



Series:

When the Heart Ripens
– and life becomes spacious

Episode: D3 – SHADOWED:

Compassion widened by suffering

History's ripe-hearted witnesses show how one's own suffering can make compassion more truthful. Under grace, pain may become a doorway into wider mercy – though there are pitfalls.

Enjoy this episode's illustrated Two-Act Play, Reflection, Practice Box, Discernment Box on look-alike states, and Meet the Witnesses.

Two-Act Play — p 1

Reflection — p 15

Practice Box — p 19

Discernment Box — p 19

Meet the Witnesses — p 31

Past Episodes in this Series

See or download past PDFs here: <https://laikosblog.org/blog-by-tony-macelli/>

— This Series traces witness-attested qualities of the spiritual heart when it has “ripened” – by divine grace and lived experience. Please read the Introduction online if you are new to the Series.

— **Group A. Rootedness in the Real.** Episodes A1–A3 traced how the ripened heart becomes grounded in ordinary life as it is. Attention settles, imagination softens, and the drive to secure meaning through achievement eases. What emerges is a stable presence able to receive reality without needing to escape or embellish it.

— **Group B. The Spacious Heart.** Episodes B1–B4 explored the inner widening through which love and attention become less anxious and less possessive. The heart learns to hold others, uncertainty, and time itself with greater ease. Relationship deepens as control, performance, and premature interpretation lose their grip.

— **Group C. The Inner Surrender.** Episodes C1–C5 turned toward the relinquishing of subtle inner compulsions – image, the need to win, wilful striving, resistance to limits, and fear of failure. The ripened heart learns to consent to reality without needing to prevail, justify itself, or remain invulnerable.

— **Group D. Meeting the Shadow and its Gifts.** This group explores what happens when a ripened heart has stopped evading its own darkness – and what it costs, and what it quietly opens. Episode D1 explored shadow faced and shadow integrated. Episode D2 turned to vulnerability no longer hidden or defended against. Episode D3 now explores compassion that has been widened and authenticated by one's own suffering.

Two-Act Play:

Compassion Widened by Suffering

Act I: The Room Where Patterns Break

Characters

Elena – Early 30s, newly employed restorative-justice facilitator; trained in correctional social work and victim support; sincere, somewhat idealistic.

Marcus – Mid-50s, long-term prisoner (over 20 years), quiet, carries a steady, un sentimental kindness.

Jonas – Prisoner in his 40s; bitter humour, old wounds close to the surface.

Liam – Prisoner in his 30s; recently bereaved (mother died), thin line between grief and anger.

Andre – Prisoner in his 20s; watchful, testing boundaries, more observer than talker.

Officer Brown – Correctional officer stationed at the door; few lines, strong presence.

Scene 1 – Opening the room

A prison group room. Pale walls, high barred windows admitting a narrow strip of light. Plastic chairs arranged in an uneven circle. A whiteboard with a faint, half-erased slogan: “We choose who we become.” A wall clock hums. The door is open; Officer

Brown stands just outside, arms folded, watching.

Elena moves chairs a little closer, places a small stack of papers on a side table, and breathes out slowly.

Elena — (to herself, quietly) — All right. One room, five men, one week's worth of ghosts.

Marcus enters first, nods once to Brown, once to Elena, and takes a chair that gives him sight of both the door and the window. Jonas and Liam follow, talking in low tones. Andre comes last, slouches into a chair, arms folded.

Elena — Thank you for coming back after last week. You know my name by now, but I'll say it again because names are one of the few things we don't have to earn. I'm Elena. I work with both prisoners and victims, and I've been asked to hold this space after what happened in the yard.

Small ripple. Jonas snorts softly.

Jonas — "Hold this space." Sounds like you're afraid it might run away.

Elena — Maybe I am. The yard incident shook a lot loose. The administration wants a report that says we've talked about violence and consequences. I'm more interested in what the last few days have done inside you.

Andre — So this is about feelings.

Elena — It's about reality. Some of that will have feelings attached. Some of it will just be facts that are hard to carry.

Pause. Liam stares at the floor.

Elena — You all know why this group exists. A man was badly beaten in the yard. Since then: lockdown, cancelled visits, more searches, more rumours. I'm not here to investigate. I'm here because when violence erupts, it doesn't stay where it happened. It spreads. Into sleep. Into calls. Into the way you walk down the corridor.

Jonas — Into bonus pay for some people.

He nods toward the door. Brown pretends not to hear.

