

Lesson Ten

Empathy and Compassion

“Saint Francis and the Sow” by Galway Kinnell



“ Real empathy is sometimes not insisting that it will be okay but acknowledging that it is not. ”

~ Sheryl Sandberg

OBJECTIVES

Mindfulness Skills	<p>Visualize fountain in heart</p> <p>Practice perspective-taking</p> <p>Offer another person empathy and compassion</p>
CASEL Competencies Highlight	<p>Social awareness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take others' perspective • Demonstrate empathy and compassion
<p>Creative Writing Task</p> <p>(Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 a-e, W.9-10.4-6; L.9-10.1 a,b; L.9-10.2 a-c; L.9-10.3 a; ELD Part I, C, 10, 12 and ELD Part II, A-C)</p>	<p>Produce a poem or letter offering compassionate care to an animal, yourself, or another person</p>
<p>Academic Writing Task</p> <p>(Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1; W.9-10.4-6, L.9-10.1 a, b; L.9-10.2 a-c; L.9-10.3 a; ELD Part I, C, 11, 12 and ELD Part II, A-C)</p>	<p>Analyze theme and its development in poem</p>

INTRODUCTION

It's easy "to other." This lesson is dedicated to breaking down the barriers we subconsciously erect between ourselves and those we perceive to be different from us. To look for beauty and connection, where what feels most comfortable is to dismiss or reject, is to work with deep-seated habits of mind.

This generosity of spirit is much needed in today's world, with the explosion of social media forcing young people to manage their own publicity and marketing campaigns beginning in the second or third grade. Teaching and modeling empathy and compassion to mitigate pervasive cyberbullying is paramount.

"Saint Francis and the Sow" reminds students to see beauty where it might be easy to overlook it. The mention of "fourteen teats and fourteen mouths sucking and blowing" may result in a few giggles and a classroom full of warm hearts as students write to "reteach a thing its loveliness."

DID YOU KNOW? THE VALUE OF EMPATHY

We are hard-wired for kindness and empathy. When we see someone suffering, our natural inclination (and our neurobiology) is to feel their pain, as well. This is due to mirror neurons, whose job is to track the emotions, physical movements, and intentions of whomever we are with and reproduce the sensed state in our own brains. In the case of witnessing someone's pain, the pain receptors in our own brains light up, though to a lesser degree. This phenomenon is called emotional resonance or emotional contagion.

Whether we choose to see someone’s suffering as a disease we can catch, or a profound human experience that we have the privilege of sharing, depends on our perspective. Psychiatrist and researcher Helen Riess, author of *The Empathy Effect*, conducted research on how empathy affects physicians’ well-being. She found that when doctors chose to stay open and attentive to the emotional lives of their patients and acknowledged their own feelings of emotional resonance, both they and their patients benefited. Patients were more trusting and cooperative, and doctors felt more connected and suffered less from compassion fatigue.

However, it can be easy to become overwhelmed by another’s suffering. Fortunately, true empathy involves a cognitive component, as well. Not only do we feel what others feel, but we are also able to imagine ourselves in their shoes. Practicing perspective-taking helps us to separate our pain from theirs and is the most sustainable way to build empathetic concern or compassion.

As teachers, therapists, and social workers, we’re also subject to compassion fatigue. Practicing mindfulness adds a protective layer, or “shield,” so we don’t take on others’ emotions so deeply that they affect us adversely. We’re better able to self-regulate and stay open to the wide range of emotions students express. We remain curious, ask questions, and listen to their answers without attempting to shut them down or fix them. This normalizes students’ emotions and helps them to clarify what they’re feeling so we may respond in a way that is helpful. We’re also modeling how to be more sensitive to others’ feelings.

STUDENT LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ✓ Picture a fountain of love in your heart
- ✓ Practice putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and wishing them well
- ✓ Do a close reading of the poem “St. Francis and the Sow” by Galway Kinnell and answer questions about it
- ✓ Write your own version of the poem or a story inspired by it
- ✓ Write a paragraph sharing what you think the poet’s message is and prove it with lines from the poem

Step 1: Quick Write (5 min.) and Partner Share (5 min.)

