Blog Post – Compassion

When pandemic planning hit and things shifted online, I started paying attention to words. I have a deep, if narrow interest in *historical ontology* – the way we generate kinds of people as we devise classifications (Hacking, 1996). For instance, I started my career in remediating students with *dyslexia*. That term morphed into *language-based learning disabilities*, which morphed into *reading disorder*, and so on. Importantly, it’s not just a relabelling – it’s a different way of being because the way we label has the power to *make up people*. Label first, personhood second. But I digress. The point is that I like to observe words and their functions and how they bring about a sense of being in the world - a word watcher.

As the pandemic spread, we were suddenly moving online and everyone everywhere started talking about how to do that. The word *compassion* started to be bandied about and within a week it became an exhortation. Compassion first.

So I want to use this blog post to talk about compassion. Compassion, not as empathy and not as softness but as a deep, soulful dedication and investment into the learning and growth of another person. I’m going to do that by telling you how I have observed compassion amongst us in the last two weeks.

It’s the instructor who tells a student physically ill from stress that we have a few good options to finish the course and any of them work very well.

It’s another instructor who connected with a student on feeling scared about finals and pressed for time with reassurance that a solution was coming soon.

It’s a colleague giving everything when you don’t think she could give any more.

It’s the other colleague who hollers to his students that he loves them because they need to know who loves them.

Its me, feeling teamwork like an Ontario summer sandbox, knees touching, this is gonna be great.

I’m thinking about compassion, like I said. I’m thinking that compassion is not softness or ease or a glib dismissal. It’s not letting a student slide through and it’s not feeling bad for someone. Compassion is an honourable, grave, sober commitment to another person’s learning and growth. Committing to the growth of students means that we acknowledge that our current context is especially difficult right now, that we are all on a feelings-rollercoaster, and that the apprehension and hurriedness (and challenge) about going online for you and for students only adds to the struggle. Compassion holds us in a place where we believe in another and believe in ourselves. Compassion asks that we extend flexibility and patience. We give benefit of the doubt. Arm in arm, we help one another to find our way through and see each other to a resolution. We’re all in it together, and compassion is what binds us.

All those words: connection, teamwork, togetherness, leadership, and compassion, have changed because of what’s nipping at our heels. No longer feel-good words, now lifelines; compassion lifelines that will make up people differently.

Hacking, I. (2002). *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.