Elena — I won't take that bait, Jonas. But I won't pretend it's not in the room. Today isn't about cleaning anyone's image. It's about naming what this has done to you, and what you find yourself tempted to do with that.

Scene 2 – Suffering named too quickly

Elena — Who's willing to start? Not with a confession. Just with one sentence about what this week has been like.

Silence stretches. The clock's hum grows louder. Marcus waits, hands folded loosely. Andre watches Elena, measuring her. Jonas leans back.

Jonas — One sentence? Fine. This week has been like living in a tin can someone keeps shaking.

Elena — Thank you. The shaking... what does it do to you?

Jonas — Depends who's holding the can.

Light laughter, thin and brittle.

Elena — Liam?

Liam doesn't look up.

Liam — They locked the wing the same day my mother was buried. That's my sentence.

A small stillness falls. Elena inhales sharply. Marcus closes his eyes briefly.

Elena — I'm... (steadies herself) I'm sorry, Liam. Did you get to speak to anyone?

Liam — A chaplain who'd never heard her name. A governor who said the word "regret" like it was a form to be signed. Now you.

Elena — I can't fix that. But I want this room to know it. We're not just talking about one man in the yard. We're talking about a week where the walls moved closer.

Andre — And where some of us are still suspects even when we're in here sitting nicely in circles.

Elena — You're not here as suspects. You're here because every violent moment sends out a shock. I want us to see where it's landed.

Jonas — So we talk. You write. They read. The wheel turns. Tell me how this isn't just another way to make sure we react correctly.

Elena's eyes move towards the door, toward the unseen "they," then back.

Elena — You're right to be wary. Reports



We listen.
We respect.
We take
responsibility.
We are all
human.

TRUTH
TAKES
COURAGE.
COMPASSION
BUILDS
CHANGE.

D3
GROUP
ROOM

BROWN

will be written. But my commitment is that nothing you say here becomes a headline. I'm more afraid of what happens when the shock stays unspoken. When it turns into something that explodes somewhere else.

Scene 3 – The failed performance

Elena — Here's what I'd like to try. We keep it simple. We'll speak as if the man from the yard were sitting on that empty chair.

She taps an unoccupied chair.

Elena — We don't name names. We don't talk about the case. We talk about what it does to you to live in a place where you could be that man tomorrow.

Jonas rolls his eyes; Andre looks wary. Liam's jaw tightens.

Andre — And you take it back to your Victim Support Unit? "Look, they've learned empathy"?

Elena — I'll take it back to say: there are human beings here who know what it is to bleed, and who are tired of pretending they don't.

She leans in slightly, her tone softening.

Elena — Empathy isn't a certificate. It's what stops us finishing each other off.

Liam — (quietly, dangerous) Don't use my mother's coffin as a teaching aid.

Beat. Elena freezes for a breath.

Elena — I... didn't mean—

Liam — You did. You lined it up neat: yard blood, lockdown, my mother. All part of the same "shock". Something you can map on a board and call it insight.

He stands halfway, chair scraping. Brown shifts at the door.

Elena — Liam, sit if you can. If you can't, say what needs to be said and then we'll see.

Liam — 'What needs to be said'? Fine. Here: When I was eight, Mum scrubbed the steps before visits because she didn't want the neighbours seeing dust. Now she's in the ground and I didn't see the box leave the church. And I'm in a room where a stranger stitches her into his lesson about violence.

Elena's face colours; her hands grip her knees. The need to rescue flares.

Elena — You're right. I moved too fast. I tried to make a shape out of something that's still raw. I'm sorry.

Andre — Look at that. We got an apology already. This is going well.

Jonas — Next week we'll get a certificate.

The room's temperature rises. Voices begin to overlap. Andre leans forward.

Andre — So what now, facilitator? You want us to say we're sorry for the yard? For lockdown? For his mother?

Liam's breathing becomes shallow. He looks close to either tears or violence. Brown takes one step into the room.

Scene 4 – Marcus' quiet intervention

Marcus shifts for the first time, leaning slightly towards Liam.

Marcus — Liam.

The single word carries weight. Liam glances at him, still charged.

Marcus — Your mother isn't a line on anyone's flipchart. Say that again if you need to.



But don't let this room turn her into a reason to swing at whoever's nearest.

He looks briefly at Elena, then back at Liam.

Marcus — Heard you the first time. We all did. She raised a man who knows the difference between grief and a weapon, even if you don't feel it today.

Liam's shoulders sag a fraction. He sits, jaw still clenched.

Liam — I don't want her in their paperwork.