Option 1

Prompt: Think of a time you comforted someone who was going through a rough patch. What was the situation? What did you say or do?

Option 2

Prompt: Make a list of animals, people, and/or parts of the natural world that are suffering.

Step 2: Guided Practice (5–7 min.)



Teacher Note: Mindfulness encourages young people to continue to turn their attention inward. At this point in the course, they may be becoming more aware of the voice of the inner critic and the rapidity with which they externalize this painful experience by judging others. This lesson includes a brief guided visualization of offering themselves self-compassion and extending it to others who are in need of the healing waters of compassion.

Script

Taking a moment to pause and turn our attention inward can be a scary act. Sometimes our inner worlds can feel like washing machines on the spin cycle. (Pause.) We may feel afraid that if we stop to take a look, we'll go crazy with all the churning thoughts and emotions, all the stories of our faults and limitations. So, we should acknowledge the courage it takes to pause from our constant doing to practice simply being with ourselves, just as we are, without the need to change anything . . . and offer ourselves kindness. Remember that this is a safe place to just be, and that just like you, everyone around you is also subject to their own negative self-talk, to their judgments and self-criticisms. (Pause; then ring bell.)

Beginning with some gentle stretches, settle into the body, softening your belly. (Pause while students settle themselves.) Imagine a string extending from the top of your head, raising your spine toward the ceiling, and dropping your shoulders toward the floor. Find the breath in your body, in your chest and your belly. And take a few slow, deep breaths.

Now tune into your mind's eye, imagining a fountain in your heart center, flowing with an effervescent, golden-colored nectar. Imagine this nectar streaming through your chest and shoulders, down your arms, all the way to your fingertips . . . and cascading into your belly, pelvis, and hips, then down through your legs all the way to the tips of your toes. (Pause.) And as it flows, feel any places of holding in your body begin to melt, any disturbing thoughts or storylines dissolving in the radiance of this golden light.

And as it flows, imagine this golden nectar extending beyond the limits of your own body, showering someone you know who needs love and self-acceptance at this moment. Imagine them being bathed in these healing waters and smiling at you with love and gratitude for your caring concern. (Invite a student to ring the bell.) Wiggle your fingers and toes, and when you're ready, open your eyes. And take a moment to notice how you feel.

Step 3: Debrief (partners, then whole class, 5–10 min.)

1. How do you feel?
2. Were you able to imagine a fountain in your heart? What was it like?
3. Did you share the golden nectar with someone else? With whom?

Step 4: Read “Saint Francis and the Sow” (2 min.)

Read poem aloud. Encourage students to visualize what they hear.

Step 5: Making Connections (5–10 min.)

1. What do you appreciate about this poem?
2. What words or phrases do you remember?
3. What images stand out in your mind?

Step 6: Cloze Listening Activity (Handout A) (10 min.)

Distribute the listening worksheet and, after reviewing unfamiliar vocabulary words, read the poem a second time and have students fill in the missing words.

Step 7: Text-Dependent Questions (Handout B; Answers on Handout C) (10–15 min.)

Distribute Handout B for students to complete questions, either alone, with a partner, or in small groups.

Step 8: Text Response (Handout B; Sample Response on Handout C)

Prompt: In the poem, Kinnell paints a detailed portrait in the words of a mother pig reflecting on her self-worth. What message do you think he’s trying to convey?

Step 9: Self-Reflection (Handout B)

Prompt: How does showing compassion make the world a better place? Give an example from your life.

Step 10: Poem Writing (Handout D, E, or F) (10–15 min.)

Distribute Handout D, E, or F, depending on students’ fluency in English and creative writing experience.

Step 11: Prose Writing Option

Prompt: Write a letter of encouragement and support to someone or something that is suffering—an animal, a part of nature, someone who may have come to mind in your quick write, or perhaps yourself. As inspiration, you may like to start with the following line from the poem: “Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.”

TAKEAWAY

Self-compassion and empathy are intricately linked. It's impossible to give to others what we ourselves don't have. Gaining perspective on our own minds and offering ourselves unconditional love is a prerequisite to showing up for others in an effective and compassionate way.

