**Skillful Means in Christian-Tradition Compassion Formation**

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**Abstract**

Traditional Christian practice traditions contain no practices explicitly identified as compassion practices. Nonetheless, compassion formation processes run through virtually every practice tradition in Christianity. And at least one contemporary practice is intentionally formulated to foster compassion by drawing, in part, from processes, understandings, and sensibilities that appear within traditional Christian contemplative practice. That contemporary compassion practice, developed by the Center for Engaged Compassion (CEC), can serve as an entry point for examining the nature of skillful means in relation to compassion formation processes found within Christian-tradition contemplative practices. This article will examine how a notion of skillful means may apply to Christian-tradition approaches to compassion formation by naming and explicating a number of compassion-fostering “capacities” as they show up in and through the CEC Compassion Practice: capacities for “framing”; “foundational” capacities; “formational” capacities; and “functional” capacities. It is hoped that by widening the field of compassion-formation resources to those within Christian practice traditions this analysis may offer insights for expanding, strengthening, or nuancing perspectives and processes that might be developed within a secular compassion cultivation program.

*Keywords:* Skillful means, capacities, Christian, compassion, contemplative

To date, it appears that no scientific or social-research studies have focused on the processes and efficacy of self-defined compassion-cultivating practices rooted in or significantly influenced by Christian contemplative traditions. This may not be come as a surprise since a survey would show that practices from Christian contemplative traditions have not highlighted or focused on the formation of compassion *per se* (Dreitcer, 2017). In other words, no traditional Christian practices are specifically designated, either formally or informally, as “compassion practices.” This could be taken to suggest that Christian contemplative traditions do not value compassion in human life. Actually, the opposite is true: these traditions simply assume that every contemplative practice is designed to contribute to the formation of compassion. Why? Because according to these traditions, loving compassion fills the core of the Divine nature—God’s nature—and the central purpose of contemplative practices is to form humans more fully into a living image of this Divine nature. To be formed into the image of God (the *imago Dei*) while living on Earth is to be formed into compassion: To be compassionate, just as God is compassionate. (Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, 2017: Luke 6:36).

In recent years, an explicitly designated compassion practice has been developed that is rooted in and informed by the teachings of the Jewish Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth and the wisdom of Christian spiritual traditions (even as this practice is also informed by the richness of non-Christian contemplative traditions, depth psychology, Internal Family Systems theory, restorative justice approaches, non-violent communication techniques, scientific understandings, and the teachings of non-violent social activism). This practice, crafted by the Center for Engaged Compassion (CEC) at the ecumenical and inter-faith Claremont School of Theology, has been taught and refined in academic classrooms, retreat centers, faith communities, and non-profit organizations throughout North America and various parts of the world. Though this distinctly Christian-inspired compassion practice has been described in detail in texts written by the CEC’s co-directors, Frank Rogers and Andrew Dreitcer, it has not been the subject of scientific research nor has it been a part of academic dialogue with compassion practices from other spiritual traditions.

The purpose of this article is to identify the ‘skillful means’ involved in the formation of compassion through this Christian-inspired practice. To be sure, the phrase ‘skillful means’ is not a part of the Christian contemplative lexicon. Still, it is possible to identify within this Christian compassion practice elements that may be characterized as “skillful means” (and subsequently studied by the scientific community and compared with other compassion formation practices). For this article, ‘skillful means’ refers to those practices, beliefs, behaviors, perspectives, and understandings that are particularly efficacious in the formation of compassion. The hope is that this effort to elucidate the skillful means within Christian-inspired compassion formation will heighten recognition of what abilities and sensibilities are held in common across many traditions (religious, scientific, secular, psychological); which ones might be uniquely highlighted within particular traditions (and why); and how compassion-formation practices rooted in Christian traditions might helpfully illuminate the development of secular compassion cultivation processes.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the terms used in identifying such skillful means reflect the ways that Christian contemplative traditions employ them, rather than how current scientific studies may be defining or operationalizing them for research (though there may be some overlap). In other words, this article is cast in the voice of the contemporary scholarly teacher of compassion, rather than in, say, the voice of the scientist, philosopher, or systematic theologian. Further, while the skillful means identified may seem obvious to those well-versed in the intricacies of contemplative practices, naming what might be obvious may help ensure that assumptions will not be lost or forgotten.

**The Center for Engaged Compassion**

**&**

**A Christian-Inspired Compassion Practice**

The Center for Engaged Compassion (CEC) is a research and teaching center created and co-directed by two professors of Christian spiritual formation. The CEC was established to foster individual, interpersonal, and social transformation through the cultivation of compassion in ways informed by the teachings of Jesus and the wisdom of Christian contemplative traditions. Though this process of compassion cultivation is Christian-inspired, one can be formed in this approach without ‘becoming Christian’ (just as one can be formed in Buddhist-inspired compassion processes without becoming Buddhist). And this approach can be taught in secular settings stripped of explicitly Christian terminology. The CEC has adapted its programs for such secular settings as the university, activist organizations that are not faith-based, and the workplace.