Marcus — Then we keep her in here. Between us.

He raises his eyebrows, the faintest question aimed at Elena. She does not answer, not yet, letting the words hang rather than promising more than she can keep.

He turns slightly toward Jonas and Andre.

Marcus — And you two... leave the lad a breath. He's not the programme. He's the one who just found out his whole life shrank to a phone call and a cancelled visit.

Jonas — You talk like you're not in the same cage, old man.

Marcus — I am. That's why I'm tired of watching us turn our own wounds into ammunition.

He gestures lightly at Elena.

Marcus — She stumbled. Fine. We've all stumbled worse. The question is whether we want this room to be another place we break

things, or one small corner where we at least try to look at what's already broken.

Silence. Brown steps back to the doorway again.

Scene 5 – Elena's pattern named

Elena breathes out, visibly shaken. She looks at Liam first, not at Marcus.

Elena — Liam, I will not write your mother's name in any report. If I ever speak of her again in the office, it will be because you asked me to.

She then turns to the group.

Elena — I pushed too hard for a pattern. That's something I fall into. I've spent years turning other people's pain into neat stories so I could tell myself I was doing good work. In here, that way of working does damage.

Jonas watches her, amused and sceptical.

Jonas — So what, we teach you now? Welcome to Module One: How Not To Use Us.

Elena — If you're willing, you already are teaching me. You see when people like me lean on diagrams instead of listening. You know what it feels like when your life gets flattened into someone else's "lesson."

She looks at her own hands, unclasping them deliberately.

Elena — Today showed me something I'd rather not see about myself: that I can reach

for control faster than I reach for care. That's mine to own, not yours to carry.

Scene 6 – Smaller question, no exercises

Elena — All right. We have twenty minutes left before they need this room. We can stop here. Or we can start again, smaller.

Jonas — Smaller how?

Elena — No exercises. No imaginary empty chairs. Just one question, answered or not, as you choose: When you think of the man who was beaten in the yard, what part of you is afraid that you could be him? Or the one who did it?

The question hangs. Andre fidgets, then speaks.

Andre — I'm more afraid of who I become when I watch and do nothing. That's the part I don't like to see. The part that says, "keep your head down, let them sort it out," and then pretends I had no part.

Elena — Thank you.

Liam hesitates, then adds, voice low.

Liam — I keep seeing my mother on the news when they say "family of the accused." Even when it's not me. That's the shadow I live under. Every time someone gets hurt, I wonder whose mother is washing the steps.

Marcus listens, eyes softened but unsentimental.

Marcus — For me... (points to his chest)



the dark corner is the part that still enjoys the story when it's someone I don't like. Even now. All these years. I hear "he got what was coming," and something in me nods. Then I remember my own victim's face. And I have to live with the fact that any compassion I've grown came through pain I helped create.

Elena does not speak. She lets the words settle. The clock hums; the strip of light at the window has shifted.

Scene 7 – Closing and thread toward Act II

Elena — We'll stop here. Thank you for what you've risked saying, and for what you've chosen not to say.

She looks at Marcus.

Elena — You mentioned the man you hurt, and the time it's taken for that to sink in.

There's talk in the prison of trying something new: a conversation, one day, between your family and someone from his. I'm not asking you to agree now. I'm just letting you know this: what has happened between you in the past is not finished just because the courts have closed the file. There are other rooms where people still live with what you did, and with what was done to you.

Marcus's face tightens briefly; he nods.

Marcus — My daughter says she doesn't sit in circles. If there's coffee and an exit, she might come. We'll see.

Elena — I'm trying to learn how to stand in rooms where suffering doesn't have an easy door out. Today I tripped. Next time, I'd

like to walk a little more carefully.

She gathers her papers—still unused—and places them back on the side table.

Elena — Thank you. We'll meet again next week, if you choose.

Officer Brown opens the door wider. The men file out slowly. Marcus pauses by Elena.

Marcus — Quietly, so only she hears. "When you're in a room like this again," he says, "let the silence breathe a little longer before you try to put shape on it. Men like us notice when someone is willing to wait with us, even when the room is ugly."

He gives a small nod and walks out. Elena remains a moment, hand resting on the back of an empty chair, listening to the echoes of the week inside her.



Act II: Chairs in a Different Light

Characters

Elena – restorative-justice facilitator (same CSP as Act I).

Marcus – long-term prisoner (RHP), on supervised temporary release.

