

Conservative Compassion Vs. Liberal Pity

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A remarkable feature of President Bush's pronouncements is his unashamed use of the "L" word. Mr. Bush calls his political philosophy "compassionate conservatism," but he is not afraid to say the older, stronger word that gives that philosophy its meaning. The word is love.

Mr. Bush used the word when, during the presidential campaign, he was confronted by a man who spoke loosely and negligently of illegitimate children and the welfare system. When the man uttered the word "bastards," Mr. Bush became angry. "First of all, sir," he said, "we must remember that it is our duty to love all the children." The president was similarly unflinching in his inaugural address, in which he spoke of "failures of love." In that address Mr. Bush spoke, too, of "uncounted, unhonored acts of decency," an allusion to Wordsworth's lines describing

that best portion of a good man's life; His little, nameless, unremembered acts Of kindness and of love. Many conservatives are skeptical of the notion of mixing love and politics. Memories of the sloppy radicalism of the 1960s, with its "Summer of Love," can sour almost anyone on love's "significance as a principle of order in the human soul, in society and in the universe," as T. S. Eliot put it. But the taint goes deeper than the sixties. Long before the hippies exhorted a now-defunct counterculture to "make love, not war," the parties of the Left sought to make love a first principle of politics. The socialists invoked the idea of love in their struggle against market liberalism: they believed that the modern system of loveless labor could be replaced by a model of community grounded not in competition but in mutual care. In their idea of the "communal" or "social" man, the socialists disclosed the deeper image of their hearts, the idea of the loving man, the man who is not alienated either from himself or the things and people around him.

In the twentieth century, many liberals adopted this vision of love's place in society. They embraced the modest socialism of the welfare state partly because they hoped to stave off more draconian forms of socialist organization, but also because they genuinely sympathized with the plight of the less fortunate, whose condition they hoped to improve through social legislation. In nationalizing almsgiving, the liberals were motivated, too, by the belief, so characteristic of the last century, that compassion exercised under the supervision of government experts is more likely to be effective than the charitable impulses of private individuals. Charity would no longer be a gift but a right. The liberals hoped, through this change of terms, to make taking alms less humiliating to the taker. They failed to see that the taking of charity is always humiliating—except, perhaps, when the gifts are accompanied by an affection so palpable as to diminish the shaming quality of the transaction.

The error the socialists and the welfare-state liberals made was to suppose that love's efficacy can be gradually extended beyond the bounds of the family and the tribe, where it spontaneously creates desirable patterns of order, into larger communities, where it does not. Wherever we see love required to perform a large, public role, we find that it almost always degenerates into pity. Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish émigré and New York intellectual, illuminated the distinction between love and pity when she drew attention in *On Revolution* to a theme in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Arendt described how the novelist, in the story of the Grand Inquisitor, contrasted the loving compassion of Jesus with the eloquent but disastrous pity of the Inquisitor:

For compassion, to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious, and pity, to be sorry without being touched in the flesh, are not only not the same, they may not even be related. Compassion, by its very nature, cannot be touched off by the sufferings of a whole class or a people, or, least of all, mankind as a whole. It cannot reach out farther than what is suffered by one person and still remain what it is supposed to be, co-suffering. Its strength hinges on the strength of passion itself, which, in contrast to reason, can comprehend only the particular, but has no notion of the general and no capacity for generalization. The sin of the

Grand Inquisitor was that he, like Robespierre, was “attracted toward les hommes faibles,” not only because such attraction was indistinguishable from lust for power, but also because he had depersonalized the sufferers, lumped them together into an aggregate—the people toujours malheureux, the suffering masses, et cetera. To Dostoevski, the sign of Jesus’s divinity clearly was his ability to have compassion with all men in their singularity, that is, without lumping them together into some such entity as one suffering mankind. The greatness of the story, apart from its theological implications, lies in that we are made to feel how false the idealistic, high-flown phrases of the most exquisite pity sound the moment they are confronted with compassion. Pity, Arendt argued, is a concern for the misery of another unprompted by intimacy with, or love for, the sufferer. Compassion, by contrast, is a love directed “towards specific suffering” and concentrates on “particular persons.” It can be exercised only by individuals or small groups, not by agencies or bureaus. Pity, Arendt wrote, “may be the perversion of compassion.” Because the pitier “is not stricken in the flesh,” because he keeps his “sentimental distance,” he has often shown “a greater capacity for cruelty” than the confessedly cruel.

