

Compassion At Its Finest

Kayla Couture

Compassion is a word we hear so often yet seldom stop to think about what it really means, what it really is. I've heard people describe a person as being compassionate. Compassion encompasses many things yet the most important aspect to remember is it revolves around the word sympathy. Feeling and showing sympathy towards something or someone are two very different concepts. Feeling sympathy occurs in many people yet showing sympathy through actions is an entirely different story. This is simply because doing is very oftentimes much more difficult than simply feeling.

A leader is someone who leads. They are not afraid to take charge and guide. However, a leader does not need to possess compassion. Compassion is a choice. It entails not only a feeling, but taking action for something that is important or valuable. To each person, compassion may develop from a cause, a person, an event or even an idea. Compassion is subjective; it exists from different things for each person. Nevertheless, compassion is a wonderful leadership quality to possess. Compassion can be thought of as the wind that keeps a sailboat moving. And whatever the person is compassionate about is the wind; it keeps them going and provides the strength necessary.

I am blessed enough to know a woman who lives each day with a great deal of compassion. More importantly, she *chooses* to lead with compassion every day and for this, I have the utmost respect for her. Her name is Eva and she is a mother. But specifically, she is a mother to a little boy with Down Syndrome.

Eva has always been a loving individual but it was throughout her pregnancy when I realized she was not only a loving person, but an inspiring one too. Eva found out her son, Will, had Down Syndrome at one of her doctor's appointments while she was pregnant. She was encouraged by the doctors and nurses to have an abortion. They made her aware of the endless setbacks he would face throughout his life. His life, in their eyes, would be a hopeless one if she were to carry to term. But abortion was no option for her. "A person's life is just as valuable as any," she explained to them. But regardless, they continued to pressure her to abort the baby. Nevertheless, she stood her ground and told them she would be keeping her baby. I organized a baby shower for her once her pregnancy neared, and excitement for the new life filled me with joy. I have a great love for children and couldn't wait to meet Will. The day of the baby shower arrived and there were many people that joined to share in the excitement.

However, there was something different, something odd that took place during the baby shower. The overall mood was somber. A few friends of Eva made comments about the fact that she was choosing to carry a Down Syndrome child to term. They made it clear that this was not a choice they would have made if in Eva's position. It was in that moment that I realized how cruel "friends" could be. I vividly recall standing in the middle of the room, picking up the wrapping paper and bows that were scattered on the floor. I put myself in Eva's shoes; she must have felt like the wrapping paper was her heart, torn into little pieces from the crude comments made by a few of the guests. But when I looked over to her, she looked to me with nothing short of a smile. That is compassion, I thought. She never allowed other people to sway her. In the society in which we live, that can be an overwhelmingly challenging feat.

Will was born on a warm July afternoon. I rushed to the hospital as soon as visitors were allowed. When I arrived and looked at Eva, I could sense the excitement of a new life. I didn't

see one ounce of fear in her eyes. I knew in my heart that she was more than aware of the endless challenges he'd face throughout his life, but I knew that the joy he'd bring would far exceed the setbacks. I learned something that day, at that moment. As I held Will and looked at him, something in me changed. I learned the true value and meaning of life. I also learned that regardless of what society is pushing our way, it is up to us to stand strong and stay firm in our beliefs. After all, tolerance is the virtue of a man without convictions. Eva is an example of a person with strong convictions. But more importantly, she *acted* upon those convictions. That is far from easy. As we know, simply *having* convictions is not enough; we must live out those convictions through our actions. To my mind, that is compassion.

Going back to the word compassion, it revolves around having sympathy. Clearly Eva had sympathy for her son. She probably had a greater deal of sympathy when she received news that his life would have even more struggles than the average person's. Yet what I find most interesting is how others reacted to his diagnosis. They expressed sympathy in a very different way, that is, by encouraging Eva to terminate the pregnancy. His life, in their eyes, would be far too difficult and thus was not worth welcoming him into this world. This experience shaped the person I am because it has taught me compassion; Will has taught me what it means to be compassionate. And that is a gift he will most likely never realize he gave to me. Children with Down Syndrome, or any disability for that matter, teach us compassion in a way us "normal" folks cannot. Life is so much more than what is going on at this very moment. The struggles and turmoil that life may bring are temporary. It is important to keep this in mind when we feel we have no compassion left to give.

Many people lead each day with compassion. It is crucial to seek out these individuals and surround ourselves with their presence as often as we are able to. Social behaviors and

attitudes are contagious. If we surround ourselves with people who show compassion, we too, will begin to show compassion through *our* actions. This is the first step to becoming a great leader.