Ruth – Marcus's adult daughter, late 20s or



OUR COMMUNITY
OUR RESPONSIBILITY
OUR HOPE

Mercy
Justice
Healing
Together

We
Listen
We
Learn
We
Grow
Together

PARISH
HALL

BROWN

early 30s.

Anna – sister of Marcus’s victim, late 40s or early 50s.

Officer Brown – correctional officer, present but mostly silent.

Scene 1 – **Before the door opens**

A modest community hall. Fluorescent lights soften against ageing paint. Stackable chairs, a table with a metal urn and a row of paper cups. A noticeboard carries faded posters: “Neighbourhood Choir”, “Debt Advice Clinic”, “Grief Support on Thursdays”. Evening light filters through high windows.

Elena arranges four chairs in a loose circle, not quite symmetrical. She adjusts them once, then leaves them slightly imperfect. A kettle hums in the background.

Elena — (to herself, quietly) — No diagrams. Four chairs. Names. Breath.

Officer Brown stands near the entrance, plain-clothed but clearly staff. He keeps a discreet distance, arms folded, eyes watchful, phone in hand. He checks a message, then sets the phone down on a side table.

Brown — (putting down his phone) — They need the van back at the office. You’ve got about forty minutes before we should be on the road.

Elena — If it goes badly, we stop. If it goes well, we still stop before anyone is wrung out.

Brown grunts softly, neither approval nor

doubt.

Brown — Forty minutes is longer than these things usually get. Use it.

A knock at the open door. Ruth steps in, wearing a plain jacket, holding her keys too tightly.

Scene 2 – **Ruth**

Elena — Ruth?

Ruth — Yeah. (looks around) It smells like every church hall ever. Tea, dust, and someone’s old grief.

Elena — You’re the first to arrive. Thank you for coming.

Ruth — My cousin said I’d regret it if I didn’t. I told her regret is already crowded.

She takes in the chairs, the urn, Officer Brown.

Ruth — So this is where we fix things.

Elena — No. This is where we see if anything can be said that hasn’t had a chance to be said yet. If nothing can, we’ll know that too.

Ruth — You talk softer than the leaflets. They said words like “closure”. I threw them away.

Elena — “Closure” is a word for drawers and doors. Not for what brings you here.

Ruth studies her, measuring sincerity.

Ruth — Will he be chained?

Elena — No. But he won’t be far from Brown’s line of sight.

Brown lifts two fingers in a quiet half-salute.

Ruth — Good. I don’t want to have to wonder who I’m talking to—my father, or the system.

Elena — You’ll be talking to him. You don’t have to talk to the system tonight.

Ruth nods once, sits, keeps her coat on.

Scene 3 – **Anna**

Footsteps in the corridor. Anna enters, carrying a small, well-worn handbag. She pauses at the threshold, scanning the room.

Elena — Anna? Welcome.

Anna — (takes in Ruth, Brown, the chairs) — I almost turned back at the bus stop. Thought, “He’s had enough of my time.” Then I remembered who this is really about.

Elena — Your brother?

Anna — My brother. And the thirty or forty years he didn’t get.

Ruth flinches slightly. Their eyes meet for a moment, then slide away.

Elena — There’s tea if you want it. Or you can just sit. We won’t start anything until you’ve found your place in the room.

Anna — No tea. If I’m holding a cup, I’ll spill

it when someone says something stupid.

She chooses a chair opposite Ruth, leaving one empty between them. Silence stretches.

Ruth — (to Anna, cautious) — I'm Ruth.

Anna — I know. They told me his daughter might be here. I said, "Of course. He didn't carry all the damage by himself. Why should she have to carry all the aftermath alone?"

A beat.

Ruth — I didn't come to defend him.

Anna — Good. I didn't come to forgive him.

Their words hang between them, honest and unfinished.

Scene 4 – **Marcus arrives**

Brown steps to the door as muted footsteps approach. Marcus enters, wearing prison-issue clothes under a plain jacket. He looks older in this light than he did in the group room: hair thinner, shoulders slightly stooped. His hands are free; a discreet ankle monitor peeks from beneath his trouser leg.

He glances first at Ruth, then at Anna. His eyes rest there longer, as if bracing for impact. He nods once to Elena, once to Brown, then stands just inside the circle.

Elena — Marcus. Thank you for agreeing to come.

Marcus — They said it was voluntary. And then they said it would mean a lot. I'm still

working out what "voluntary" means in that sentence.

Brown — You signed the form.

Marcus — I did. Which means I'm here because I chose to be. And because I've already taken enough choices from other people.