The centerpiece of all of the CEC’s compassion formation programs is a core “Compassion Practice” crafted by its directors. This practice distills the teachings of Jesus and the wisdom of Christian compassion traditions, and it seeks to foster what the center refers to as “engaged compassion”—compassion that is embodied both in people’s daily lives and in focused efforts toward social justice and communal restoration. This practice assumes that each person has a ‘True Self’—a divine spark of the image of God (the *imago dei*) somewhat analogous to Buddhist understandings of the Buddha nature within all beings, or the core Self of psychodynamic traditions such as Internal Family Systems (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020). When grounded in our True Self, our capacities for compassion and resilience are more readily accessible. When dislodged from our True Self—when possessed by reactive emotions, for example, or driven by destructive behavioral impulses—the Compassion Practice invites the following process:

**The Compassion Practice**

**1. Catch Your Breath** (Get Grounded)

**2. Take Your PULSE** (Cultivate Self-Compassion)

Take a U-turn and tend to your interior state by:

***P****aying attention*: Cultivate a non-judgmental awareness toward whatever is stirring within you.

***U****nderstanding empathically*: Listen for the hidden need or suffering within your interior state.

***L****oving with connectedness*: Extend care toward the need or suffering within yourself.

***S****ensing the Sacred*: Invite a Sacred resource to be with the suffering within you.

***E****mbodying the new life:*Absorb any life-giving qualities being restored within you.

**3. Take Their PULSE** (Cultivate Compassion for the Other)

Turn meditatively toward the other and connect with their humanity by:

***P****aying attention*: Cultivate a non-reactive awareness of what the person is doing and how they are doing it.

***U****nderstanding empathically*: Listen for the hidden suffering within their emotions or behavior.

***L****oving with connectedness*: As you are moved by their suffering, extend a warm regard toward the need or wound that surfaces within them.

***S****ensing the Sacred*: Invite a Sacred presence to be with the suffering within them.

***E****mbodying the new life:* Notice and commit to the life-giving qualities wanting to be restored within them.

**4. Decide What To Do** (Discern Compassionate Action)

*Grounded in compassion, both for yourself and the other, discern those actions that seem appropriate and restorative.*

To illustrate the core principles and movements of the Compassion Practice, the following story is offered of a rabbi who was trained in one of the CEC’s compassion cultivation programs.

During the contentious elections for marriage equality in California, Leah Rosen moved, with her lesbian partner, to the rural central valley to serve as a temple rabbi. In addition to teaching Torah and leading Shabbat services, she started an LGBTQ advocacy center devoted to education and public witness. One day, as she was leaving the temple, she discovered a pamphlet on her car’s windshield held in place by a stone large enough to shatter a plate-glass window. The pamphlet advertised an upcoming rally protesting marriage equality at the town-square intersection. Handwritten on the note were the words, “I dare you to try and stop us.”

Leah knew who did it. The chairman of the caucus protesting marriage equality lived across the street from her. While she and her partner were unloading their moving van, he had gathered his grandchildren from his front yard then staked down placards condemning homosexuality. Every time she left the house, she felt his glare from the shadows within his living room window. The rock on her windshield, however, was the first act of outright intimidation.

As would anyone, Leah’s instinctive reactions were outrage and fear. Part of her was furious—damned if she would back down, and incensed enough to organize a counter demonstration with blistering placards of her own declaring that she could not be bullied. Part of her wanted to crawl away, ignore the threat, and just swallow the indignity—after all, she still lived across the street from him, and reacting would only encourage him, or escalate his hostilities.

Trained in the Compassion Practice, Leah refrained from acting out of her various reactive impulses. Instead, she took some time walking and praying to ground herself; then she turned inward and listened, with a centered contemplative presence, to the needs and longings hidden within her reactive impulses. She recognized that she needed to stand strong in her personal identity and political commitments; yet she wanted to stand strong in a way that still invited relationship. She wanted to find a way to befriend her neighbor; to return hate with love and dignity; and perhaps, even, to win him over, not through rage and ridicule, but through empowered, engaged compassion.

So, she got curious about this gentleman. She asked around and found out that he was a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church, and that he had a passion for ministries supporting abused animals. Leah could appreciate that, serving on the board of a local animal shelter herself. She also found out that he had a source of pride, his homemade chili—the best in the central valley to hear him boast—which he showed off every summer at the annual parish festival.

That’s when Leah got an idea.

On the day of the rally protesting marriage equality, Leah gathered some friends and staged a chili cook-off in the park across the street. They had music, balloons, booths for children, and a dozen pots of chili, all proceeds going to the local animal shelter. The energy was so contagious, and the chili so enticing, folks mobbed the park, ignoring altogether the handful of protesters at the rally. Before long, the protesters lost their steam and started packing up to dissemble. Leah took her cue and crossed the street toward them. She walked up to her neighbor, the ringleader, and said to him,

“Excuse me, I understand that you make a mean bowl of chili.”