The type of compassion that modern liberals claim as their own peculiar virtue is really a form of pity, milder perhaps than that which lies at the heart of the socialist orthodoxies, but dangerous in its own right. David Hume called pity “counterfeited” love. It is the false compassion that results when men exercise their kindness by committee. It is the look in the eyes of the welfare clerk or the public housing official. To be pitied by another man is to stand humiliated before him; however well-intentioned programs grounded in pity may be, they always end by laying low their intended beneficiaries. Pity does not lead to a flourishing in the pitied, though it may provoke their resentment, even their rage; the act of pitying is always a kind of strength condescending to weakness. Love awakens; pity oppresses.

Driven by a belief in the redemptive power of love, President Bush has tried to mobilize America’s little platoons of compassion on behalf of the wayward, the needy, the outcast. Even so, pity still prevails in government. Proposed changes in the law, to involve the institutions of civil society in the distribution of public assistance, languish in limbo. Religious institutions, for example, do a better job than purely secular assistance programs in helping people fix those inner defects of character that account for so much failure and distress, but our modern poor laws hinder the compassionate work of these organizations.

In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo described the power of faith-based charity not simply to feed and clothe but to heal and transform. Hugo made his character Monseigneur Myriel, bishop of Digne, a model of religious charity, and he expertly portrayed the effect of the priest’s compassion on the wretched convict Jean Valjean.

“You need have told me nothing,” [the bishop assured Valjean.] “Why should I ask your name? In any case I knew it before you told me.” The man [Valjean] looked up with startled eyes. “You know my name?” “Of course,” said the bishop. “Your name is brother.” “Monsieur le curé,” the man cried, “I was famished when I came here. Now I scarcely know what I feel. Everything has changed.” *Les Misérables* is a novel, and it may be that Hugo’s account of the compassion of the bishop of Digne is overly sentimental. But don’t tell that to Father Peter Raphael and Sister Simone Ponnet of Abraham House. This organization, in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx, is home at any given time to ten or so previously incarcerated convicts, who, in exchange for early release, have agreed to live by the rules of the house—its regimen of work, education, and drug testing—prior to regaining their full liberty. Only nonviolent offenders in prison for the first time are eligible. When I mentioned Hugo’s bishop of Digne to Father Raphael, who was for many years a prison chaplain on Rikers Island, I found he knew the story by heart. Hugo’s picture of compassion, he insisted in French-accented English (Father Raphael was born in the Languedoc), “is not fiction.” He has seen the transformations occur. In New York State, some 70 percent of released offenders return to crime; of more than 100 Abraham House graduates, only one has so far gone back to prison for a fresh offense.

Why is faith effective in the provision of welfare assistance? First, because it enables the provider to see in the recipient something more than degraded human flesh. The next time you read a newspaper account of some particularly wretched man, who has committed a crime or fallen into a miserable way of life, try to connect this picture of the man with the child he must once have been, full of promise. If this takes an effort of imagination, how much greater the force of will necessary to associate the miserable man with the idea of a loving God who purposefully gave him life and who yet desires his regeneration. Faith gives some people the ability to do that. "God," Father Raphael says, "came to call sinners."

Whatever one's idea of the truth of particular religious creeds, society benefits when people engaged in social work are able to see promise in the people they are charged with helping. Faith in God, Father Raphael says, is crucial to the work of the non-denominational Abraham House—as well as to its success. He calls the place a "little parish, a parish of offenders."

His faith, Father Raphael says, not only helps him to see the "grace God can work" in fallen men; it also helps him overcome the fear a man naturally feels when he works under the ever present threat of violence. Here, too, Hugo understood the problem. After the bishop of Digne has offered Valjean a bed for the night, Hugo relates how the convict "swung round upon his elderly host, folded his arms, glared at him," and exclaimed,

"This is wonderful! You're putting me to sleep in a bed next to your own." He broke off to laugh, and there was a monstrous quality to his laughter. "Have you thought what you're doing? How do you know I have never murdered anyone?" The bishop replied quietly: "That is God's affair." Father Raphael tells me that when you visit a prisoner on Rikers Island, "You don't go by yourself over there." He believes that God goes with him.