He moves to an empty chair but does not sit yet.

Elena — Before we begin, I want to say this once for all of us. No one here is under pressure to give anything they don't want to give—not story, not tears, not words like "forgiveness" or "sorry." If at any point you need to stop, say so. We can end without explaining why.

She looks at each in turn: Ruth, Anna, Marcus, Brown. They nod or grunt, each in their own way.

Elena — All right. Let's sit.

They sit: Ruth and Anna facing each other, Marcus between them but slightly back, Elena completing the circle. Brown takes a chair near the door, angled toward them.

Scene 5 – **Why they came**

Elena — I'd like to start with one simple question. You can answer, or you can pass. Why did you decide to come tonight?

She looks to Anna first.

Anna — Because this isn't finished. The court finished. The papers finished. Our

neighbours finished talking about it after a few months. But my mother still sets an extra place at Christmas. And I still talk to a headstone when I don't know what to do. I came because I'm tired of pretending this belongs only to the past.

Elena — Thank you.

She turns to Ruth.

Ruth — I came because every time I fill in a form and write my surname, I watch people's faces change when they remember the headline. Because when my son came home from school last year and said, "Are we the bad family?", I didn't know how to answer. And because I don't want his grandfather to be a rumour he hears from someone else first.

Marcus swallows, eyes focused on the floor.

Elena — Marcus?

Marcus — I came because there's a woman in this room whose brother never walked out of the door I walked out of. And because there's a woman in this room whose childhood was soaked in the rain that came after what I did. And because for twenty-one years, most of my words about that night have been spoken to chaplains, counsellors, and mirrors. It felt time to let some of them reach the people who actually carry the weight.

Scene 6 – **Fears**

Elena — Thank you. I'm not going to ask you to tell the whole story of that night. You've each told it too many times, in too



many rooms. Instead, I'd like us to stay close to this evening. When you woke up this morning knowing you were coming here, what did you fear most?

Anna exhales through her nose.

Anna — That I would be polite. That I would fall back into the voice I use at work, the one that makes everything sound reasonable. My brother's death was not reasonable. I was afraid I'd sand the edges off so I wouldn't make other people uncomfortable.

Elena — Does anything feel sanded off right now?

Anna — No. My hands are shaking and my teeth hurt from holding back words. That feels about right.

Ruth shifts in her chair.

Ruth — I was afraid I'd defend him. That I'd start listing the things that happened to him as a kid, the ways the system failed us, as if my grandparents' fists or our postcode could explain your brother's blood. I don't want to be the advocate for his pain when yours is sitting right there.

She nods towards Anna.

Anna — Your pain is real. It just doesn't cancel mine.

Ruth — I know.

Brief silence.

Elena — Marcus?

Marcus — I was afraid I'd make this about me. That I'd start talking about my own suffering in a way that tried to balance the scales. I've had years to practice that. "Trauma on both sides," they call it. It's true, but if I make that the centre tonight, I'm just rearranging the furniture in a room that already collapsed once.

Scene 7 – Conflict rises

The room tightens. Elena senses it but stays seated.

Anna — You talk well. They must love you in those groups.

Marcus — Talking is what's left when the blade is gone.

Anna — There it is. The blade. You remember its weight. My brother's body did too. Do you remember his name?

Marcus — Yes.

Anna — Say it.

He swallows.

Marcus — David.

Anna — Say it without flinching.

Marcus — David.

Silence. Ruth's eyes close briefly.

Anna — I have heard pastors, judges, even neighbours say his name in order to make a point. A cautionary tale. A sermon illustration. I am tired of people borrowing

him to tidy their own guilt. If you are going to say his name in this room, let it be for him, not for you.

Marcus nods, visibly shaken.

Marcus — Understood.

Ruth — (to Anna) — Do you want us to leave? Me and him? Would that make tonight any easier?

Anna — No. If I wanted you to leave, I would have stayed home. I want you to sit in the same air I sit in when I visit the grave. Just for an hour. So that when you think of him, it's not only courtrooms and headlines, but my mother's hands and the way we still keep his shoes by the door.

Ruth's eyes fill but she blinks the tears back.

Ruth — When I think of him, I see the article with the CCTV still. And my father in handcuffs. And my grandmother saying, "He was always trouble." I've never seen his shoes. I'm sorry for that.

Scene 8 – Elena's restraint

Elena leans forward slightly, then stops herself, remembering how quickly pattern-making hurt Liam and the others. The urge to summarise, to frame, runs through her and drains away.