EXTENSION

Ask students to brainstorm a list of positive messages they could offer to themselves or to someone in need of a boost. Example phrases include: *You are worthwhile. You are beautiful all the way deep in your heart. You are shy, and that's okay. You are brave. You do matter. You have lots of feelings, and they are important. You deserve to have your needs met. You have lots of laughter deep inside. I love you. I am so proud of you.* These messages could be used to create a "Compliments" flyer with personalized messages at the bottom, which students could tear off.

Saint Francis and the Sow

by Galway Kinnell

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
5 though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on the brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
10 it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
15 blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
20 down through the great broken heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Handout A

Cloze Listening Activity

Name: _____

Listen to the poem and use the words to fill in the blanks.

creased	blessings	touch	remembering	spininess
retell	reteach	self-blessing	brow	flower
snout	spiritual	broken	spurting	shuddering

Saint Francis and the Sow

by Galway Kinnell

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't (1) _____,
for everything flowers, from within, of (2) _____;
5 though sometimes it is necessary
to (3) _____ a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on the (4) _____
of the flower
and (5) _____ it in words and in touch
10 it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the (6) _____ forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in (7) _____
15 (8) _____ of earth on the sow, and the sow
began (9) _____ all down her thick length,
from the earthen (10) _____ all the way
through the fodder and slops to the (11) _____ curl of the tail,
from the hard (12) _____ spiked out from the spine
20 down through the great (13) _____ heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess (14) _____ and (15) _____
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them:

the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

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Handout B

Text-Dependent Questions, Text Response, and Personal Reflection

Name: _____

Text-Dependent Questions

1. Highlight ten concrete nouns from the poem.

2. In line 11, the poet writes about comforting a flower “until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing.” What does “self-blessing” mean? Use context clues.

3. The poem is titled “Saint Francis and the Sow.” Saint Francis was famous for showing great compassion to the animal world. Why do you think the poet chose a female pig (sow) as a subject for his poem?

4. What physical gesture does the speaker in the poem make to comfort the pig?

5. The poem opens with the line, “The bud stands for all things.” What do you think the bud represents (symbolizes)?

6. “Spiritual curl” is a noun phrase (noun + adjective) that evokes a mystical feeling. Find one more.

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Text Response

Examine the theme and its development in the poem.

Prompt

In the poem, Kinnell paints a detailed portrait in the words of a mother pig reflecting on her self-worth. What message (theme) do you think he's trying to convey? What lines from the poem demonstrate it? Cite textual evidence.

Self-Reflection

How does showing compassion make the world a better place? Give an example from your life.

Handout C

Text-Dependent Questions Answer Key and Sample Text Response

Text-Dependent Questions Answer Key

1. bud, hand, brow, flower, forehead, sow, snout, tail, spine, heart, teats, mouths
2. to wish oneself well and to practice self-love
3. Pigs are generally considered to be dirty animals that wallow in the mud. The poet is challenging this bias by elevating the pig to a spiritual dimension.
4. They put their hand on her forehead and remind her that she is lovely
5. *Answers will vary.* The bud represents everyone's potential to love themselves completely and move through the world with confidence and grace; we can choose to bloom like a flower or stay a bud; the heart; the start of life.
6. "great broken heart"; "sheer blue milken dreaminess"

Sample Text Response

The theme of the poem "Saint Francis and the Sow" is empathy and compassion. Kinnell is calling our attention to an animal that isn't held in high regard. In the world of his poem, we are invited to look more closely and admire and empathize with the pig nursing her piglets. She is personified as reflecting on and "remembering" her worth, and as having a "great broken heart," something to which many of us can relate.

Handout D

Basic Poem Writing Play Sheet

Name: _____

Copy your favorite line from the poem "Saint Francis and the Sow."

Next, brainstorm three to five words in each category below:

Animals that most people don't like	Unique part of their body	Descriptive adjectives

Now fill in the blanks with your ideas.

Sometimes it is necessary to reattach a thing its loveliness.