“The best in the central valley,” he grumbled.

“Great,” Leah replied, “you see, we’re having a chili cook-off across the street, and I wonder if you would be willing to be our honorary judge.” The man was taken aback. “It’s for a good cause,” Leah encouraged. “All the proceeds are supporting abused animals.” She gestured toward the other protesters. “Bring your friends,” she continued. “Free chili for everyone.”

The man could not resist. Before he knew it, he was across the street tasting chili. After sampling them all, he told Leah that none of them could hold a candle to his own. To which Leah suggested that they do it up right, design a chili cook-off together for the whole town, each of them drawing on their various networks to support it.

And that’s what they did. They organized a veritable festival together, all of the profits benefitting the local animal shelter. It went so well that Leah suggested that her neighbor serve on the shelter’s board. She offered him rides to the board meetings, which turned into stops for coffee along the way. And to the man’s shock and dismay, after months of her indefatigable friendliness, he found himself actually liking this woman.

A year and a half went by before the gentleman worked up the gumption to ask Leah a personal question. “So,” he fumbled one day over coffee, “I hear you’re a lesbian woman. How how long have you been one? And how did you know that you were one? I mean, what’s it like?”

Leah was curious if he had ever known anyone who was gay or lesbian. It turns out that he had. His younger brother was gay, years ago. He came out to his family when he had contracted AIDS, back when AIDS was a death sentence. The young man’s family shunned him, as did his church, as did he, the older brother. The young man disappeared on the streets of San Francisco, and died alone.

Leah could see the shame and regret hidden within her friend. Moved, she offered him a gift. “In my tradition,” she shared, “we say Kaddish for those who have passed away. It is a way of honoring their memory and hoping they have found the peace that eluded them on Earth. It would be my privilege if I could say Kaddish for your brother. If you want, we can do it together.”

The man nodded. And the two of them, a conservative Roman Catholic deacon and a lesbian Jewish rabbi, gathered in a small-town temple and honored the memory of a man who had died alone some twenty years earlier. (This story appears in many forms throughout the CEC training programs, with a version in Rogers, 2019).

Rabbi Rosen engaged the Compassion Practice, repeatedly in fact through the months of her relationship with this gentleman. Whenever she was understandably activated, she took the time to ground herself; she took the U-turn and tended to the needs hidden within her activated interior states; once reconnected with her resourceful True Self, she cultivated compassion for the humanity of her adversary; then she discerned, along the way, various acts of kindness and collaboration that she could offer, even ritually sharing in her adversary’s grief. Rabbi Rosen embodied engaged compassion.

**Skillful Means in Christian-Inspired Compassion Formation**

The various skillful means that are most efficaciously operative in the Christian-inspired compassion formation within the CEC will be organized within four classifications. “Framing” capacities are unique ways that core teachings are conceptualized or “framed” within the formation programs. “Foundational” capacities are prerequisite skills necessary in compassion formation but do not foster compassion in and of themselves. They are necessary but not sufficient capacities. “Formational” capacities are the linchpin skills that foster the internal experience of compassion proper. “Functional” capacities are skills that contribute to the active and appropriate embodiment of compassion in the world.

**Framing Capacities**

*Concepts Conveyed through Story-Telling*

Perhaps the primary skillful means within Christian traditions of compassion formation is that of story-telling. The foundational figure within Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth, is portrayed within the New Testament as teaching more through telling stories than through linear didactic discourse. Jesus offers no instructions on how to engage in spiritual practices and delivers no subtle discourses on the nature of reality. Instead, he tells stories of people living a way of life, and of behaving in exemplary ways (or not). Even when he delivers propositional statements, he follows them up with stories in order to illustrate what he means. A look at one of Jesus’ stories shows how story-telling works in the Christian tradition to elucidate the nature of compassion. (A version of the following explication of this New Testament narrative appears in Dreitcer, 2017, pp. 22-25).

This New Testament story is known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Nestlé-Aland Green New Testament, 2017, Luke 10:25-37), and it conveys that, in Christianity, compassion has three dimensions to it: loving God, loving oneself, and loving others. As the narrative setting unfolds, Jesus is teaching when a lawyer tests him by asking him what one must do to “inherit eternal life.” The question challenges Jesus to state the meaning and purpose of Jewish law and all of life. But Jesus turns the challenge back on the man, essentially asking him how he would answer his own question. The man responds with what Jesus says is the right understanding, the three dimensions of love: Love God with your entire being, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Then the lawyer asks Jesus, “But who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds not with a theoretical description or a linear proposition, but with a story—a tale of a man who was robbed, beaten, and left by the road “half dead.” The injured man’s religious leaders, his models and teachers in the spiritual life—those who *should* care for him—pass him by without helping him.

