

**September 29, 2012**  
**Day-long retreat by Sr. Joyce Rupp**  
**St. Anne's Parish, Shrewsbury**



The topic for the day was **“The Gift of Self-Compassion.”**

Contrary to common belief, self-compassion is not an indulgent, self-centered orientation. Rather, self-compassion is essential for a healthy spiritual life. Self-compassion implies that we take time to renew our spirit, that we offer forgiveness and forego harsh judgments about our imperfections. This approach leads us to be kinder to others, as well. As the co-director of The Institute of Compassionate Presence, Joyce Rupp teaches in the program both regionally and nationally. She offers the expertise of her study and extensive teaching on the topic of compassion. This retreat will include insights from her own lived experience and from the Gospels, along with the published works of Kristin Neff (*Self –Compassion*), Brene Brown (*The Gifts of Imperfection*), Paul Gilbert (*The Compassionate Mind*) and Jack Kornfield (*The Wise Heart*).

A quote from author Kristin Neff sums up the purpose of this retreat: *“Self-kindness, by definition, means that we stop the constant self-judgment and disparaging internal commentary that most of us have come to see as normal, ...It also involves actively comforting ourselves, responding just as we would to a dear friend in need.”*

## Joyce Rupp's Gift to New England Women: Self-Compassion



*“I open my eyes to you, I open my heart to you. Together we raise our hearts to the sun, and together we are opening our loving hearts as one.”*

So began an extraordinary day of spiritual nourishment and healing led by noted author and speaker Joyce Rupp, sponsored by the Commission for Women of the Diocese of Worcester.



### **The topic: The Gift of Self-Compassion.**

The Father Smith Center at St. Anne's Parish in Shrewsbury, MA was filled to overflowing with three hundred women gathered together to listen, pray, sing, meditate, reflect and interact with each other.

### **Opening prayers**

The opening prayer had the women lovingly looking into each other's eyes, hands reaching out. The energy in the room spoke of warmth and connection.



*The women engage in communal prayer.*

Joyce chanted the above opening lines, explaining that the repetition of chant focuses the individual by quieting the inner self.

“It brings us inward to the Holy One,” she said.

A second chant sought to lead the women even deeper:

*“Sisters, brothers, take your time, go slowly. Listen deep within yourself, Love is waiting for you. Love is waiting for you.”*

### **Turning the worldly to sacred**



During this opening prayer, Joyce led the women in meditation, teaching them how to quiet themselves through breathing, focusing on their bodies, leading the mind and heart into stillness, and then turning to the spirit, finding that secret place where God dwells. And in the midst of all that, a very worldly thing occurred.

A cell phone kept ringing.

And Joyce Rupp used that distraction to teach the crucial theme of the day: it's all about attitude.

Using the cell phone interruption, she spoke of non-judgment, of turning one's thoughts of criticism and condemnation to ones of understanding and even, appreciation of the fact that the cell phone ring sounded like soft music that fit right in with the meditation.

Indeed, the lyrics from the classic Shaker hymn, "Tis the Gift to be Simple" ring true:

*"To turn, turn will be our delight, Till by turning, turning we come 'round right."*

### **What is compassion?**

At the conclusion of the opening prayer, Joyce taught about compassion: "Compassion is connecting with suffering the way a mother is connected to her baby in the womb."

It's all about awareness, attitude and action. Do I recognize suffering in our midst? How do I approach it? What will I do about it?

### **These themes also apply to compassion for the self.**

Joyce explained that self-compassion is not only about giving ourselves comfort but applies to how we judge ourselves. "Can we approach ourselves as kindly as we do others?" she said.

She justified self-compassion, explaining that it is needed for life's circumstances, relationships and, especially for women, acceptance of our physical selves. This is especially true for professional caregivers who often have great difficulty with self-compassion and thus suffer from compassion fatigue and burnout.

### **Why is self-compassion so difficult to give?**

Women are socialized to be caregivers. And Christians, Joyce explained, are taught not to be self-compassionate but to be self-sacrificing. And one cannot be done without the other.

## **Divine examples**

Jesus set the example for practicing self-compassion and Joyce presented several scripture passages which illustrated this:

- In John, chapter 4, Jesus, tired from the journey, sat down and asked a Samaritan woman for a drink. In His wisdom He recognized His need for rest and refreshment and granted Himself the permission to do so. And as a result, He had an extraordinary encounter with a most unlikely individual, the Samaritan women, which led many to believe in Him.
- Several times in scripture Jesus steals away by Himself, often overnight, to “recharge His battery” by praying to His heavenly Father.
- Jesus spent time with close friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He allowed Himself to be vulnerable and weep at the tomb of Lazarus.
- In all four gospels, Jesus encountered a woman who wished to either bathe His feet with her tears or anoint them with oil. Again, He permitted Himself to be ministered to.

