

Masculinity, Compassion, and Self-Compassion

By Edward M. Adams



Athenians prayed to Eleos, the goddess of mercy and compassion. The intercession of Eleos was considered helpful to cope with the unpredictable and painful twists and turns of life.

My third-grade classmate was born with a cleft palate. I remember Dennis as shy and always alone. One day, as we got off the school bus I began to tease him. “You can’t even talk right,” I repeated over and over. Dennis didn’t utter a sound. I can still see him staring at me as my taunts burned into his soul. I walked away confused and uncomfortable but—in my innocent and delusional young mind—feeling superior.

I hurt Dennis. I am sure that my words added to his feelings of alienation and self-consciousness. I will always regret what I did that day. As time went on, I too was targeted and shamed by some of my male classmates. The hurt I felt allowed me to empathize with Dennis. I grew to have disdain but a strong respect for the destructive power of shame. Looking back, I wish there had been men in my life who might have modeled—and explained—to me that what I did to Dennis was not manly; rather, that showing him kindness and compassion would have been. I wish the other boys in my class had cultivated compassion into their male gender identities and had become my friends and not my nemeses. And I wish all boys will grow up to become men and fathers held in high esteem because they are compassionate.

The word compassion comes from the Latin meaning “to suffer with.” Compassion begins with empathy. Empathy evokes thoughts and feelings that acknowledge and connect with the suffering of others: “I know how you feel.” Fortified with empathy, compassion calls forth the intent and actions to help alleviate that suffering: “I can relate to how you feel and I want to help you.” Self-compassion is being aware of your own suffering and responding to it in a supportive and kind way, rather than harshly: “I made a bad mistake but I’m a good man and I can find a way to get through this.” Perhaps because compassion began as an attribute of the female goddess Eleos, or because bonding and nurturing emanate from women toward their offspring, men identify it as a feminine trait.

In Jungian terms, compassion would live within the realm of the anima or the feminine side of masculinity. However, the problem is not that compassion and self-compassion are considered feminine characteristics; the problem for men and women is the rejection of compassion and self-compassion as inherent to

masculinity. Consider this simple question. Which of the following two attributes are typically identified as masculine—aggression or compassion? Most likely, you answered “aggression.” And you would not be wrong. Compassion’s detachment from the masculine is a source of trouble because it eliminates any feelings of connectedness to others and permits violence and destruction toward self and others. Compassion and self-compassion need to be integrated into the male schema. Indeed, society’s survival may depend upon it.

Despite many men not identifying with compassion as a male trait, it exists everywhere in everyday life. I see men expressing tenderness, kindness, and the desire to relieve suffering—men performing acts of compassion on individual and grand scales. A father, exhausted from a day of work, may drive miles to see his child play soccer. Another man spontaneously decides to mow his elderly neighbor’s lawn without seeking praise or compensation. Around the world first responders (not exclusively male) risk their lives to save others in distress. September 11 was a vivid demonstration of compassion in action (again not exclusively performed by men). Nevertheless, men and women disassociate compassion as being intrinsic in men.

As long as compassion resides within the shadow of masculinity, Eleos, the goddess of compassion and self-compassion, will refuse to be ignored. Eleos wants to be valued and demands recognition and honor. Perhaps, each time we witness or hear about acts of terror and violence, it’s Eleos trying to get our attention. Until compassion and self-compassion become elevated into the hearts of men (as they are in many but not all women), violence and suffering will escalate. Hopefully there will be no alternative but to bring compassion into the light of our humanity.

For the men (and there are many) who understand that compassion and self-compassion are deeply masculine, we need to become “compassion activists.” We can choose to live compassionate lives. We can urge men to act and women to value the manly power of compassion. We can father compassion in our work, love, and social activities.

I have no idea what happened to my classmate Dennis. My fantasy about—and my wish for Dennis—is that he has thrived; that he uses his sensitivity to extend compassion to others and self-compassion toward himself. By doing so he not only will have been honoring Eleos but also would have grown to become a man who learned that compassion and masculinity are one.