To put a hand on _____ of the _____
(part of the body) (animal)

And retell her in words and in touch

She is _____.
(adjective)

Continued on next page

Draw a picture of your act of kindness.

Handout E

Intermediate Poem Writing Play Sheet

Name: _____

Brainstorm words in the following categories, and then use your ideas to write your own version of the poem, offering compassionate care to an animal that is misunderstood, disdained, feared, or in danger.

Animal	Unique or signature part of its body	Descriptive adjectives

Continued on next page

Title: _____

(save this for last and make it surprising or just right for your poem)

Sometimes it is necessary

to reteach a thing its loveliness,

to put a hand on the _____
(adjective) _____ *(part of body)*of the _____
(animal)

and retell them in words and in touch

They are _____.
*(adjective)*and the _____ began remembering
*(animal)*all down their _____ body
*(adjective)*from the _____,
*(part of body)*all the way down through _____;
*(a "distant" part of its body)*blessings of _____ on the _____
(something from nature) *(animal)*May they remember their _____
*(positive quality—noun)*the _____, _____ of _____.
(adjective) *(adjective)* *(positive quality—noun)* *(animal)*

Handout F

Advanced Poem Writing Play Sheet

Name: _____

Use the following template as a guide to write your own version of the poem. Feel free to change it or abandon it at any point.

Title: _____

(save this for last and make it surprising or just right for your poem)

Sometimes it is necessary

to reteach a thing its loveliness,

to put a hand on the _____

of the _____

and retell _____ in words and in touch

_____ is _____.

and the _____ began remembering

all down _____ body

from the _____,

all the way down through _____;

blessings of _____ on the _____

May _____ remember _____

the _____, _____ of _____.

CREATIVE WRITING EXAMPLES

Poetry

The Rat

Sometimes it is necessary
to reattach a thing its loveliness.
to put a finger on the translucent pink ears
of the rat
and retell it in words and in touch
it is adorable.

And the rat began remembering
all down its body
from the sensitive snout,
down through the muscular tail;
blessings of moonlight on the rat

May it remember its intelligence—
the friendly, pure, resourcefulness of rat.

—Austin, ninth grade

A Magical Life

Sometimes it is necessary
to reattach a thing its loveliness.
to put a hand on the cheek
of the girl
and retell her in words and in touch
she's thinking too much.

And the girl began remembering
all down her body,
from the top of her head
all down her legs to the bottom of her feet,
blessings of the water from the ocean on the girl
May she remember her kindness.

The magical, fearless loveliness of girl.

—Samantha, ninth grade

Journal Writing



Teacher Note: This journal writing sample and the poem that follows demonstrate how to revise a piece of free writing to create a new version of the poem without strictly following the poem writing template.

Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness. I am lovely just as I am. I accept myself just as I am. All this is me. All this is my own perfect loveliness, from the kinky hair on the top of my head, all down the length of this roundish belly and wide hips, eyes that blink away the tears of a love who went away, to see the page I'm writing on. Blessings of earth and sky, blessings of all the creatures on this earth—the plants and animals, and the rain. All that is good and wholesome. All that is protective. Blessings! Blessings! May I remember! May I remember I have a right to be here and to be happy. May I cut through the craving to be small, the old energy that wants to forget who I am, that wants to live in a world of pain and suffering. Remembering our goodness. Remembering our connectedness. The natural goodness of ourselves just as we are. We're perfect just as we are. Blessings on us—a shower of blessings on us!

—Laura Bean (author)

Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.
 To put a hand on the forehead of someone who is sick
 and retell her in words and in touch
 she is worthy.
 And the girl began remembering
 all down her feverish body
 from the kinky hair on the top of her head,
 all down the length of her roundish belly and wide hips,
 eyes that blink away the tears of a love that went away.
 Blessings of earth and sky,
 of all the creatures on this earth,
 the plants and animals and the rain.
 All that is good and wholesome.
 All that is protective.
 May we remember our natural goodness, just as we are.
 Blessings on us!
 A shower of blessings on us!

—Laura Bean (author)

REFERENCES, RESOURCES, AND FURTHER READING

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