## **Giving and receiving**

Jesus was good at giving and He was *just as good at receiving*. This is how He practiced self-compassion.

Understanding that women often think of self-compassion as self-centered and selfish, Joyce reminded the group that kindness and compassion to others is not possible without applying those things to ourselves. The second Great Commandment of Jesus states, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

## **Self-compassion therefore includes:**

- Respect for yourself
- Listening to your inner voice
- Taking care of your body, including getting enough sleep
- Vigilance regarding what we put into our minds (for example, the movies we watch, books and magazines we read, the internet, music, etc.)
- Connecting to the mind (also known as mindfulness)
- Awareness of how much you criticize yourself
- Apprenticing yourself to yourself
- Befriending yourself
- Forgiving yourself

Joyce summarized by stating that “Self-knowledge leads to self-kindness.”

## **A time for sharing and meditation**

At the conclusion of her morning presentation, Joyce passed around the microphone to the women for a time of poignant public sharing.

Joyce next led the women into the next activity of quiet individual meditation. Based upon on the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage from Luke 8:40-49, Joyce instructed the women to place themselves within the scene, imagining that they are that woman, filled with faith, determined to be healed despite the risk, and experiencing that amazing encounter with the Lord.

## **The danger of “Should”**

Concluding her morning talk, Joyce spoke powerfully of the need to move on from personal mistakes and the damage done by constant self-berating. She introduced the theme of “The Tyranny of the ‘Should:’” “I *should* be doing this, I *should* have done that ...”

“Every *should* undermines self-compassion because it raises the inner voice which says, ‘I am not good enough,’” she said.

## **Praying with the body**



After a long and relaxing lunch, the afternoon session opened with prayer focusing on the body. Recalling Colossians 3:9-16 and the verse, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” (verse 12, New International version), Joyce led the women in a series of simple chants with hand motions.

## **Praying from our circumstance**

Reminding the women that “we pray out of who we are,” Joyce shared personal stories regarding her beloved cousin Teresa, since passed away from cancer, and the loss of three important figures in her life in less than a year (including her mother, her best friend, and her spiritual director), and

the influence these losses have had upon her prayer life. She shared a compelling story of healing by means of calling upon people she loved and lost (her personal saints) and asking them to stand in with her as she prayed.

### **More time for sharing**

Joyce led the women first into public sharing by passing the microphone, and then into more personal sharing one-on-one with a partner.

### **Boundaries and the weight of perfectionism**

The final topic discussed was that of boundaries: setting realistic expectations, learning to say 'no' and recognizing and claiming personal space. Citing author Brené Brown (*The Gifts of Imperfection*), Joyce spoke at length about the dangers of being a perfectionist. In her book Brown stated that perfectionism is about shame because of expectations not met. The very nature of perfectionism means that the bar is always set too high, creating the continuous cycle of shame which is so harmful.

### **Healing power of touch**



*a communal prayer of hugs, support and song*

Another author that Joyce frequently cited was Kristen Neff, author of *Self Compassion*. Neff referred to the healing power of touch and how such touch produces oxytocin, a hormone known for producing feelings of well-being and harmony. No doubt touch, when done under the proper circumstances (including permission by the participants) reconnects us with one another and with ourselves.

Joyce listed Neff's sixteen warning signs of compassion fatigue, often experienced by professional and family caregivers which can be found in her book.

## **The meaning of Divine perfection**

Finally, Joyce spoke of mindfulness: the need to know ourselves better and to make the necessary connections between the heart, head, body, our inner selves and the outside world. She quoted a passage from scripture, “Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) and declared that divine perfection means being whole. And to be whole, we must be connected.

With all that in mind, Joyce and the women ended the day with a litany and a song.



The Spirit was present throughout and three hundred-plus women left the Father Smith Center with much to ponder, no doubt feeling spiritually nourished, and on the way to becoming whole.

## **Staying connected with Joyce Rupp**

Joyce has written 22 books, produced 8 CDs of chant and presentations, and offers a free monthly newsletter with news and inspirational essays. Visit her website at [joycerupp.com](http://joycerupp.com).

Here are more pictures filled with sweet memories of the day we spent together.



Commission members (L to R) Pat Smith and Sr. Paula Kelleher, SSJ, volunteer Shirley ??, and commission treasurer Shirley Pukaite formed the registration team.

