

Interview with Maggie Brown, RN, MSN, AHN-BC, HWNC-BC, Reiki Master Teacher

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Maggie Brown

Heidi: Tell me the story of you and your work in compassion?

Maggie: So, let's see! Way back, when I was a young nurse, I was in an acute care setting. There, I had that "ah ha" moment when I realized that around 85% of the people I was seeing were "lifestyle impacted patients". I remember that moment, as a snapshot in my head.

So, I decided to go back to school and get my MSN as an Adult Nurse Practitioner so I could do prevention education and help people with their self-care and really try to prevent the problems that I saw as an acute care nurse. Primary care was wonderful (in the beginning) because we had the time to really spend with patients and to help them prevent illness.

My first job as a nurse practitioner was at health care for the homeless, and this was my first window into the experience of holding non-judgmental, heart-centered compassionate space for people, regardless of where they are, what their lifestyle is and what they are involved in. Just being that presence for them and to truly hear them.

I met many beautiful souls practicing healthcare for the homeless. Holding compassion for them, knowing they were someone's family member, allowed me to see them more holistically.

As a nurse, I had trained in MBSR modeled on Jon Cabot-Zin's work so I was familiar with and practiced mindfulness but I had not heard of mindful self-compassion. I did not really understand the importance of self-compassion until it became a necessity in my personal life. In 2013, my son Brian, who was a beautiful soul, died by suicide. It was in this experience of extreme, unexpected loss, that I knew if I didn't have self-compassion, I was not going to make it. This is when I had to put my hand on my heart and say "This is really hard", and honor and witness myself in that suffering. That was the beginning of my real deep appreciation for humanity, the deep suffering we have as humans and the power of salvation through compassion. This all involves being vulnerable and brave.

After my personal introduction to self-compassion, I discovered Kristen Neff's research on the concept of mindful self-compassion, which incorporates mindfulness, loving kindness, and common humanity (the three essential components) and I started to explore this for myself and in my work. So, at this point, I had progressed in my nursing career, and was practicing as a health and wellness coach and an advanced holistic nurse. I was guest lecturing on the importance of self-care and integrative therapies. I began to observe a missing piece in self-care education for nurses; we were providing self-care education and inviting people to engage in self-care, but I felt like we were missing an important first step, the step of just compassionately listening to where people were at.

Just holding space and hearing their story; listening with a compassionate, open heart. I feel we need to listen, to offer compassionate heart-centered presence as the first step, because nurses are suffering. So, I held this concept in my mind for probably two years before the compassion caravan started. At first, I was calling it the "heal mobile" but then I googled it and this was a dog service, so funny. Actually, I realized then that the word "heal" means that there is a desired outcome, so it didn't really fit as the project name. The project is about offering a compassionate space to speak truth and be heard. Self-care education would be a part of the project, but the main focus was compassion. [The Compassion Caravan](#) just came to me in meditation, "that's it!" I thought.



While I was participating in the [Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guide Immersion](#) training, I asked the forest for guidance. During a medicine walk (a solo experience in the forest), I felt a clear message that there was great suffering to be addressed and that reaching out with compassionately listening was where I needed to start, "much can be accomplished in the silence" was the message.

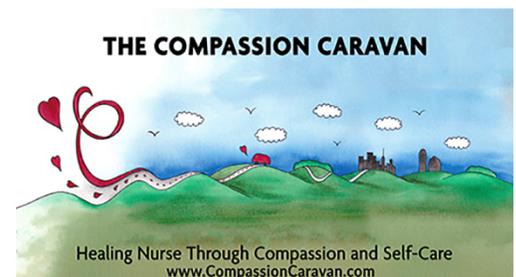
After that, at the AHNA 2019 conference, I started talking to people about this openly, and I happened to sit next to someone who was living and traveling in an RV. Traveling seemed doable. The vision became clearer, a project of traveling and offering compassionate listening circles, self-care education, and forest therapy; creating a thread of connection as we traveled.

