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Natural Compassion

I was in about forty feet of water, alone. I knew I should not have gone alone, but I was very competent and just took a chance. There was not much current, and the water was so warm and clear and enticing. But when I got a cramp, I realized at once how foolish I was. I was not very alarmed, but was completely doubled up with stomach cramp. I tried to remove my weight belt, but I was so doubled up I could not get to the catch. I was sinking and began to feel more frightened, unable to move. I could see my watch and knew that there was only a little more time on the tank before I would be finished with breathing! I tried to massage my abdomen. I wasn't wearing a wet suit, but couldn't straighten out and couldn't get to the cramped muscles with my hands.

I thought, "I can't go like this! I have things to do!" I just couldn't die anonymously this way, with no one to even know what happened to me. I called out in my mind, "Somebody, something, help me!"

I was not prepared for what happened. Suddenly I felt a

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prodding from behind me under the armpit. I thought, "Oh no, sharks!" I felt real terror and despair. But my arm was being lifted forcibly. Around into my field of vision came an eye—the most marvelous eye I could ever imagine. I swear it was smiling. It was the eye of a big dolphin. Looking into that eye, I knew I was safe.

It moved farther forward, nudging under, and hooked its dorsal fin under my armpit with my arm over its back. I relaxed, hugging it, flooded with relief. I felt that the animal was conveying security to me, that it was healing me as well as lifting me toward the surface. My stomach cramp went away as we ascended, and I relaxed with security, but I felt very strongly that it healed me too.

At the surface, it drew me all the way in to shore. It took me into water so shallow that I began to be concerned for it, that it would be beached, and I pushed it back a little deeper, where it waited, watching me, I guess to see if I was all right.

It felt like another lifetime. When I took off the weight belt and oxygen, I just took everything off and went naked back into the ocean to the dolphin. I felt so light and free and alive, and just wanted to play in the sun and the water, in all that freedom. The dolphin took me back out and played around in the water with me. I noticed that there were a lot of dolphins there, farther out.

After a while it brought me back to shore. I was very tired then, almost collapsing, and he made sure I was safe in the shallowest water. Then he turned sideways with one eye looking into mine. We stayed that way for what seemed like a very long time, timeless I guess, in a trance almost, with personal thoughts of the past going through my mind.

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Then he made just one sound and went out to join the others, and all of them left.

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At times, helping happens simply in the way of things. It's not something we really think about, merely the instinctive response of an open heart. Caring is a reflex. Someone slips, your arm goes out. A car is in a ditch, you join the others and push. A colleague at work has the blues, you let her know you care. It all seems natural and appropriate. You live, you help.

When we join together in this spirit, action comes more effortlessly, and everybody ends up nourished. Girding against the flood . . . setting up a community meeting . . . preparing a funeral . . . people seem to know their part. We sense what's called for, or if we don't, and feel momentarily awkward, someone comes quickly with an idea, and it's just right, and we're grateful. We babysit the kids while their parents move possessions to homes farther from the rising river . . . we bring a comfortable chair for an older person who might attend the meeting . . . we call the rabbi with a favorite psalm of the one who has just died. Needs are anticipated, and glances of appreciation among us are enough to confirm that it's all going well.

We take pleasure not only in what we did but in the way we did it. On the one hand, the effort was so natural it might seem pointless or self-conscious to make something of it. It was what it was. Yet if we stop to consider why it all felt so good, we sense that some deeper process was at work. Expressing our innate generosity, we experi-

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enced our "kin"-ship, our "kind"-ness. It was "Us." In service, we taste unity.



The state had just released many people from its mental institutions with very little preparation. Our halfway house was about to be flooded with applicants. We had only so much room. Who to shelter? Who to clothe? Who to feed? Deep questions to be faced very suddenly.

An hour before we opened, we agreed to sit together in silence. Meditation, prayer, just plain calming down . . . everyone went for their ammo. Then we opened the doors, somehow trusting.

Everything we did, we agreed to do with love. Those people we accepted, we accepted with love. Those we turned away or helped find alternatives . . . love. Everyone seemed to understand. The differences between us all, staff and applicants alike, seemed less solid. The whole idea that it all had to do with mental illness even seemed a little artificial. Nobody was really thinking that much, or had time to, or needed to, or something. So much of it was just coming from the heart. So many people, with so many problems. But it went so smoothly. How?

The day after we were done, we sat down to discuss what had happened—your classic evaluation procedure. "Can we come to order?" Which met with some laughter. "So . . . ?" someone said. Then this one person stood up and said, "These past three days . . . that was about who we all really are. The way we were . . . that was the truth about us, deep down."

There was a moment's silence. Someone said, "Right." And that was the meeting. We waited a little longer; you're

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not used to things becoming clear like that. But after a minute or two, people gradually got up and went back to work.

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Caring for one another, we sometimes glimpse an essential quality of our being. We may be sitting alone, lost in self-doubt or self-pity, when the phone rings with a call from a friend who's *really* depressed. Instinctively, we come out of ourselves, just to be there with her and say a few reassuring words. When we're done, and a little comfort's been shared, we put down the phone and feel a little more at home with ourselves. We're reminded of who we really are and what we have to offer one another.

When the experience of helping seems so natural, it's not surprising we find ourselves wishing or wondering if things could be like that more or even most of the time.

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I went as a representative of the hippie community of San Francisco to meet the Hopi Indian elders to arrange a Hopi-Hippie Be-In in Grand Canyon. We wanted to honor their tradition and affirm our common respect for the land. As you can guess, this was during the sixties.

Four elders sat at a kitchen table in an adobe building on four chairs. There were no more chairs when I got there. So I sat on the floor kneeling opposite them, so I could see over the table, but under it as well.

The youngest was sixty-five, the eldest one hundred and ten. I could see their hands on their knees under the table. They looked like roots in the earth. There was something so absolutely connected about the whole quality of their presence.