Then along comes a Samaritan, the citizen of an enemy nation, seemingly the last person who might help this dying traveler. The Samaritan, says Jesus in the passage, was moved to compassion. He deeply *felt* the wounded man’s pain. And then the Samaritan, *understanding* what he was called to do in this situation, *acted* to ease the pain, binding his enemy’s wounds and caring for him until he was healed. This core teaching of Jesus demonstrates that true compassion involves turning appropriate perceptual understanding and care-filled feeling into purposeful, restorative behaviors that overturn death-dealing normsheld in place by dominant systems and structures that destroy human life and well-being. In this story, the Samaritan not only heals an individual’s wounds, and breaches the gap between “enemies,” he defies and upends the system that supports and abets the destruction of abundant life.

The three-fold framing of compassion conveyed by this story is echoed throughout the biblical stories and carried into the Christian traditions. The *understanding* of compassion comes from teachings of the Hebrew scriptures and of Jesus. The people hear and see God’s compassion, human compassion, and the importance of following the path of compassion. The *feeling* of compassion found in the Bible is a spontaneous, empathic response of deep and abiding care. The roots of the words most consistently translated into English as compassion convey an instinctive, emotion-filled, physical churning of the stomach (literally being ‘gut-wrenched’ in Greek), or a maternal movement of the womb (Nestlé-Aland Greek New Testament, 2017). This body-based emotion is a feeling of sharing in the experience of another person. That depth of connection is conveyed in the Latin roots for the English word: *passion*=feeling; *com*=with.

Understandings and feelings, however, do not stand alone in biblical texts about compassion. Whenever words for compassion appear in the Bible, *behaviors* follow that are intended to ease suffering; human beings are “moved” to embody compassion (Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, 2017). Compassion is dynamic—both in the movements of feelings within, and in the movements of actions in the world. People don’t *have* compassion, they *become* compassionate. And in so doing, they incarnate the image of God.

Further, according to this story, Christian compassion involves a triadic circle of relationships. The interrelated elements of compassion—understanding, feeling, and behavior—only have life and meaning within this three-fold relationality. These relationships include an ever deepening connection with the eternal Source of Compassion (Jesus’ invitation to “love God with our entire being”), a caring connection with others (Jesus’ invitation to “love your neighbor”), and an ever deepening compassion for oneself (Jesus’ invitation to “Love your neighbor *as yourself*”).

The first relationship in this circle comes as persons connect with what is considered to be Divine Presence, the sacred Source of Compassion. The various Christian traditions name this eternal presence of compassion in a multitude of ways: Love, Christ, Holy Spirit, Father, Mother, Light, Word, God beyond God, Ground of Being, Being Itself. No matter how this Source is named, according to Christian contemplative traditions, to love God is to love resting in God’s compassionate Presence—to love God’s compassion flowing in, through, and for the entire world in a way that grounds and enlivens all that is.

The second relationship in the circle of compassion comes in connection with others, “neighbors,” and the entire world beyond ourselves. Personal experiences of Divine Compassion free individuals to be compassionate. Through persons’ compassionate love of others, God’s compassionate love expands and deepens in ways that can never be fully planned for or envisioned. There can be no love of God in the absence of loving others, and vice versa. Further, “neighbors” are not merely those near and dear, or those who care for us as we care for them. For Jesus, *neighbors* includes the “distant others,” the outcasts, the ostracized, even those experienced as enemy. The story portrays Jesus defining love of neighbor as an active compassion even between members of groups entrenched in mutual loathing.

The remaining relationship in the circle is compassion for oneself. Jesus invites the listener to “love your neighbor *in the same way you love yourself, and vice versa*” (Nestlé-Aland Greek New Testament, 2017, Luke 10:27). The construction of the original Greek sentence makes “yourself” and “neighbor” interchangeable and inseparable. Self-compassion and compassion for others form one package—and remain inseparable from Divine Compassion.

This underlying conceptual framework regarding the roles of understanding, feeling, behavior, and relationships shape Christian approaches to compassion cultivation. In this framing, compassion is not only an emotion (an unintentional feeling of empathy is not compassion); nor only perceptual awareness (contemplative mindfulness in and of itself is not compassion); nor is it limited to conceptual understanding (knowing the meaning of compassion is not enough); nor is it simply a human behavior (all actions that ease suffering, while beneficial, are not necessarily actions of compassion). Rather, compassion within Christian traditions is *engaged* compassion, a holistic complex that integrates and involves the full range of human capacities (including emotion, cognition, perception, motivation, intention, relationality, physiology, and behavior) in the restorative, beneficial transformation of relationships, the systems and structures of human life, and the ecosystems that support earthly existence (Rogers, 2019).

In these ways, Jesus’ story of The Good Samaritan illuminates Christian understandings of compassion. His story, however, does more—it embodies a skillful means involved in forming compassion. When teaching about compassion, Jesus did not lecture; he told a story. Concepts and ethics were communicated through narrative. As has been researched, stories are particularly efficacious for teaching. They offer exemplary figures and illustrative examples that serve as aspirational and practical models for life; and they offer pedagogically accessible means of conveying information and instruction (e.g., Deane et al., 2019). Further, and relevant specifically to compassion formation, stories are moving. They soften hearts and evoke empathy (Keen, 2006).