The effect of a compassionate gaze is to make the beneficiary conscious of something in himself he did not know he possessed. Hugo's bishop of Digne sees past Valjean's grime and perceives what Hugo called his "soul." Through the bishop's charity, Valjean is himself brought to "see his own soul, hideous in its ugliness." Yet as "he wept a new day dawned in his spirit." Melodrama? If so, we need more of it: according to one study, one in every 32 adults in the United States is under some form of supervision by the criminal justice system; over 2 million people are behind bars.

Compassionate assistance cannot, of course, be a substitute for the punishment of criminal acts or atonement for wrongdoing. And we must remember, when we speak of compassion's healing virtues, the ineradicable element of evil in human nature. No doubt most people do too little to resist the evil in themselves; but for the much smaller group who embrace the malignant power they discover in their hearts, even acts of kindness and of love may fail to redeem.

But although in many cases compassion can heal, institutions that have the power to do more than pity people who, unrepaired, will go on to wreck other lives continue to be shut out of public almsgiving. Abraham House receives no government money. In order to qualify for funds, it would have to compromise the principles that make it effective. "We tried many, many times," Father Raphael says. "We went to Albany. We saw the people from the state and from the city, telling us, 'Oh, you have to compromise with us, to change a little bit your philosophy, because we can help you.' But our philosophy is that we cannot erase the spiritual way we deal with human beings."

To understand how different from the compassionate ideal is the reality that bureaucratic pity has constructed, consider the example of the public school system. Compassion is at least as key in education as in almsgiving. A teacher's faculty of sympathetic insight into his students' minds and imaginations is precisely what shows him each one's special potential. We do not, when young, know who we are; it is in the course of being educated that we come to understand what we must be. The teacher whose vision is sharpened by compassion helps to awaken those processes of self-culture that enable his student to develop his own peculiar gifts and aptitudes.

In his inaugural address, President Bush observed that “no insignificant person was ever born”: the specially valuable function of a good teacher is to perceive, in each student, his unique significance. This work of doing justice to people, impossible in a crowd, is not easy even in a classroom. Though experience helps, compassion is the real origin of that insight that lets a teacher see through the superficial masks that young people so often wear, and to understand their deeper problems and possibilities. The German philosopher Johann Georg Hamann argued that only “love—for a person or an object—can reveal the true nature of anything,” an observation especially true of that most complicated and mysterious of objects, the human soul.

“My experience,” the poet Coleridge said, “tells me that little is taught or communicated by contest or dispute, but everything by sympathy and love.” Educators whose teaching is an extension of their powers of sympathy—think of Charles “Chips” Chipping in James Hilton’s *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*—develop the most remarkable qualities of perception. The reason is obvious: Shakespeare has one of his characters reflect on the folly of taking love out of learning, for love “adds a precious seeing to the eye.” In the same spirit, Dickens dramatized the compassion of the true teacher in the character of Marton, the benevolent schoolmaster in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Like Hugo’s bishop of Digne, Marton is the soul of charity; and he has awakened in little Harry, his “favourite scholar,” a love of learning and of “poring over books.” Yet Harry’s reciprocated affection for his teacher perplexes Marton. “How did he ever become so fond of me?” the schoolmaster asks, modestly oblivious to the miracle he has performed in an English village. “That I should love him is no wonder, but that he should love me—” The reader understands what Marton himself does not: it is what Dickens calls Marton’s “compassion” that has made Harry love him and desire to please and emulate him—one of learning’s most powerful spurs. Harry ends by calling his teacher his “dear kind friend.” “I hope I always was,” Marton replies. “I meant to be, God knows.”

Marton’s compassion, Dickens shows, has enabled him to perceive, in the young people with whom he works, the “panting spirit” inside their “fragile form.” “I love these little people,” Dickens has the narrator of *The Old Curiosity Shop* declare, “and it is not a slight thing when they, who are so fresh from God, love us.”

