

Appreciation (2 of 5) Understanding Self and Others

May 23, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

suffering, compassion

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning and welcome.

One of the ways of appreciating people, of showing appreciation, is to show them that they are understood. Humans have a big need to be understood. I have been in many situations where there was conflict, with people disagreeing vehemently about something, or with some people quite hurt by some behavior, and they're trying to work it out.

The whole situation changes when one or both parties understand the other. They show that they understand what is going on for the other person. They haven't necessarily agreed with the other party's point of view, but they have understood their point of view, and have made that clear. Maybe they have understood the background for that point of view or for what happened.

Something like magic happens in communities and between people when someone feels as if they have been understood. Often something can relax. There can be a greater feeling of safety or being respected.

When we run into situations where there is suffering – situations that might evoke our compassion – to quickly respond compassionately before we assess the situation well can lead to inappropriate action and inappropriate intervention. Or it can lead to intervention, connection, or support for someone that isn't as rich or as valuable as it could be.

One of the ways of appreciating people, and one of the elements of compassion, is to take the time to understand them better. An important part of understanding them would be to understand ourselves better, because without understanding ourselves, we won't understand the biases we have or the orientations we use to view the situation.

When different people encounter the same person who is suffering, they can see the suffering in very different ways. Some people might see the suffering as primarily emotional, and respond to the emotional situation. Some people might understand the suffering as physical, and make sure that they get people some water and food. Some people might see it as societal or about a larger situation they have to fix. They are fixing

the situation in order to help the person who is suffering to feel better, but are not really taking time to know them.

We sometimes orient ourselves very quickly in times of suffering, because we think it's a crisis or we are alarmed. But if it is possible, we can slow down and take time to understand the other person. Even if we can't support or help them with their particular suffering, it can make a huge difference for people to feel understood, and that their situation is really taken into account.

For example, I have visited people in the hospital, where people were caring for them, but the people did not really feel understood in their suffering or in the challenges they were having. But when someone comes and does not try to fix their medical situation or try to make a nice picture of it all – “you'll be okay” – but really acknowledges, “Oh, I understand that this is difficult for you,” something in the person relaxes.

Take time to understand the other person. Maybe ask simple questions, such as: “How is it for you?” And you might say, “This must be difficult for you.” That can be a prompt for the person to want to explain more because they know you're interested. You seem to be attuned to them. You might ask: “You know, this seems difficult.

What's happening? What part do you find the most difficult?"

Sometimes we can be quite surprised, because what we think the difficulty is, is very different from someone else's experience. Maybe you are focusing on them and on the challenge they have, but they are actually focusing on how their challenge is limiting their ability to take care of a relative or a neighbor. So in helping them, you might be missing what's really important to them.

To understand others is a form of appreciation. It also allows us to find out from people what we can appreciate. When people think that we really want to understand them or we're beginning to understand them, sometimes they will open up more. Sometimes people will relax, and we can see them more fully. Then there is more to appreciate. The more we appreciate, the more this begins to be compassionate action. Compassionate action begins with appreciation and understanding. That *is* compassion in action.

The other part of understanding is how important it is to understand ourselves. We have so many biases and so much conditioning about how we encounter suffering. For instance, do we understand that we really want to support the other person, or are we taking care of ourselves? Some people's idea of compassion is to address suffering so that they don't have to feel bad.

This is more about fixing others in order to take care of ourselves and make ourselves more comfortable.

Or, we can have certain opinions about what does and does not deserve compassion, or what counts for suffering and what doesn't, or what elements of life need to be addressed when there is suffering.

Understand that we often have preconceived ideas that we carry with us in how we understand the situation.

This is where mindfulness is invaluable because when we have trained ourselves to be mindful, we start becoming more sensitive to the beginning of an opinion – the beginning of an orientation of “you,” a selective way of thinking. When we see it arise at the beginning, we can question it. We can add a question mark: “Is this really so?” If we see we’re focusing on people’s emotional life, is it really true that that is what’s needed? Do I always look in terms of reading people’s emotions? Maybe what comes up is, “Something needs to be fixed here, and I’m responsible to fix it.”

One of my Achilles heels is a sense of responsibility for things that are not necessarily my responsibility – “It’s up to me.” I’ve had to learn to notice that in myself – how quickly that gets activated. “Oh, I have to take care of the situation,” and it’s not mine to take care of. But it is my responsibility to connect to someone, to help

people feel understood, to appreciate people, to empathize, to sympathize, and so forth.

Also, we need to understand what we are trying to do when we are compassionate or when we're trying to be with suffering. How much self is involved there? Are we trying to look good? Are we trying to look good in the eyes of people who are not even here, for whom we're supposed to be a certain way? Are there a lot of shoulds or opinions that we're operating under? Are we scared?

So, to understand ourselves better. Both these movements take a little bit of time. Maybe we have the time in some situations. To not rush into compassionate action, but to take time to appreciate the other person, and to find what there is to appreciate. To appreciate something that might be deeper than their surface behavior or what they're saying. To try to understand them a little more deeply.

What is behind their surface behavior? What is behind what they're saying? What do they need? What do they think they need? What does this difficulty mean for them? How do they understand it? Because there are so many facets, whichever facet you think is important might not be important for them. Then you can turn your attention towards yourself and ask the question: "What is there to understand about myself in relation to the

suffering that I'm encountering? Am I afraid? Am I overeager to fix it? Do I feel responsible? Am I judging the person in some way for what they're doing?"

An important element of compassion is appreciation, and an important element of appreciation is understanding. Maybe we can't really appreciate others without some deeper level of understanding about them.

So you might see how this works today when you're with people. Maybe they don't have to know that you're making an effort to understand them better. In your conversations with others, you could ask yourself, "Can I take time to understand this person more? Can I understand myself more? If I understand myself, maybe I'll understand them better." In that deeper understanding, is there a deeper appreciation? And is there a deeper understanding of the issues that need to be addressed?

Thank you very much. We will continue this discussion about different aspects of appreciation tomorrow.