For these reasons, story-telling pervades every segment of the CEC’s compassion-cultivation programs. Stories like that of Leah Rosen illustrate concepts, awaken the imagination, and inspire commitment while evoking compassion; participants being heard as they surface and share their personal stores cultivates and deepens their compassion for themselves; and participants hearing each other’s stories in dyads and small groups cultivates compassion for the other. It could be said that the heart of the CEC’s Christian-inspired compassion practice entails listening to and being moved by one’s own and another’s stories. Story-telling is a skillful means for both conceptual understanding and for evoking the experience of compassion.

*Conceptualizing Interior Movements*

Christian contemplative traditions refer to intrapersonal experiences (such as emotions, behavioral impulses, thoughts, mental images, and somatic sensations) as “interior movements”—charges of energy and activity active within one’s inner world. Many Christian traditions take a suspicious stance toward these interior movements. At best, these movements are sorted into ‘good’ interior movements (i.e., movements that are helpful in leading to a more spiritual life—like joy, perhaps), ‘bad’ interior movements (i.e., movements that are barriers to or diversions from the spiritual life like anger or hatred perhaps), or ‘neutral’ interior movements (i.e., movements that are neither helpful nor problematic having no particular value in and of themselves on the spiritual path). At worst, all interior movements are labeled as bad: distractions from or blocks to the spiritual path, and so to be avoided, discouraged, or suppressed through various strategies prescribed by the practice traditions.

The CEC Compassion Practice takes a different path. It draws from streams of the Christian contemplative tradition that view every interior movement as a potential opening to Divine Presence. One such stream, the Ignatian tradition, affirms that God is found in all things—including every interior movement, no matter how ‘negative’ it might seem at first (e.g., Barry, 2009; Ignatius & Ganss, 1991; Toner, 1982). The CEC’s compassion formation and training programs expand and hone this perspective (and infuse it with contemporary psychological, cultural, and scientific understandings), approaching interior movements as invitations to uncover and explore the deep needs, yearnings, and suffering hidden within these movements. From this stance of engaging one’s own interior movements with compassionate understanding, fears can be calmed, suppressed longings can be realized, aching wounds can be healed, and unexpressed gifts can be brought to life.

Upon closer examination, this stance of engaging interior movements with compassionate care contains three constituent skillful means. The first involves a conceptual framing that posits all interior movements as valuable, helpful, and to be welcomed as gateways to fresh understandings about oneself or the world, and to deepened connection with God’s compassionate presence. The second builds on the first and entails an attitude of trusting expectation—the stance that deeper truths and greater fullness of life lie at the end of an exploration of the inner movements, no matter how difficult those movements appear to be. The third is open curiosity—the suspension of suspicion, a desire to attain deeper understanding, and a commitment to seek that deeper understanding in order to further personal, interpersonal, and global transformation.

**Foundational Capacities**

Foundational capacities are contemplative skills that are necessary prerequisites for engaging in the practices that form compassion proper. The Compassion Practice relies upon three essential foundational capacities: intention, awareness, and attention.

*Intention*

In Christian contemplative practices, intention has to do with wanting, willing, choosing, and holding to a way of being or behaving. Without an abiding intention, a contemplative practice will not begin—or if it does happen to begin, it will falter and fade.

The Christian contemplative practice that most fully exemplifies intention is a form of Centering Prayer developed in the mid-1970s by the Cistercian brothers of St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts (Keating, 1986; Keating 2005; Pennington, 2001). This practice is an updating of a prayer instruction mentioned in an anonymous fourteenth-century writing called *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Hodgson, 1982). Centering Prayer focuses on honing a particular intention, the intention to be open and available to the presence of God, Divine Compassion. Practitioners choose a word as a reminder of this intention. In the midst of calm silence, if they notice that they are no longer resting in their intention—no longer open and available to God—practitioners repeat the word as a reminder to return to their intention again. That is all: Be with the intention; repeat.

The CEC’s Compassion Practice does not focus solely on intention in the way that Centering Prayer does. Still, it would not survive without a foundation of strong intention. It necessitates the practitioner’s intention to deepen curiosity towards one’s interior movements, to connect with the sacred Source of compassion, and to open oneself to compassion for the other.

*Awareness*

Awareness, as it appears throughout the history of Christian contemplative traditions, refers to the ability to notice what is happening in any given moment—either with movements of one’s inner life or movements in the outer world. The practice of the Awareness Examen is a paradigmatic example. The Awareness Examen is a contemporary expression of a practice formulated by the Spanish priest Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century CE. (Ignatius & Ganss, 1991; Linn et al., 1995). The first step of this practice—the “Awareness” part of the practice—involves letting the memory gently scan a set period of time, such as the previous twenty-four hours. This memory review does not fixate or focus on any one moment in particular. Instead, it allows the events, encounters, and situations of the past day to emerge into one’s current awareness without directing, guiding, curating, or pre-judging what appears. Similarly, the Compassion Practice invites an open awareness of the various interior movements active within oneself.