It is because education seeks to nurture that “panting spirit” that compassion is so crucial to its enterprise. Education involves more than equipping a child with mechanical skills, filling him with useful information, and teaching him how to reason. Good teachers also try to awaken a child to the world’s possibilities—and his own. They nourish his moral imagination, his human sympathy, his understanding of himself as a citizen in a community.

The philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose father had famously educated him on strictly utilitarian principles, knew from bitter experience how defective an education only in skills, unilluminated by compassion, can be. James Mill’s machine-like efficiency as a teacher made his son into a prodigy of scholarship—he began Greek at three—but it left him unfinished as a human being. As a young man, Mill published brilliant essays upholding the progressive political ideals his father had inculcated in him; but he had not learned how to cultivate the “material out of which all worth of character, and all capacity for happiness, are made.” He was, he said, like a “stock or a stone,” able to turn out quantities of prose for the Westminster Review but unacquainted with what he later called the “culture of the feelings.”

The result was predictable: after completing his home schooling, Mill suffered a nervous breakdown—a “habitual depression,” a “grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,” he called it, quoting Coleridge. The “whole foundation on which my life was constructed,” he wrote, “fell down.” He recounted how, after much travail, he came “to adopt a theory of life, very unlike that on which I had before acted.” The scholar educated on severely utilitarian principles now ranked “among the prime necessities of human well-being” what he called the “internal culture of the individual.”

My own first memory of the kind of education I am trying to describe, an education inspired by love and compassion, is inseparable from my early consciousness of a world beyond the mechanical and utilitarian. My second-grade teacher encouraged me to memorize Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Of course I was incapable of understanding much of it at the age of seven, but I soon discovered that adults were stirred by the words.

At Gettysburg, Lincoln went beyond Jefferson's Declaration of Independence to give the most profound account we have of the ends of American life. The Declaration, for all its power as a civic touchstone, is of the eighteenth century in its depiction of men as machine-like assemblages of "inalienable rights." The weakness of the classical liberalism that the Declaration expresses lies in what Lionel Trilling called its "denial of the emotions and the imagination," its "mechanical" conception of "the nature of the mind." Lincoln insists that the mind is more than a package of reason and passion: it possesses depths that the Enlightened philosophers never fathomed.

In urging me to learn the Gettysburg Address by heart, my teacher introduced me to the most cogent refutation we have of the idea that the American is merely a Yankee—rational Economic Man, a shrewd getter and spender, a Mill-like calculating machine. On this battlefield, Lincoln says, Americans offered up their lives out of love for ideals that transcended their material aspirations. These ideals sanctify their deaths: they "consecrate" and "hallow" the land where they fell. Though my second-grade self could understand none of this, I was conscious at the time, in some inarticulate way (however improbable it may seem), of the growth within me of an ideal self—the person whom the second-grader, trying to memorize the Gettysburg Address, wanted to become, and believed that he could become. And, though I wouldn't understand this until much later, it was the beginning of my civic education, as well.

Even in the best of all possible worlds, not every teacher will live up to this compassionate ideal, sparking each student's intellectual, moral, and imaginative development. Not every school will be a community bound together by fellow-feeling. But compared with many private schools, whether secular or religious, today's public education system—like so many creations of the liberal, bureaucratic state—smothers the embers of compassion under an encompassing blanket of pity.

Today's progressive-ed pedagogy, with its focus on pupils' self-esteem, shrinks from giving students the constant challenge they need to move on to a new level of mastery and insight. The dumbing-down of the curriculum, the unwillingness to make kids learn a body of knowledge and develop basic skills through drill, the easy tests and lack of consequences for leaving homework undone—all conspire to keep kids' horizons low, instead of expanding them. In inner-city public schools, especially, teachers tend to view their students with undiluted welfare-state pity, seeing them as unable to meet high, or even ordinary, standards. The result is the normalizing of social promotion and the multicultural assertion that the student's own world is sufficient for him, that his education need not constantly challenge him with worldviews and ways of life higher and better than the limited world into which he was born—since how could he ever become the person fit to enter such a higher realm?

