

# Compassionate Connections

- *brother Michael*

**A**S WE MOVE THROUGH LIFE THERE ARE CONSTANT changes. There are external changes that present themselves to us simply because we are moving through time and space. Consider the change of seasons. Summer is not winter, and shoveling snow is not weeding the garden. These are changes that happen whether we like it or not. The change I reflect upon here is internal change, the kind of change that cannot be taken for granted but needs to be chosen and nurtured.

When we are children the universe is so new. Is the world bigger than my playpen? Our world expands as we grow. Our first experiences of a larger world include our parents, our peers, siblings and favorite toys, and then there is the rest of the world that is a hazy mass of movement and potential. The world of childhood is often perceived as a pyramid. There are select forces and persons who seem bigger and more powerful at that stage of our life.

As we grow we change. We discover our own agency. We start naming and calling, recognizing our name and our calling in life. We start to wonder about compassion. Life offers us alternatives that we can choose. We form patterns upon which we build our future choices.

When I came to community one of the first challenges I encountered was our living by consensus. Everyone has a voice and early on I was encouraged to speak my voice. This was liberating since I was encouraged to speak no matter how I felt. Sometimes fear can grow into anger which becomes isolation and shame in a very short period of time, yet even when I felt vulnerable my voice was heard by brothers, and together we worked to live in one heart. In those experiences there was neither condescension



Clouded Sulphur butterfly.

nor trampling over. We give careful consideration to the words we use and compassionate understanding becomes our response to one another.

This is when the change of perspective from a pyramid to a circle becomes real. If we are part of a circle of equals, then patience, respect, and love are the priority. This transforms how we relate to every other reality we encounter.

Recently I encountered another way of describing this. I was reading Jean Vanier and following his line of thought. It started with pyramids and as I read further I thought to myself, "We are on our way to circles." Yet I was surprised by this man who has so much experience in communal living. In his experience in l'Arche he went from pyramids to body. I heard the word "body" in a new way. He continued by referencing First Corinthians where Paul writes of our being one body in Christ. Not all of us are the head, not all of us the hands or the feet, yet we form one body. I stopped reading because, although I have often heard of this concept and know the scripture quotation, I knew I needed to take time for reflection on this new awareness in order to gain greater insight into its meaning.

I experience my body as a beautiful, fragile plurality that is mystery. My body has both strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes a sliver can cause such pain while a good belly laugh is simply wonderful to experience. My mind is powerful and my heart is healthy and they need each other.

Further quiet reflection will increase the strength and flexibility of this insight. This word "body" which is so common in our tradition and in our experience has become new for me. Now comes the time to be choiceful and attentive, to grow in compassionate connections. ■