*Attention*

The foundational capacity of attention shows up in the subsequent step of the Awareness Examen. After allowing moments in one’s life to emerge into awareness, the Awareness Examen then focuses attention on one moment that particularly attracts that attention. Focusing attention in this way helps uncover within the memory of that moment some significance in the life of the practitioner. Within this focused attention on one moment, a deeper awareness of how God is present within that moment can be intensified.

Other practices that highlight attention engage it for purposes not usually found within the Awareness Examen. For example, in the Jesus Prayer, a contemplative practice with roots in the Middle Eastern and North African desert monastic communities of the 4th-5th centuries, attention serves as a way of fully engaging what is considered to be the sacred name of Jesus (Ware, 1986). Directing attention to the name, holding it in mind, and repeating it again and again, is believed to provide, among other benefits, solace, protection, strength, and an experience of sharing in the life of Christ. Similarly, in the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina* (holy reading; beginning in the 5th-6th centuries) attention focuses the mind on the repetition of a biblical phrase or passage for the purpose of drawing from it some understanding for the life of the practitioner (Studzinski, 2009).

The Compassion Practice requires attention as one focuses on a particular interior movement within oneself in need of tending, and when focusing on a particular person with the intention of deepening one’s compassion for them.

**Formational Capacities**

Foundational capacities provide prerequisite skills for cultivating compassion; but they do not nurture actual compassion. In the Compassion Practice, the experience of compassion proper is fostered through “formational capacities”—specifically, the skillful means of exploration, relationality, emotion, and imagination.

*Exploration*

The capacity of exploration consists of examining intrapsychic experiences for their helpfulness in cultivating compassion. Exploration is the pro-active cousin of the skillful means of reconceptualizing all interior movements as cries in need of compassionate tending. A constant within the CEC Compassion Practice is that interior movements are continually plumbed for what might be learned from them, what truths might be drawn from them, how the sacred Source of compassion can be known within them, and what invitations they seem to be expressing. This exploration is done in specific ways that engage the remaining formational capacities.

*Relationality*

Relationality refers to the ability to form intimate, affection-filled bonds with others. All Christian contemplative practices begin with, are filled with, and move toward an intimate experience of the Source of Compassion referred to as God. This feeling of relationship is meant to create an abiding sense of being securely grounded in and carried by something greater than oneself, something that spans and exceeds time and space. The contemplative practices mentioned above are all grounded in this kind of relational connection: The Awareness Examen begins with some version of inviting God’s Presence to be experienced throughout the practice; the Jesus Prayer and *Lectio Divina* use the repeated words of the practice to intentionally deepen and expand an intimate experience of God; and in Centering Prayer the focus and purpose from start to finish is the growth of lived intimacy with God.

In light of the power of relationality in these and other practices, the CEC Compassion Practice opens with and maintains a grounding in a felt connection with some posited source of compassion that lies within and/or beyond the practitioner. This grounding connection in intimacy could take the forms found in classical Christian contemplative practices, such as the Awareness Examen, the Jesus Prayer, *Lectio Divina*, and Centering Prayer described above. But forms that avoid traditional religious language and sensibilities are possible, as well. For example, the CEC Compassion Practice might establish an initial grounding intimacy with someone real or imagined through an invitation such as this:

Bring to mind a moment of being cared for by someone you experience as offering you love. Perhaps you recall a moment from your past—for instance, a time as a child being held in your grandmother’s arms, or a time of sitting peacefully with your best friend. Or maybe the person is a figure from your imagination, a kind, compassionate companion, guide, or protector. Settle into the presence of this person, this figure, for some moments. Notice whatever sense of loving connection these moments hold for you. Let yourself rest for a time in a sense of this loving connection, this caring intimacy.

Having experienced this intimacy at the outset of the practice, practitioners are then invited to return to this initial sense of relational grounding throughout the practice—whenever they feel the need for calming stability and clarity.

*Emotion*

The skillful means of emotion refers to the myriad ways that the CEC Compassion Practice engages (rather than avoids) difficult emotions to further the growth of compassion. “Emotion” here is a catch-all term employed to include what various spiritual, psychological, and scientific communities describe as automatic neurophysiological reactivities, the conscious awareness of those reactivities, and the multi-dimensional embodied experiences identified in some traditions as “affections” (e.g., McNamer, 2010; Scherer, 2005; Singer & Bolz, 2013; Zadra & Clore, 2012). “Difficult” characterizes those disturbing, challenging, and perhaps disruptive emotions named in many contexts as “negative.” Within the framework of the CEC Compassion Practice, labeling some or all emotions as “negative” does not helpfully convey the perspective that all emotions may function beneficially, no matter how disturbing they might be. As noted in the description of reconceptualizing interior movements, the Compassion Practice draws from streams of the Christian contemplative traditions that view all emotions, disturbing or not, as ultimately beneficial openings to Divine Presence, the Source of Compassion.

