THRIVE EMERGE

Compassion

I had an unsettling encounter with a stranger in a Baltimore park today. We were celebrating my grandson's birthday when a man on a nearby bench began shouting – angry, loud, and unpredictable. He wasn't directing his words at us, but the energy carried a sense of threat. He would be quiet for a while, then return to his ranting, caught in an internal cycle we could only glimpse from the outside.

Eventually, he wandered over and began talking with a few of us – now animated rather than hostile, but still a bit too loud, and his stories exaggerated – but not frightening. My own response softened. When his voice rose, I met his eyes and gently asked him to lower it. He apologized each time, trying in his way to comply. At one point, he even admitted he needed to do a better job of taking his medication.

I didn't need my psychiatrist's training to see his struggle. What mattered most in that moment was to meet him with compassion – not out of fear or avoidance, but with recognition that all of us, at one time or another, wrestle with anger, confusion, or a sense of losing control. And when we do, what we long for is not judgment, but belonging. Not rejection, but validation.

When I suggested calling the police, one of my daughters urged compassion instead. "This is his turf," she said, reminding me that in New York, where she lives, this side of humanity is visible every day – people struggling, sometimes inappropriate, but doing their best to get by. Most of the time, she said, the wiser response is to live and let live, not escalate with fear.

But when I noticed the scissors in his back pocket, and his energy rising again, the situation shifted. The police were called. We left the park.

I'm left with mixed feelings. Of course we must protect those we love. Setting boundaries is not weakness but necessity. Yet in today's world – where fear so easily turns into confrontation – we often act from that primal survival instinct: me or you. One of us wins; the other does not.

Compassion calls us to something greater. It asks us to widen our view, to remember that every human being seeks the same thing: freedom from pain and a taste of happiness. Compassion invites us to rise above fear, to see our shared humanity, and to meet each other with kindness, tolerance, and respect. Not to abandon safety, but to lead first with our deepest selves – with loving-kindness toward a troubled world.

For those of us whose minds have sometimes felt unruly or misunderstood, for those who have been seen as "too much," "too odd," or "too unpredictable," compassion is everything. It is the bridge back to dignity. So let us begin there.

Just a few minutes at a time. Just a few moments of kindness. They matter. They lift us all. And they bring us nearer to the world we long to build – a world where greatness comes not from exclusion or fear, but from the courage to see and celebrate one another's true selves.