

Everyday Compassion: Mr. Rogers and Käthe Kollwitz

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This paper studies Mr. Rogers and Käthe Kollwitz, two lovers of humankind who conveyed their compassion through their artistry and ministry. How are they alike and how are they different in the way their actions are loving? Is there a common element in their life histories that lead them to compassionate living? What compelled these individuals to loving action? Further, what can we learn from these individuals so that compassion can be fostered in ourselves and others?

Why have I chosen to compare Mr. Rogers and Käthe Kollwitz out of my memory box of heroes and heroines? Why such an odd coupling rather than Dorothy Day or Teilhard de Chardin or Simone Weil?

Somehow to me these two people convey in the midst of their extraordinary talent and presence a sense of the ordinary and everyday. They are approachable.

Most Americans know Rogers and his TV program, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood that began in 1968 on public television. Now that he has died (February, 2003) at the age of seventy-four, it is all the more important that we note his modeling of the compassionate life.

Some of us are aware of Käthe Kollwitz and her art. But it seems many are not. She was a German artist born in 1867 who died in the spring of 1945. She encountered the horror of two world wars, the loss of her son in World War I and her grandson in World War II. When she publicly denounced Nazism in the early 1930's, she was no longer permitted to show her work publicly and had to resign as a teacher at the Art academy. (Kollwitz, 1955, p. 8) She too was the model of a compassionate life.

So how is it that these two gifted people are approachable? Neither of these artist—compassionate lovers went to ashrams, or wore sack cloth. They both were perhaps driven in their own work but they lived their work lovingly. They both got married, raised children, had friends, loved music (ironically, both appear to have had a fondness for Beethoven), and enjoyed travel—in other words, they attempted to live ordinary lives. Perhaps Rogers was more able to live an ordinary life than was Kollwitz, given that she attempted the “ordinary” in the midst of wars and the deaths of a son and grandson.

Despite their seeming differences, I have a special personal connection with both Rogers and with Kollwitz. I remember as an adolescent with angst, discovering a Kollwitz print of a mother and child. I felt deeply touched by this picture. There was “something”—a depth and solidity to the figures (no sentimental mother and child portrait this!). There was a pathos that stunned me. Meeting Kollwitz on paper came on the heels of my cousin’s untimely death when he was thirteen and I was fourteen. This event was a turning point for me. Until then, I had not really faced death and my mortality. After that, death played out figure and ground with my life and it was not always evident to me which was figure and which was ground. Kollwitz’s acknowledgement of death as the other side of life resonated within me. That tension was graphically portrayed in her work: the fragility of life was confronted.

Kollwitz did not avoid the difficult theme of death, but instead grappled with it palpably in all her works. She portrayed this life–death tension continually.

It would seem that much of her mother and child works early on were a recapitulation of family of origin traumas. Long before she had to confront her grief at the death of her son Peter in World War I, Kollwitz, as a child, carried the burden of her own mother’s grief at the death of two of her children. Kollwitz (1955, p. 19) remarks, in her account of her early years, how she blamed herself for her brother Benjamin’s death:

... Father said that our little brother was dead. ... I instantly felt certain that this was punishment for my unbelief; now God was taking revenge for my sacrifice to Venus. My relations with my parents were such that I said not a word about it; but what a weight there was upon my mind, for I believed myself to blame for my brother’s death.

She suffered the weight of the child’s magical thinking. (It seems appropriate to note here that this theme—the deleterious effects of a child’s magical thinking—is one that Mr. Rogers has often addressed so kindly in his songs.)

Grappling with death was her life theme. However, to know and appreciate life and to live in loving kindness and compassion requires this grappling. Kollwitz (1955, p. 157) remarks in a letter to her son Hans later in her life: “All my work hides within it life itself, and it is with life that I contend through my work.”

Consider the words of Naomi Shihab Nye (1995, p. 42) in her poem *Kindness*:

Before you know what kindness really is
 you must love things,
 feel the future dissolve in a moment
 like salt in a weekend broth.
 Before you kindness as the deepest thing inside ...
 you must know sorrow
 as the other deepest thing.
 You must wake up with sorrow.
 You must speak to it till your voice
 catches the thread of all sorrow
 and you see the size of the cloth. ...

Kollwitz's family of procreation informed her art as well. She admits in her diary and letters that she was very driven and focused and intent in her work yet it was her attachment and love of her family that also ignited her compassion for the suffering of others—the workers, the peasants—and was the underpinning force.

It is her mother–love that expands outward to others and connects her to her universal sense of compassion for all humanity. Stephen Post (2003) writes in *Unlimited Love*, “[Parental love] is the foundational evolved building block that, when uncoupled from our ancestral environment, can be refashioned into something that goes beyond its beginnings and becomes even more extraordinary than it is by nature.” (p. 97) Kollwitz accomplished this feat in her passionate compassionate art that catapulted from its core of mother–child bond into a universe of suffering in which she discovered beauty.