Elena — You're both naming something that doesn't fit neatly anywhere—how what happened has wrapped itself around your lives, in different ways, for a long time.

She stops there, resisting the temptation to complete the thought.

Anna — Don't tell us what it means. Please.

Elena — I won't. If meaning comes, it will come from you, or not at all tonight.

She sits back, allowing the room to breathe.

Scene 9 – **Marcus' admission**

Marcus — Anna... There is something I need to say that I haven't said in this way before.

She looks at him, wary.

Anna — Go on.

Marcus — For the first years inside, I told myself what I did to David was half his fault. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong people. I clung to that because the full weight felt like it would crush me. Every time a chaplain or psychologist asked, I gave them the same story. I was sorry, but I still thought, somewhere quiet inside, that he shouldn't have been there.

He pauses, voice rough.

Marcus — Besides the terrible thing I did, the part I am most ashamed of now is how long I lived with that lie. Longer than the trial. Longer than the first appeal. Years. The blow was fast. The lie was slow. When I finally let myself see that it was mine, all of it, I started waking up at night with his name in my mouth. That doesn't undo anything. But I need you to know I no longer share the blame

with him when I talk to God, or to myself, or to these walls.

Anna listens, jaw tight, eyes bright.

Anna — You realise we are not obliged to be comforted by that.

Marcus — Yes. I am not saying it for comfort. I'm saying it because if I didn't, this meeting would be another place I hid behind half-truths.

Scene 10 – **Ruth's grief**

Ruth — You talk about lies. My lie was that I could build a life sideways, away from what you did. Different city, different job, no contact for five years. Then my boy comes home with a homework sheet on "People in our community who went to prison," and your name is on it. It's like the story found me again. I realised I'd been living in a corridor with your shadow at both ends.

She looks at Anna.

Ruth — Part of me wants to ask you to see the little girl who visited her father once a month and felt the guards watching her walk. But another part knows that when you see me, you see his face. And I don't know what to do with that.

Anna — Both can be true. You can be a child who lost her father to prison and the daughter of the man who killed my brother. I don't have language tidy enough for that. But I can sit in the same room with it for a while.

Scene 11 – **Pressure spike**

Anna's voice hardens.

Anna — Do you ever think you should have died that night instead of him?

The room stills. Brown shifts, ready to intervene if needed. Elena inhales, then keeps still.

Marcus — Yes. More often than is healthy, according to the doctors. They warn me that drowning in guilt helps no one. But there are nights when I think the balance of the world would look less crooked if I had gone and he had stayed.

Anna — And what stops you from staying inside that thought?

Marcus — Two things. First, that my death now would not bring him back then. It would just add one more stone to the pile. Second, that my daughter is in this room. If I decide I should have died instead, I erase the years in which I tried, however clumsily, to be something other than the worst thing I ever did.

Ruth looks at him, something complicated in her face.

Scene 12 – **Small steps**

Elena — We have about ten minutes before we need to let this hall return to its ordinary life. I'd like to ask each of you one last question, if you're willing. Not about forgiveness. About next steps, however small.



She turns to Anna.

Elena — What, if anything, feels different walking out of this room compared with walking in?

Anna — I knew his face from photographs and hearings. Tonight I saw the way he looks at his daughter when she speaks. That doesn't change what he did. But it means that when I say his name—Marcus—I will also remember that someone else has to live with it at their kitchen table. I don't know yet whether that softens anything. But it widens the picture a little.

She looks at Ruth briefly, not unkindly.

Elena — Ruth?

Ruth — I heard David's name in a room that wasn't a courtroom and from someone who loved him. Until now, his name arrived in my life mostly as accusation or rumour. Tonight it arrived as a brother. I don't know what I do with that yet. But my son will not grow up thinking "victim" is just a word in a file. He'll know there was a man called David whose life was stolen by his grandfather.

Marcus bows his head.

Elena — Marcus?

Marcus — I've spent years talking about responsibility in rooms where everyone was paid to listen. Tonight I listened to people who had every reason to stay home. What feels different is that the weight in my chest has a few more faces attached to it. Yours, Anna. Yours, Ruth. It's heavier. But it feels truer.

Scene 13 – Closing Scene

Elena — Thank you. All of you. We're going to end here. No speeches, no prayers unless you ask for them, no forms to sign in this room. When you step outside, the night will be the same—streetlights, buses, dishes in the sink. But you'll be carrying something you weren't carrying before, and I hope it has at least as much truth as it has pain.

She stands slowly. The others follow.

