

The Art and Discipline of Seeing Compassionately by C. Paul Schroeder

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This article by C. Paul Schroeder is an adapted chapter excerpt from *Practice Makes PURPOSE: Six Spiritual Practices That Will Change Your Life and Transform Your Community*, published by Hexad Publishing, September 2017.

Across our nation, throughout our world, viewpoint polarization is on the rise. People from different sides of the political aisle look at the same facts and draw radically different conclusions. Opposing camps assemble the same pieces of information into different pictures, then attack each other, shouting, “See? See? Here’s proof that we’re right and you’re wrong!” We are pulling farther and farther apart from one another, and the strained fabric of our democracy is starting to tear.

This dynamic, however, isn’t limited to the realm of politics. It shows up even in our most intimate relationships. In my interactions with those closest to me, I often find myself thinking, “You are so clearly wrong on this—why can’t you see it?” or “I have every right to be angry after what you did,” or “If you would just take my advice on this, you’d be much better off.” This usually happens because I make up stories to support my assumptions, selectively assembling the details into a picture that suits me. And when these stories are challenged, I dig in my heels and argue with people I love.

Prophets and sages throughout the generations have all agreed on this one point: how you see determines what you see and don’t see. So if we want to heal the divisions in our country and our homes, we have to learn a new way of seeing.

The spiritual practice of Compassionate Seeing enables us to create space for stories that are different from ours, and engage curiosity and wonder toward people who don’t see the world as we do. It is the first of six practices described in my new book, *Practice Makes PURPOSE: Six Spiritual Practices That Will Change Your Life and Transform Your Community*. The following excerpt is a short introduction to Compassionate Seeing, with some practical suggestions for how to start using it right away.

HOW TO PRACTICE COMPASSIONATE SEEING

Ending the cycle of judgment requires Compassionate Seeing, the first and most fundamental of the Six Spiritual Practices. Compassionate Seeing is a moment-by-moment

commitment to viewing ourselves and others with complete and unconditional acceptance—no exceptions. Here are the basic steps:

1. Notice your discomfort. Pay attention whenever something makes you feel uncomfortable, or seems painful, ugly, boring, or annoying. Don't try to fix or change anything. Just notice it.
2. Suspend your judgments. Resist the inclination to immediately decide whether something is right or wrong, or whether you like or dislike it. Don't assign blame, and don't shame yourself or anyone else.
3. Become curious about your experiences. Start to wonder about yourself and others. For example, try asking, "I wonder why that bothers me so much?" or "I wonder what this is like for you?"
4. Look deeply with the intention to understand. Approach your experiences with a flexible mindset, and try to remain open to new information and alternative explanations.

THE TWO MOVEMENTS OF COMPASSIONATE SEEING

The First Movement: Recognizing the Difference

Compassionate Seeing has two movements, both of which are encoded in the universal spiritual prescription we know as the Golden Rule: treat others as you would want to be treated in their place. The first movement of Compassionate Seeing is recognizing the difference between ourselves and other people. This means seeing others as truly other—they are distinct individuals with their own unique experiences, preferences, and ambitions.

Focusing on our differences might seem counterintuitive at first, because we usually think of compassion as somehow blurring the distinction between ourselves and others. But if I don't recognize and respect the difference between me and you, I will impose my beliefs, values, and goals on you and get wrapped up in the outcome of your choices. I will act as if my story was your story, too. Whenever I find myself trying to control other people's behavior or manage their decisions, I take it as a sign that I am having trouble separating myself from them. When I notice this is happening, I find it helpful to repeat this simple maxim to myself: "What is about you is about you, and what is about other people is about them." I have learned that as long as I keep this in mind, life tends to be much simpler for me and the people around me.

Recognizing the difference between ourselves and others is an especially critical skill when it comes to parenting. As a parent, I constantly struggle not to impose my desires and goals on my children. It's so easy for me to over-identify with them and make their success or failure about me. Much of the conflict between children and their parents happens because the parents don't recognize the difference between themselves and their children. It's important to remember always that our children have their own aspirations and life-trajectory—and they might be very different from our own.

The Second Movement: The Imaginative Leap

As we recognize and accept the difference between ourselves and others, this naturally gives rise to curiosity about their experiences. This leads us to the second movement of Compassionate Seeing: we make an imaginative leap across the boundary that separates

us. This imaginative leap is a daring act of curiosity and creativity. Instead of imposing my values and beliefs on someone else, I begin to wonder about that person's motivations, desires, and emotions. I put myself in the other person's place, asking the question, "If I were this person in this situation, what would I think, how would I feel, and how would I want to be treated?"

As I am making an imaginative leap into someone else's situation, I notice my tendency to make judgments pauses almost automatically. Curiosity and wonder are fundamentally non-judgmental approaches to the world. I find that I simply cannot hold a judgment in my mind and be truly curious about another person at the same time. Judgments pop like soap bubbles in the presence of curiosity. As soon as I start wondering about someone else's experience, I stop selectively gathering information to support my preconceived ideas. Instead of thinking I have the other person figured out, I see that person as a mystery. Engaging a discovery mindset helps us avoid judgments and stay flexible, open, and interested.

COMPASSION AND PURPOSE

The practice of Compassionate Seeing reminds us above all that our story is not the story. There is a greater reality, a larger picture of which we see only a very small part. In this way, Compassionate Seeing connects us to Purpose, the experience of belonging to something infinitely greater than ourselves. When we practice Compassionate Seeing, we recognize that our lives are intertwined with a story much bigger than our own. Uncovering this thread of connection between us is like plugging into a powerful current of abundant vitality and joy.

Judgments, on the other hand, disconnect us from Purpose by falsely suggesting that what we see is all there is. This makes it easy for us to blame others for what we perceive as their shortcomings or bad choices. Judgments sap our time, energy, and attention. They cause us to waste these invaluable commodities constructing false narratives. If we could see the whole picture—or the whole person—then other people's behavior would probably make far more sense to us than it does now. The more I know of someone else's story, the easier it is for me to accept that person for who they are, even if I find their actions difficult or troublesome. So if I am having a hard time practicing compassion toward someone else, I take that as a sign that I just don't know the whole story. I'm not seeing the big picture.

For more information about the book and the six practices, visit www.sixpractices.com.