Compassion 1

On Saturday, November 24th, I caught a piece of the radio program “The Peoples’ Pharmacy” on WBFO. Joe and Terry Gradon interviewed Dr. Kelly McDonigal from Stanford’s Compassion Cultivation Center. It caught my ear, so I would like to share what I heard with you.

First, a parable of my own that will set the stage for what Dr. McDonigal had to say.

Once upon a time, Annabelle Lee was charged with watching her little brother, Johnathan. It was a Summer’s day afternoon so Annabelle Lee told her brother to get his skate board because they would go to the park. Johnathan, a feisty eight- year-old, grabbed his board and started right off. Annabelle Lee yelled, “Hey, slow down before you hurt yourself.” Johnathan slid down the sidewalk; around a curve, and outside of Annabelle Lee’s sight. She just shook her head. Her brother seldom listened to her and she was in charge, being thirteen years old and all.

Johnathan tried a trick on his skateboard but the trick was on him. He took a backflip off his board and landed on his back, skinning his arm from wrist to shoulder. The worst of it was that he landed at the feet of Samson and Lorelei, all from the same school. Samson, now aged ten, laughed and laughed and kicked the skateboard down the street. Lorelei, the same age as Annabelle Lee, was shocked at the accident. She was the one who screamed. She got so shaken up that she yelled at Johnathan for being so stupid.

Annabelle Lee finally reached her brother. She helped him up; wiped off the gravel from his arm and the tears from his face. She knew she was in trouble because she was in charge to take care of him. Annabelle Lee got angry with her brother but, oddly enough, didn’t show him any anger. She knew he was scared but not really hurt, so she gave him a hug instead and said to him, “Johnathan, you are just like me when I was your age.” “You were?” he asked. “Yup”, she said, with a smile on her face and a glow in her heart.

Annabelle Lee had a gift – the gift of compassion. No compassion from Samson, just bullying. Lorelei was so shocked by the accident that the first thing she did was to pile on the stress by yelling and getting angry. Annabelle Lee had the gift to give, the gift of compassion.

Now to Dr. McGonigal to explain what compassion is. The following words are hers for the most part. You can get the podcast at PeoplesPharmacy.com, program 1104.

The questions she came up with is how compassion is needed to ease anxiety and despair. It is easy to show compassion to someone we love dearly but what about those who have different ideas than ours. Or even within families, how do you interact without a fight?

She did science on these questions. It might be weird to apply science to something like compassion. Neuroscience and psychology can empower us to be more skillfully open-hearted; to be more effective in how we help others, and take care of ourselves.

Now-a-days, interactions are adversarial – from politics to sports to economics. These interactions are making us less compassionate. Compassion has its roots in a desire to relieve suffering. Compassion includes the belief that you can make a difference. It includes to courage to act. It also includes a warm glow you get by connecting with others.

What can be the opposite of compassion. It is when Samson starts to bully Johnathan. It can also morph into something ugly as in the case of Lorelei’s scream.

Dr. McGonigal will shed some light for us next week as I continue this topic. After all, if we don’t accomplish compassion, we won’t understand what Christmas is all about.