Elena — If any of you decide you never want to do anything like this again, that choice will be respected. If any of you want another meeting, we will talk about what that

might look like, without assumptions.

Anna reaches for her bag. Ruth buttons her coat. Marcus glances at Brown, who nods toward the door.

Anna — (to Ruth, quietly) — If your boy ever asks about David, and you don't know what to say, there's a bench in the cemetery with his name on it. Sometimes sitting there says more than words.

Ruth — I don't know if I could face your mother.

Anna — You don't have to. Just know it's there.

Ruth nods, filing the information away.

Brown moves to Marcus.

Brown — Time.

Marcus — (to Ruth) — Thank you for coming.

Ruth — I didn't do it for you.

She hesitates.

Ruth — But I'm glad you heard what she had to say.

She nods toward Anna.

Marcus — So am I.

Elena watches as Brown escorts Marcus toward the door. Before he steps out, Marcus looks back once, taking in the chairs, the urn, the women.

He gives a small, almost imperceptible bow and leaves.

Ruth and Anna stand in the now-larger silence.

Elena — You're welcome to stay for a moment. Or to go straight home. There is no right way to walk out of this hall.

Anna gives a faint, tired smile.

Anna — I think I'll walk. The bus can wait. I need the air.

She exits. Ruth lingers, then turns to Elena. The hall has grown quieter; the urn hum has stopped. Chairs stand slightly askew.

Ruth — My social worker likes to tell me what I'm feeling while I'm still working it out myself. Tonight you didn't do that. You let my words stand. Thank you.

Elena — Thank you for saying that. It hasn't always been like this for me.

Ruth raises an eyebrow, curious despite herself.

Ruth — No?

Elena — Not long ago I was running a group at the prison. I thought I was being helpful—pulling threads together, telling the men what their stories meant while they were still breathing through them. One of them came up to me afterwards, and, very quietly, showed me a better way. It was your father.

Ruth — What did he say?

Elena — He didn't give a lecture. He just stood beside me and said something like, "When you're in a room like this, let the silence breathe a little longer before you try to put shape on it. Men like us notice when someone is willing to wait." I heard his words as correction and as kindness. I've been trying to learn from it ever since.

Ruth — (voice tightening, holding back tears) — He never knew how to wait with me like that when I was small.

She gives a short, almost apologetic laugh.

Ruth — But I'm glad he's learning something in there that might do someone good, even if it's mostly strangers.

Elena — There is a lot of harm in his story. There is also a great deal of good in him that doesn't always get a chance to be seen.

She pauses, letting that stand, then continues more quietly.

Elena

I have discovered there's a lot of good in all of us, really. The same is true of you. And of Anna.

Ruth looks down at her hands, then back up.

And even me

Ruth — I don't know yet what to make of tonight. But I'm... glad you didn't tidy it.

Elena — Neither did you. You spoke plain. That's more than enough for one night.

Ruth nods, a small concession.

Ruth — Thank you for that, Elena.

Elena — (smiles kindly, reaching for her coat) — Safe journey home, Ruth.

Ruth hesitates as if to say more, then simply nods again and leaves. The hall is empty now.

Elena looks at the four chairs, then begins stacking them slowly, as if each carried a fragment of what was said. She turns off the urn, listens for the sudden quiet, and stands still for a moment in the centre of the room.

Elena — (softly) — Teach me to widen. Widen without lying.

She switches off the lights. The outline of the chairs fades as Act II ends.

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Reflection

– Compassion widened by suffering

The two-act play has already shown what this Reflection now needs to name: long-term prisoner Marcus as someone whose heart has been widened by suffering, and Elena as someone whose heart is being loosened and schooled, perhaps on a similar journey. This Reflection assumes you have just spent time in those two rooms and are wondering what kind of heart is being hinted at there.

There are seasons when you discover that your earlier ideas of compassion were thinner than you realised. You may remember a time when “being compassionate” meant managing your tone: speaking kindly, offering help, feeling for those whose lives seemed harder than yours. There is nothing wrong with that beginning; many lives have been steadied by simple kindness. Yet as suffering comes closer – your own or another’s – it exposes how much of that early compassion could still be practised, mistakenly, from a safe distance.

For some, the shock comes when pain enters the body in a way that cannot be talked away: illness that will not yield to resolve, an accident that alters capacity, trauma that leaves the nervous system jumpy long after the event. For others, the impact lands in conscience or vocation: a betrayal that shatters trust, a community fracture that goodwill cannot repair, a failure whose consequences cannot be neatly contained.

