Those of us who have had the very good fortune to experience it at the receiving end, so to speak, have little excuse not to mete it out generously to others when and wherever we witness a situation for doing so. As I write these words, however, I find my toes curling. Early memories of being told by parents and teachers to ‘count my blessings’ and, more formally, (and to me meaninglessly) to love God (we are *commanded* to do so) – or at least to love the Lord Jesus as a faithful and dependable ‘Friend’ – stick in my craw. These apparent injunctions probably hold me back from many a compassionate or kind action that I might perform.

Shocking to say, and perhaps even more shocking to write, the more I have tried to



Peter Jeffrey as Mr Bulstrode in the BBC *Middlemarch* (1994)

appreciate the attraction of following the rabbi from Nazareth along ‘the Narrow Way’, the more I have been not exactly repelled but not drawn either. However ridiculous, totally unreasonable and completely unjust it may sound (which it clearly is), I find myself put off by the emphasis given in the Gospels to Jesus’ bias to the poor and disadvantaged, the needy and the underdog. Where is the Good News of this undeniably good and compassionate person for the likes of me? While happy to acknowledge that social justice needs to be brought about for all, I don’t like being coerced or cajoled into any action to help bring it about by do-gooders standing on the moral high ground. Perversely, perhaps I am someone who has always felt distinctly uncomfortable in the company of obviously ‘good’ people.

Returning from my anti-social rant to look more at the problem of disconnects between religious doctrine, ethical stance, and genuine compassion for others as well as moral action, it is interesting to note what writers of past and present have contributed in this area. Here is George Eliot’s comment on her *Middlemarch* character Mr Bulstrode’s wicked behaviour (despite his being a rigid and loudly self-proclaimed Christian):

There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow men.

It appears that Eliot does not opt for explaining away Bulstrode’s bad behaviour as hypocrisy but rather, she recognises a universal tendency to understand that religious belief in a ‘general doctrine’ can only go so far and that our morality is dependent on direct fellow feeling or sympathy. Eliot appears to be saying that if we can’t sympathise or feel compassion for ‘individual fellow-men’ then we are unlikely to treat others well whatever our religious beliefs are.

From the realms of well-written, contemporary American fiction, in Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*, Miss Celia, the needy and inexperienced young woman who is desperate to hide from her husband a total inadequacy as a 1950s American domestic goddess, is ready enough to accept unbounded practical assistance from her perceptive and compassionate domestic help, Minny. Yet, through her background under segregation, she seems immune from recognising Minny for the outstandingly patient, caring and competent individual that she is. Other memorable ‘white’ characters in the novel display similar blindness and an inability to identify with the feelings and plight of those who work for them. Unknowingly, these characters – from both sides of the segregated divide – appear to belong to the Machiavelli and Hobbes school, where the prevailing motivation for action is understood to be fear rather than love.

In contemporary British fiction, for example in Sadie Jones’s *The Outcast*, the central character Lewis rarely receives acts of loving kindness after the tragic death of his mother. What is most disturbing about the narrative, perhaps, is that even the best of the adults in the growing boy’s life fail to pick up on the depth of his bereavement and fail to summon the necessary patience to help him out of it. The father is unable to free himself sufficiently from the weight of his own bereavement to pay proper attention to the needs of his son and he exemplifies such a traditionally stoically ‘British’ attitude towards grief that he is blind to the fact that Lewis is not coping and needs psychiatric help.

The boy’s young stepmother at least makes an effort to befriend Lewis before making the

disastrous attempt to seduce him that destroys not only any trust he has painfully started to build up in her but the affection that has slowly developed between them. In this novel, however, redemption of a sort is achieved in the character of the damaged Kit, abused by her father in childhood but who is eventually able to stir in Lewis a profound desire to protect and love her. The author appears to demonstrate that it is by having experienced love that the individual is capable of developing and showing it to another.

In the delightful 2008 novel, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, set during the Nazi occupation of the island, the characters are brought together in a very moving way. Under the regime of privations caused by the Occupation their fellow feeling develops as a result of a common need to cope and keep up their spirits, and the narrative unfolds an exceptionally humane vision and demonstrates the power of cooperation and single-minded love in survival.

Now that our society has developed so many professional channels of help for people facing severe difficulty in coping with being ‘up against it’ in numerous ways – even if in these austerity times this help is not as freely available as it needs to be – we tend to forget how people managed in the past – and indeed manage today in undeveloped and troubled parts of the world. When there was no trauma counselling or therapy on offer, folk here were usually dependent on various wise and perceptive lay persons, members of extended families living in the vicinity or, if they were lucky, a parish priest with pastoral ability. Those needing help risked being shunned, misunderstood or disbelieved and there was, presumably, a likelihood that their psychological state could end up more troubled than when they originally unburdened themselves.

As the asylum seekers arrive in greater numbers, there will be a huge and overwhelming



Syrian refugees help fill sandbags for flood defences in Rochdale

need for the host countries to provide sustained counselling for the millions of traumatised displaced people seeking sanctuary, in addition to the basic provision of shelter, food and paying occupation for the duration of their stay. Those who make these provisions will need to dispense what is necessary in a manner which will somehow preserve the human dignity of the recipients and not demean them. Whether those hailing from cultures unlike our own who have received loving kindness in the form of charity handouts over a prolonged period will become sensitive to their dependence and feel inadequate, even ashamed, as time goes on remains to be seen.

All we can do is hazard a guess that it is a basic human response to feel uneasy when there is an extended imbalance between giving and receiving. However, as it is likely that many of the current refugees will opt to stay on in Europe if they can find homes and sustainable work in the countries where they have landed up, it is to be hoped that, like those who ‘did their bit’ during the flooding crisis in the New Year, they will fulfil a psychological need and feel a sense of satisfaction – and indeed pride – in contributing to the betterment of life in their local communities as well as feeling valued by their fellow residents.

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