Kollwitz was passionate about portraying the life of the worker. (The *Weavers* series actually gave her notoriety.) She states that while her work may have been in the direction of socialism, her real motivation was about beauty: “My real motive for choosing my subjects almost exclusively from the life of the workers was that only such subjects give me in a simple and unqualified way what I felt to be beautiful. ... My impulse to represent the proletarian life had little to do with pity or sympathy. I simply felt that the life of the worker was beautiful.” (Kollwitz, 1955, p. 43-44)

In taking the time to see the workers, Kollwitz witnessed their truth, their beauty. Jean Vanier (1998, p.22) in *Becoming Human* reminds us that “to reveal someone's beauty is to reveal their value by giving them time, attention, and tenderness.” And Stephen Post (2003, p. 51) observes that “love is not ... best understood as a form of pity so much as an abrogation of rejection through the creation of a celebratory relationship. ... It is the ultimate expression of inclusion, acceptance and ‘being with’.” In her art, Kollwitz allowed those whose lives were dismissed or invisible to count and to be made visible. In that way, she connected with her subjects and celebrated their lives.

Certainly these notions of seeing beauty and celebrating the other were lived out by Mr. Rogers as well. His love and compassion, like Kollwitz's, expands beyond the parental love into a universal and “unlimited love” (as Post aptly defines it) that permeated his television programming. Who has not heard him sing, “You Are Special” and not felt just a little bit better? (Rogers, 2003)

You are my friend
 You are special
 You are my friend
 You're special to me.
 You are the only one like you.
 Like you, my friend, I like you.

In the daytime
 In the nighttime
 Any time that you feel's the right time
 For a friendship with me, you see
 F–R–I–E–N–D special
 You are my friend

You're special to me.
There's only one in this wonderful world
You are special.

Rogers (2003) also has a song, “It’s You I Like”—“liking the deeper inside of you”—that is, not the persona or the social class or “the clothes you wear.”

It's you I like,
It's not the things you wear,
It's not the way you do your hair—
But it's you I like
The way you are right now,
The way down deep inside you—
Not the things that hide you,
Not your toys—
They're just beside you.

But it's you I like—
Every part of you,
Your skin, your eyes, your feelings
Whether old or new.
I hope that you'll remember
Even when you're feeling blue
That it's you I like,
It's you yourself,
It's you, it's you I like.

Mr. Rogers didn’t paint or sculpt but, just as Kollwitz could *see* her subjects and convey them empathically in their beauty and their truth, Mr. Rogers could connect and see the “deep down inside” you with the people he met. In a recent memorial to him (PBS, April 2003), a ten-minute video clip was shown of his time with Jeff Erlanger in 1981. In the segment, Rogers sings “It’s You I Like” with Jeff, a severely disabled child confined to a wheelchair: the warmth and connection between this TV personality and a little boy so paralyzed was palpable. (I remember being touched by this episode in 1981; I cried again in 2003.) Jeff Erlanger, now a man, spoke from his wheelchair on the stage of Heinz Hall in Pittsburgh about that day with Mr. Rogers. Because of Rogers’ immediate presence to Jeff and of his “just wanting to get to know you”, there were no retakes, no need for editing. The ten minutes you saw of their warm dialogue was the original!

Ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1963, Rogers tended his TV flock with loving presence. He and his program embodied Vanier’s perspective on loving, “To love is not just to do something for them but to reveal them in their own uniqueness, to tell them that they are special and worthy of attention. We can express this revelation through our open and gentle presence, in the way we look and listen to a person, the way we speak to and care for someone.” (Vanier, 2003, p. 22)

My own experience of Mr. Rogers attests to his remarkable lack of persona and his ability to be present and kind. My family and I lived in the Pittsburgh area from 1972 until 1986. When my children were toddlers (we were all his faithful fans—his program

came at Disintegration Time—5:30 pm—and I needed to sit with Mr. Rogers as much as the kids did), the country neighborhood grocer informed me that Mr. Rogers was going to use their store that Sunday (when the store was closed). Sure enough, as we drove by our grocery after church, there was Mr. Rogers finishing his shoot. We stopped and he was happy to talk with us. He remarked to me how fortunate my children were to have me as their mother, what a good job I was doing—comforting words for a psychologist who found that parenting was the hardest job in the world and who questioned everything she was doing! He was so present to us. I asked him if we could get a photo of the children with him—he kindly obliged even though my husband had to drive two miles home to retrieve my camera. Back came my husband, camera in tow, and the picture was taken, or so we thought. Unfortunately, despite Mr. Rogers’ patience, presence, and kindness, we discovered that there was no film in the camera. So I have a special remembrance of Mr. Rogers, but no photo!

It seems that Käthe Kollwitz had a loving presence akin to Mr. Rogers, given that many people came to her with their problems, and that she was considered a kind listener and was loved by people from all walks of life. Kollwitz’s son Hans describes his mother in the year after 1933 (Kollwitz, 1955, p. 8)

She could not help learning of the horrors that were occurring in Germany; so many of those who were affected came to her to pour out their grief and dread. ... she was never able to observe the miseries of others without taking them into herself. That was the reason people told her their troubles. She seldom gave advice, but she listened, “preserved their words in her heart.”