A teacher prompted by compassion rather than pity would say to a struggling kid: "You are not living up to your potential. You are frivolously wasting the gifts God gave you. You've got talent. Show it." Compassion awakens a spirit of emulation; pity does not, for pity is afraid to judge, even where judgment is essential to growth. Nowhere is the secret contempt that underlies all forms of pity more evident than in this failure of teachers to hold their students to their own private standards or to try to excite in them a yearning to excel and transcend. In their hearts, these teachers lack the very foundation of compassion: the ability to see their pupils as fellow creatures exactly like themselves. Denying that these young people can possibly live up to a higher idea of themselves, the teachers acquiesce in what President Bush has called the "soft bigotry of low expectations."

Yet it is difficult for teachers to do better under their demoralizing working conditions. Caught between the it's-not-my-job work rules of the teachers' unions and the picayune regulations of the

central bureaucracy, they find themselves imprisoned in a mechanical system organized like an industrial factory. Anyone who has been put to cookie-cutter work on such a model knows how difficult it is to feel, in such conditions, that he possesses a soul and a destiny; only by a tremendous effort of will can such a person retain, in this situation, anything more than a faint idea that the human raw material he is charged with processing also has its unique human potential. A teacher's contract requires him to teach for x hours a day; at the end of the xth hour his students become someone else's problem. The merit of teachers who do manage to see behind their students' apathetic masks goes unrewarded: teachers' unions oppose merit pay and defend a perverse set of incentives that encourage not compassion but timeserving.

That mindset results in a community far different from one where compassion can work its nurturing transformations, and, were there any lingering possibility of creating such a community, the rights revolution that has swept over the public schools in the last several decades has vaporized it. The rights that students have been discovered to possess include everything from the right to due process before being suspended from school for misconduct to the right to wear a baseball cap during the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance to the right to play on the boys' baseball team, even if one is not a boy. Earlier this year, a federal district judge decided who had the "right" to be the valedictorian in a New Jersey high school.

To view schoolchildren as rights-bearing citizens before they have reached the moral and civic maturity the schools are supposed to foster is to lose sight of education's purpose. Where students can sue their teachers, there can be no spirit of order and community, no flourishing of fellow-feeling. A teacher cannot be expected to act confidently to make the classroom an orderly place, a little platoon of learning, when he knows that even a minor infraction on his part of the numerous rules that now govern every facet of school life may render him personally liable. Nor will a teacher who is straining every spiritual muscle to maintain authority in the face of his unruly students be able to see through the cocky pose to the struggling, uncertain soul.

Even though the liberals' reign of pity has filled America with shabby housing projects and grim schoolhouses destitute of beauty and love, the Left has won a reputation for compassion, while conservatives are thought to be coldheartedly indifferent to human suffering. How did this come to pass? Partly because, with the decline of classical liberalism, conservatives became the principal defenders of liberty of trade. In their effort to rescue market principles, they forgot the role that love plays in ordering those parts of society that the mores of the marketplace do not govern.

But there is another reason. Unnerved by the success of the progressives, many conservatives reasoned that, since they could not possibly beat their opponents, they must join them. In a spirit of pessimism and opportunism, these conservatives abandoned their own principles. A mistake: they gave up the chance to formulate an alternative theory of compassion without gaining in exchange a reputation for charity.

If the liberals built up a regime of pity both to halt the spread of more sweeping forms of socialism and to assuage their own guilty consciences (in agony over the fact that some of them are rich), the pessimistic conservatives did so to outfox the liberals. One sees this dark cleverness at work in the careers of conservatives as different as Otto von Bismarck and Richard Nixon. Bismarck, strictly speaking, was not a conservative: he was an idiosyncratic reactionary who, in the words of his English biographer, A. J. P. Taylor, followed by turns Marx and Metternich. In the 1880s, a decade after he had unified the German nation, Bismarck implemented a far-reaching program of social welfare insurance, grounded in the then-revolutionary idea of old-age pensions. The reforms he oversaw were, he believed, inevitable; better, he thought, that he, rather than the liberals or the radicals, should carry them out, for he at least could be relied upon to mitigate the damage.

These reforms were admirable in theory, and, had they been implemented in a different spirit, they might have proved beneficial in practice. But the Iron Chancellor enacted his program in a

manner calculated to diminish personal liberty and increase the authority of the state. Bismarck, Taylor wrote, did not “promote social reform out of love for the German workers.” His object was to make workers “more subservient” to the state.