When I shared my vision, people would say "this is a great idea", and "this is so needed." So, I reached out! I reached out to nursing theorists for their blessing. At first, I thought it would just be a few nurses involved, but a lot of holistic nurses came forward with their resources and wanted to volunteer their thoughts, enthusiasm, and expertise to create a beautiful program. I reached out to [The Omega Institute](#) for sponsorship for retreat space, and they said "yes!, we want to sponsor you"! With great enthusiasm, many other people came together to support us, the artist, [Gaia Orian](#) who designed the image for The Compassion Caravan and [i123.com](#) donated web support. Individuals concerned about the well-being of nursing stepped forward in donating time. Dr. Helen Erickson, [Creator of MRM Theory](#), and Margaret Erickson, CEO of the [AHNCC](#), were incredibly supportive and created a beautiful program of mobilizing self-care resources through offering an expressive art self-reflection as a part of the workshop. With the help of a core group of holistic nurses from [AHNA Chapters](#), the Compassion Caravan project blossomed into a national project that offered the power of compassionate healing presence, interconnectedness and integration.

So, we were ready to rock and roll and all the things were in place, and then COVID-19 hit and we were detoured. We detoured into the virtual world and now we holding virtual Compassionate Listening Circles. These are becoming their own thing, and are very meaningful for the people who are participating.

Mindful self-compassion training really informs the Compassionate Listening Circles and I would love to see this become a component of nursing education. Hopefully the misnomer of "compassion fatigue" will disappear. It's empathy fatigue, not compassion fatigue, that nurses are experiencing.

Our Compassionate Listening Circles are now being held 3 times per week. There is a Nurses in Nature Retreat planned for October, but the COVID-19 numbers are going up, so we will see. Since it is a wait and see at this point, I am going to take a "time out" from a lot of doing. We are kind of in a waiting pattern so I am going to devote 40 days of meditation to support the unfolding during this unknown. I picked the day of the new moon to begin my "time out" (July 20th) and I counted 40 days out, and it ends on my son's birthday, my son who passed...that is so interesting to me.



It feels like a lot of the spirit guides are coming in around this project, there is a lot of confluence of energies, of course this is 2020, the year of the nurse and midwife. It's Florence's 200th birthday. The Compassion Caravan was honoring that. In my mind, I see the earth holding us compassionately too. I had a dream of a woman who shared that nature needs to be one of the pillars of the project. So, I am excited that the Nurses in

Nature Retreat is coming. I like to explore the concept of our energies connecting to the mycelial network, almost a spiritual and physiological interdependence with the planet. Maybe in 20 years there will be a Research Newsletter about this! We have evolved with and we are intimately connected with Mother Earth.

On a 5 day silent meditation retreat I got "The answer lies in our heart instead of our mind." That reminded me of the Einstein quote "We can not solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them." Compassion is the purest form of love. The Vision of the Compassion Caravan is that "small seeds of compassion" will germinate and provide momentum for change in the current healthcare system and culture. We can shift the paradigm from a fear driven society to one of compassion and move to love and open acceptance.

The Compassion Caravan workshops were to open with a session called Gathering of Kindred Spirits, and were to close with a session called Manifesting Miracles. I believe, together, as a critical mass, we can manifest miracles, the vibration of love, compassion, can make this happen.

So now, the question to ask is, are we being asked to travel our own personal compassion caravan? Are the events of 2020 urging us to explore our mindful compassion for ourselves, others and the planet as we travel through each day?

Heidi: Tell me about the compassionate listening circles that are happening on Zoom and where you are seeing this manifest in experiences and outcomes?

Maggie: It's interesting, they are small but mighty. There are simple guidelines that these circles follow, for example, no cross talk, no feedback, no advice giving, that it is okay to be together in silence. This silence is profound. People want to be able to speak their truth.

The compassion circles are evolving over time, and it feels like there is healing in them, even though it's not coaching and it's not therapy. It's a really safe space in which to be together.

Visit www.CompassionCaravan.com and reach out on the Contact Me page to request Zoom invites.

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