

We've been talking about rites of passages, those moments of our lives when we move from one status to another. If we're in the midst of those passages, they can be good places to stop and reflect on our spiritual lives. If we've passed them by, we can always look back and consider their importance. Last week, I spoke about birth. Today, I would like for us to think about when we first made our way out into the world, which for most of us was first grade. I know many of you probably don't remember the day you were born, but you might remember first grade.

My first-grade teacher was teacher was Mrs. Mann. I didn't know her first name until a couple years ago, when I mentioned her in a book and had to call the school office to learn her first name, which was Wilma. Wilma Mann was a nice lady and I have fond memories of her. I remember one winter day, I had a hard time pulling on my rubber boots and couldn't figure out why. Mrs. Mann helped me and even though it took several long moments of struggling she never lost her temper. After we had wrestled them on, we looked around for my gloves, which turned out to be in the toes of my boots. As it turns out, that would become symbolic of my academic career—teachers trying to cram knowledge into a head ill-equipped to receive it.

Back then, first grade was our initial launch into the world. Many of our mothers stayed home, so this was our first foray out into the world and we were a little uncertain, and even overwhelmed, by everything. Trying to make sense of things. Figuring out our place in a confusing world.

We have a next door neighbor girl who went away to Vacation Bible School this week. The class project was to help raise money to send someone to Africa help sick people. Our little neighbor was very excited about helping and came over to our house talking about people with *leopard seeds*. It took awhile, but we finally figured out that *leopard seeds* was *leprosy*. We never did get her to understand that. As far as she's concerned they've got to get those leopard seeds planted so they can help people.

I admire her zeal to help. It isn't always easy to help people. I remember when I was in the first grade, on the playground at recess, and a boy who was a bully hit my friend Bobby in the face and made him cry. Then the bully told those of us gathered around that if anyone helped Bobby, they'd get punched, too. This boy was bigger than most of us and very aggressive. While Bobby continued to cry, the rest of us melted away, afraid, except for one girl who gave the bully what for, then went up to Bobby and put her arm around him until he stopped crying.

Afterwards, I was embarrassed to be around Bobby, because I hadn't helped him, but the thought of confronting the bully frightened me. Later, I would wonder whether I became a Quaker pacifist not because I abhorred violence but because I was afraid of it and wanted an excuse to avoid it altogether.

I've often wondered why, when I've forgotten so many other things, that moment has stayed with me and even had a formative effect on my religious beliefs, causing me to believe that bravery in the face of tyranny is a spiritual virtue, just as much as faith or kindness or feeding the hungry. That little girl who helped my friend Bobby when everyone was turning away was a saint in the making.

I remember when our children were first born, and we were discussing with a group of parents what each of us wished for our children. Most of us said happiness and good health and love, the usual things. But one man said, "I want my daughter to be brave."

To this day, whenever I think of bravery, I think of that little girl, whose compassion was greater than her fear. It takes real bravery to be compassionate.

We go to school expecting to learn math and science and spelling. As kind as our teachers are, we also learn the world can be hard and frightening. We form reactions to those difficulties, usually without much thought. Our reactions become patterns, the patterns become habits, and the habits become our lifestyle.

The Italian poet and novelist, Cesare Pavese, once wrote, “Religion consists of the belief that everything that happens to us is extraordinarily important.” If that is true, if religion consists of the belief that everything that happens to us is important, then we can revisit our early actions and reactions and say, “I don’t want to be that way.” That’s the other side of religion’s coin. Healthy religion or spirituality urges us to look squarely and honestly at where we’ve been, at those habits which cripple us, then invites us to embrace a different way forward.

These are our choices when we first encounter the world—compassion or fear. When we read the gospel stories about Jesus, one of the things we notice about Jesus was his utter refusal to let fear stifle his compassion. He was aggressively compassionate, even when doing so made him the target of religious bullies. There are often no bigger bullies than religious bullies, who believe their meanness to be God’s will and can be zealously and passionately cruel.

You remember the story of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand? What was his dilemma? Will I be brave enough to be compassionate? Or will I let fear keep me from doing the right and good thing? Now try to remember the names of those Pharisees. Do you know them? Of course not. They're not even named. Look how history has treated them. As a blustery wind, forgotten as soon as it passes.

But compassion is remembered. And that day compassion's name was Jesus. May our names be remembered with his.