Bismarck “provocatively rejoiced,” Taylor wrote, “in echoing Frederick the Great’s wish to be le roi des gueux, king of the poor.” But the merriment was deceptive, for the old Junker was at heart a pessimist. With his nervous anxieties, his gastric ulcers and temper tantrums, his nights with his cigars and his “Black Velvet” (a combination of stout and champagne he concocted himself), Bismarck was not at home in the modern world he felt powerless to stave off completely, nor was he in the least sympathetic to its aspiration to lift up the masses through social legislation. “I have spent the whole night hating,” he announced one day, when he was the most powerful man in Germany and perhaps in Europe, and might be supposed to have been on good terms with his planet.

In trying to outmaneuver his enemies, Bismarck laid the foundation for the socialist state envisioned by the nineteenth-century German economist Johann Karl Rodbertus, one of the earliest theoreticians to reconcile nationalism and socialism in a Romantic ideal of the super-state. Rodbertus thought it possible to re-create, in a nation-state organized along socialist lines, the communal purpose that had propelled the city-states of antiquity to greatness. In his theories lay the inspiration of a number of socialisms—National Socialism, Leninism, the Stalinist idea of “socialism in one country.” Bismarck was under no illusions about men reaching greatness; but in combining nationalism and socialism, he prepared the way for a successor who did nurse such dreams: Adolf Hitler.

A century after Bismarck’s reforms, Richard Nixon made a similar series of calculations. As part of his Family Assistance Plan, Nixon contemplated the ultimate form of public pity, a government-supplied minimum income unconnected to individual exertion and therefore sure to subvert the industriousness that strengthens character. Impelled by a bitterness—a resentment, Henry Kissinger called it—even fiercer than Bismarck’s, Nixon similarly sought to disarm the opponents he hated by using their ideas against them. (“Can you imagine what this man might have been,” Kissinger once asked, “had he ever been loved?”) Although Congress never enacted his proposed guaranteed-income legislation, Nixon succeeded in opening the government’s sluice gates and flooding federal cash into social programs. Such spending, 28 percent of the budget at the end of Lyndon Johnson’s term, consumed some 40 percent of it by the time Nixon left office. Under Nixon, the dreams of the Great Society became a reality.

Nixon had been influenced not by Rodbertus and the Romantics, but by Nietzsche. Borrowing a copy of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* from his assistant, Monica Crowley, in 1992, Nixon told her: “I must have lent [my copy] out to someone. I can’t believe I’m missing my Nietzsche! I always try to look at his stuff during a presidential campaign to remind me of why I went through the damn fire.”

Nietzsche’s theory of decadence found fertile soil in Nixon’s mind. In off-the-cuff remarks in Kansas City in July 1971, Nixon—recalling how, on visits to Athens and Rome, he had sat musing upon the broken columns—speculated on the decline of the American civilization. The “great civilizations of the past,” Nixon said, “as they have become wealthy, as they have lost their will to live, to improve,” have “become subject to the decadence which eventually destroys a civilization.” The United States, he said, was “now reaching that period.” The policies Nixon proposed for “decadent” America were contrived in an atmosphere of impending doom and have about them, as so many things in his life do, a quality of ruin.

Believing that Western civilization had passed its peak and begun to decline, both Nixon and Bismarck formulated their apparently compassionate programs out of a combination of cynicism and disillusionment. Ostensibly conservative, they never thought to address the problem of compassion in a conservative way; full of hate, they could never have grasped the transformative potential of love. Possessed by morbid drives that defy easy psychological analysis, they pursued

a revolutionary domestic policy, not because they had any faith in its merits but in order to be revenged on their enemies and consolidate their power.

Conservatives have come a long way since then. Unlike their counterparts 30 years ago, they've learned where compassion fails to thrive. They know that governments are not structures of love—any more than markets are. More important, they understand, as Burke and Tocqueville did, the power of civil society. Conservatives today are showing that the state can mobilize civil power in new ways, in order to multiply the little platoons of compassion and to tap society's deep reservoirs of love. From government-funded school voucher programs that give kids the chance to experience real teaching, to faith-based welfare reforms that actually promote welfare, these policies are designed to replace the pity that rots lives with the compassion that can transform them.

That's what makes compassionate conservatism conservatism's revolutionary idea.