Following these traditions, then, the practice engages difficult emotions in three ways. First, practitioners are invited continually to notice what emotions are emerging within their experience as the practice begins and progresses. Second, if practitioners experience a sense of compassion, they are invited to settle into and expand that feeling whenever it arises. And third, practitioners are invited to explore difficult emotions with a grounded awareness and empathic curiosity, treating them as the primary entry points for compassion formation.

The first two ways of engaging emotions are fairly common among a wide variety of contemplative practices. But the third, exploring difficult emotions, is unique to the CEC Compassion Practice and warrants a bit more explication. Rather than ignoring, releasing, or setting aside difficult or “negative” emotions, it invites practitioners to approach them with these types of affirmations: emotions are messages meant to help persons find ways to heal, free, and restore their lives and the life of the world; emotions reveal the parts of ourselves that need compassionate care; the “louder” the emotion, the greater the need and invitation to tend to it, to nurture a caring relationship with it; compassionately tending to the need connected to an emotion strengthens the “compassion muscle,” the ability to offer compassion not only to oneself, but to others and the world (Dreitcer, 2017, p. 123).

These affirmations regarding difficult emotions play out in a core process within the CEC Compassion Practice. This process first invites practitioners to notice and name a difficult emotion in real time. Then comes an invitation to imagine that emotion as a living being—perhaps a young child—who is trying to communicate some experience of distress. The image can be clarified through considering how old the child is, what it looks like, what it is wearing, what its surroundings are. After a mental image of the child has been established, the practitioner is invited to engage the child in conversation, asking one or more of these questions: What are you afraid of? What do you long for? What aching wounds do you have that are still in need of healing? What gifts do you have to offer that are being denied or stifled? (Dreitcer, 2017, p. 124). This process of uncovering the root pain of a difficult emotion (imagined as a child in distress) leads to a sense of compassion for this suffering part of oneself. As the process is repeated with additional difficult emotions, compassion expands to include more and more of the dimensions of oneself. Working with one difficult emotion at a time, self-compassion grows over time and is strengthened through continued exercise. Ultimately, the same process may be applied to other persons: Imagining what difficult emotions they may be struggling with; in open curiosity, asking caring questions of those emotions; and so, coming to an empathic understanding of their pain and the pain of the individual experiencing them—an understanding that can expand to compassionate feelings and behaviors.

*Imagination*

The skillful means of tending emotions with care as described above goes hand-in-hand with the last of the formational skillful means: Imagination. Rather than avoiding images, as many contemplative traditions do, the CEC Compassion Practice employs the activities of the imagination, in concert with relationality and emotion, as the most effective tools for deepening and expanding the experience of self-compassion and compassion toward others. In fact, the transformative combination of emotion, imagination, and relationality plays a powerful role in the Christian contemplative practice tradition originally formulated by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century CE (Melloni, 2000), the Christian tradition that most deeply influences the CEC Compassion Practice. Ignatius encouraged exploring difficult emotions in order to trace the movements of God in the soul; he designed practices for engaging an imagined group of heavenly saints in spiritually-edifying conversations; and he taught ways of imagining oneself into a biblical story in order to strike up a relationship with a loving Jesus. Ignatius also influenced certain streams within modern psychology, as Carl Jung taught his students about Ignatian imaginal-emotional-relational processes in relation to Jung’s development of active imagination (Becker, 2002). The CEC Compassion Practice engages exploration, relationality, emotion, and imagination as powerful skillful means for the formation of compassion, whether framed through the lens of religious traditions or not.

**Functional Capacities**

“Functional” capacities are the skillful means that actively embody compassion in the world. They include discernment, restorative behaviors, and what the CEC refers to as “Compassion Compass Coordinates” (Rogers, 2029). All three are inter-related. Discernment illuminates what restorative behaviors might be appropriate; the Compassion Compass Coordinates offer characteristics that mark genuine compassion; and the active embodiment of restorative behaviors invites further discernment in a continued cycle of action and reflection.

*Discernment and Restorative Behaviors*

For the CEC Compassion Practice, along with the Ignatian contemplative tradition that most fully informs it, discernment involves both a particular kind of understanding and a careful deliberation and thoughtful analysis informed by intuition, data, and focused attention to context and potential consequences (Ignatius & Ganss, 1991; Leibert, 2008). Discernment is necessary for genuine restorative behavior—wisdom-filled actions that are appropriate to and helpful for the situation. Without discernment, well-intentioned actions have less chance of truly helping the persons they are meant to benefit. “Undiscerned action, no matter how caring the intention, may be misguided, inappropriate, or even harmful” (Dreitcer, 2017, p. 27). With discernment, behaviors are more likely to further well-being, and actions are more likely to be contextually appropriate.