However, there is perhaps a great difference between Kollwitz and Rogers in how their loving kindness and compassion developed. To my knowledge, Rogers did not experience any major losses comparable to those encountered by Kollwitz; Rogers’ family of origin had not the traumatic deaths that Kollwitz’s family of origin endured. Nevertheless, Rogers did, in an existential sense, very deeply help his young (and adult) audiences confront death and loss and difficult feelings.

To some, Rogers seemed sappy: perhaps it was these folks’ own fear of approaching the shadowy underbelly of life, because underneath the sweater and the sneakers was a guide into the difficult psychic realms of dealing with death and loss, scary feelings, and the experience of our own vulnerability. Rogers’ kindness and compassion arose out of his facing these themes squarely and without denial.

While Rogers helped children grapple with mortality and vulnerability at a level they could safely understand, Kollwitz lived through tragedies and then seemed to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of her experience to help the rest of us confront the life–death dialectic. Compounding her traumas from World War I and II, Kollwitz’s home in Berlin was completely destroyed by bombing; her son Hans lost not only his home in that war, but also his son.

Her own son Peter was killed in October 1914; by December, Kollwitz starts conceiving a plan for a memorial, but it is in fits and starts. There is nothing facile or linear about Kollwitz’s compassionate life.

Peter's death created a profound shift in her work and her thought. She was intensely preoccupied with creating this memorial to be placed at the cemetery in Belgium where her son was interred with so many other soldiers. (Millions died in World War I!) When the memorial was finished years later, it was of two parents kneeling: universal, archetypal parents grieving for the loss of the universal soldier who has died for what old man's cause in what absurd war?

In February 1915, Kollwitz (1955, p. 64) remarks, "I do not want to die even if Hans and Karl [her husband] should die. I do not want to go until I have faithfully made the most of my talent and cultivated the seed that was placed in me until the last small twig has gone. This does not contradict the fact that I would have died—smilingly—for Peter. ... Peter was the seed for the planting which should not have been ground."

This diary entry reminds me of Joseph Campbell's notion of following your bliss. Following your bliss, your unique life path does not mean lack of obstacles, suffering, and struggle. Quite the contrary, I think Campbell's point is that living your gifts and talents fully entails all of those elements. Of course, Rogers embodied following bliss and he invited everyone to do likewise—to be who they are. (Or, to quote St. Francis de Sales, "be who you are and be that perfectly".)

When one reads Kollwitz's diary entries (1955, p. 96), the hard facts of following one's bliss and the path of compassion become evident:

I have again agreed to make a poster for a large-scale aid program for Vienna. I hope I can make it, but I do not know whether I can carry it out because it has to be done quickly and I feel an attack of grippe coming on. I want to show Death. Death swings the lash of famine—people, men, women and children, bowed low, screaming and groaning, file past him.

While I drew, and wept along with the terrified children I was drawing, I really felt the burden I am bearing. I felt that I have no right to withdraw from the responsibility of being an advocate. It is my duty to voice the sufferings of men. ... This is my task, but it is not an easy one to fulfill. Work is supposed to relieve you. But is it any relief when in spite of my poster people in Vienna die of hunger every day? ... Did I feel relieved when I made the prints on war and knew that the war would go on raging? Certainly not. Tranquility and relief have come to me only when I was engaged on one thing: the big memorial for Peter.

Mr. Rogers' and Käthe Kollwitz's compassionate paths were prayerful. Their work, in fact, was their prayer. Rogers said of his TV work that he wanted it to be the "broadcasting of grace upon the land" (quoted in his PBS memorial, April 2003). Kollwitz in 1915 (p. 64-65) talks of her work and her prayer:

It is said that prayer ought to be a coming to rest in God, a sense of uniting with the divine will. If that is so, then I am—sometimes—praying when I remember Peter. The need to kneel down and let him pour through, through me. Feel myself altogether one with him. It is a different love from the love in which one weeps and longs and grieves. When I love him in that way I do not pray. But when I feel him in the way which I want to make outwardly visible in my work, then I am

praying. That is also why the parents on the pedestal are kneeling as they carry their dead son. And are wholly in meditation, and in him.

Kollwitz and Rogers are two extraordinary, creative, and compassionate people who expanded their “ordinary” parental love and compassion outward and into the lives of all the people they met. They lived lives that were the antithesis of the tribal altruism that Stephen Post speaks of. That is, their loving kindness and compassion extended beyond the bounds of their families. Both expressed in their work a hope for a transformation in the world. Käthe Kollwitz wanted her work to convey the need for an end to all war. “The seed for the planting should not be ground” was her recurrent cry. Perhaps if more children (and adults) were listening to the man who wanted his program to be a broadcasting of grace upon the land, Kollwitz’s dream could be possible.

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