In the CEC Compassion Practice, discernment follows upon the processes described above. The CEC views framing, foundational, and formational capacities as fashioning a stance of clarity, calm, and stability. From within this grounded clarity, practitioners are invited into a discernment process that leads to behaviors that benefit oneself and others. A discernment process focused on another person might follow this broad outline: resting in a grounding sense of intimate connection with a figure of compassion; brainstorming possible beneficial behaviors; noticing which behavior offers a sense of benefitting the other person, oneself, and the world; imagining oneself as engaging in this behavior, and attending to the experience of that imagined action in relation to your expectations of it; asking, finally, if the behavior seems right, fitting, appropriate. If the answer to the last question is “yes,” the final move is to live into compassion (“become compassion,” as previously described) by embodying the discerned beneficial behavior (Dreitcer, 2017).

*“Compassion Compass Coordinates”*

The final set of functional capacities to be considered here consists of qualities the CEC has identified as Compassion Compass Coordinates. These are characteristics that mark genuine compassion. The eight coordinates consist of abilities and sensibilities that are listed as pairs of (ostensible) opposites meant to be held in creative tension. These sets of skillful means intend to strike a beneficial balance between internal and external, intrapersonal and social, self-care and care for others and the world. They are “coordinates” in the sense that, like points on a compass, they are meant to point toward what a life of engaged compassion consists of. A brief survey of these four pairs of coordinates may offer a sense of the role of compassionate coordinates as functional capacities for and within compassion.

The first of these sets of coordinates balances love for the adversary with empowered personal dignity. This pairing affirms traditions that assert that even enemies should be loved, offered compassion, even as it insists that true compassion is not passive before personal violation, neither submitting to indignities nor retreating in the face of intimidation. Rather, compassion boldly stands up for personal dignity. It speaks truth to power, refuses to be shamed, and asserts the value of one’s personhood before those who are dismissive or condescending. Leah Rosen operationalized this pair of compassion capacities by finding a creative way to offer her adversary a gift of things dear to him (chili and animal care), even as she refused to back away from her own public identity and commitments.

A second set of coordinates is closely aligned with the first. It pairs universal inclusivity with firm limits around violation. This couplet asserts that no one dwells beyond the reach of compassion; compassion embraces everyone, no matter what they have done or who they are. And yet, dangerous persons who are unrepentant need to be contained, and those vulnerable to them need to be protected. Rabbi Rosen refused to eliminate her adversarial neighbor from compassionate consideration, even though he showed nothing deserving of her caring outreach. At the same time, she refused to be shamed by him or to have his stated animosities harm or diminish her life and work in any way.

The third pair of coordinates links openness to the other’s truth with a non-reactive presence that is grounded in one’s own truth. Leah Rosen brought the first of these coordinates to life when she was willing to listen to her neighbor’s life story rather than shun him because of his behaviors. Her entire approach to the man demonstrated the second element in this pairing. Her unwavering grounding in who she was, and what she was committed to, allowed her to work alongside him on projects that she believed in as she stayed calmly focused on the beliefs and goals that she held dear.

The final set of coordinates connects rigorous systemic social analysis with imaginative social problem-solving. Rabbi Rosen engaged in the first coordinate of this pair in her research into what her adversary valued and how his values connected to the broader life of the community the two of them shared. Armed with that information and open to creative possibilities, she imagined her way into a set of activities she could share with her adversarial neighbor—activities they could mutually enjoy. In this way she managed to disarm him as her actions benefited him and the social systems he cared about.

Taken as a whole, these four sets of coordinates begin to form an identifiable outline of how a life of compassion functions in regard to realities faced by individuals and communities in their day-to-day lives. They describe abilities and sensibilities that stand as aspirations and reliable markers for living into the kind of compassion that all the previously-described skillful means seek to foster.

**Discussion**

This article began by noting that research has not been brought to bear on compassion-cultivation processes influenced by Christian contemplative practice traditions. It is hoped that this survey of skillful means within a particular training program that is influenced by Christian practices and perspectives, might set the groundwork for significant research into the efficacy of approaches to Christian-tradition compassion formation. Such research could pave the way for exploring how Christian compassion formation processes could helpfully contribute to and diversify the resources that are inform the development of widely effective compassion training programs for a secular audience.

In addition, this survey of compassion-related skillful means in Christian practice traditions might serve as a resource for freshly illuminating elements within compassion training programs influenced by religious or spiritual traditions other than Christian ones. For instance, this article leads to questions that might include the following: Do Buddhist-tradition practices such as Loving-Kindness Meditation, Tonglen, and *Metta* contain the cumulative sets of skillful means (identifiable as framing capacities, foundational capacities, formational capacities and functional) that appear in Christian-tradition compassion-fostering practices? If so (or if not) is this incidental or by conscious design? Similarly, do compassion training programs that draw from such traditions follow this cumulative structure or not—consciously/intentionally or not? What might be gained or lost in the presence/absence of these elements (including story-telling and imaginatively inviting and engaging difficult emotions)? How does initial conceptual framing influence expectations, experiences, and (ultimately) formation? What might govern the choices of conceptual framing for a secular compassion training program? These and other questions might be raised in a comparative-practice analysis based on issues and perspectives highlighted by this article’s exploration of skillful means.

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AD: sole researcher and author.

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