Genuine suffering does more than hurt; it rearranges attention. You find that you no longer observe other people’s distress from the outside in quite the same way. Their fear, anger, or withdrawal stops being an interesting problem and begins to sound like a language you partly recognise.

1. When suffering alters how we see

Marcus in the play stands somewhere along this line. Years of prison, the long work of facing what he did, and the ongoing weight of his victim’s absence have altered the way he sees. He does not talk about compassion as a project; he speaks instead about lies that lasted longer than the blow, about nights when guilt and prayer blur. His mercy toward Liam in the group room, and toward Ruth and Anna in the hall, does not come from a naturally gentle temperament. It has been cut and widened by the knowledge that he lives only because mercy has met him again and again where he did not deserve it.

Elena, by contrast, is still in an earlier but necessary confusion: sincerely wanting to help, sincerely over-structuring people’s pain, discovering through failure that her heart cannot remain in charge of meaning if it is to become truly compassionate. By the end of Act II she has allowed herself to be corrected – by a prisoner, by experience, and, quietly, by God – into a different posture. She is less quick to interpret, more willing to wait, more aware that mercy is not something she controls. When she prays, “Teach me to widen without lying,” she is

not asking for a technique but for grace to do something her ego cannot.

This is one of the quiet thresholds this Episode attends to. Compassion widened by suffering is not a matter of temperament, nor a decision to be “more caring” as a project of the self. It names a shift that happens when pain has entered deeply enough – and been held truthfully enough – that the heart’s way of seeing is altered. Outward behaviour may look similar – you still listen, visit, organise help – but what your heart assumes while you do these things has changed. You no longer assume your position is fundamentally different from the person you accompany. Pain has taught you that the line between “their suffering” and “my life” is thinner than earlier comfort allowed you to imagine.

Within a Christian horizon, this widening is not simply the fruit of resilience or psychological integration, though those matter. It has to do with where you finally stand, and on whom. A heart that has ripened in this way no longer trusts its small self – its ego, image, projects – to be the main ground on which life rests. In the language of faith, it discovers, sometimes slowly and reluctantly, that “*in Him we live and move and have our being*” (Paul) is not a pious addition but the only stable floor underfoot.

The small self still matters; it still suffers, chooses, may need therapy and support. But the ripened heart begins to learn that it is being carried by a Presence larger than its competence. Marcus hints at this when he speaks of talking to God about David, when he admits that doctors warn him against drowning in guilt, when he chooses to live with respon-



sibility rather than chase self-destruction as a way of evening the scales. Someone – Someone – bigger than his shame and his will slowly holds him where he would otherwise collapse.

2. From ideals to participation

Our witness St Isaac the Syrian speaks of this kind of mercy as a burning of the heart: a compassion so attuned to the suffering of creatures that it cannot bear to condemn from afar. This burning does not come from rehearsing doctrines of love; it arises when your own consolations have been stripped, when you have discovered how quickly pride collapses under sustained loss. A patient who has endured long nights in a hospital corridor will hear the anxiety of another patient differently from someone who has only visited briefly. A parent who has sat beside a child in addiction or depression will hear certain silences with new seriousness.

Over time, and only with grace, this knowledge can ripen into a mercy that is no longer selective – no longer offered only to those whose wounds fit your preferences – but extends even to those whose behaviour you cannot approve. Marcus' willingness to hear Anna's anger, to say David's name without taking it hostage for his own comfort, is a small example of this.

The story of Nelson Mandela offers another glimpse. Years of imprisonment did not automatically make him compassionate; many people emerge from such suffering hardened or consumed by revenge. What mattered was how he let that suffering be held within a larg-

er relation to God and to truth. He came to see even his warders and opponents as human beings caught in a system that damaged them too. That did not soften his clarity about injustice, but it did make it possible for him to seek reconciliation without denying harm. In Christian language, his heart was being shifted from relying on its own strength to leaning into a justice and mercy that preceded him and would outlast him. The same Spirit is at work, in quieter ways, in countless less visible lives.

It is crucial to say clearly that suffering does not automatically produce such compassion. You may have known, or perhaps been, someone whose pain has hardened into bitterness or narrowed into an obsession with one's own injury. Some wounds overwhelm before they teach; others need the shelter of therapy, medication, silence, or distance before their meaning can even begin to be faced. To claim that suffering always ennobles would be dishonest and cruel. The witnesses gathered for this Episode insist on something subtler: when suffering is carried in truth – neither denied nor weaponised – and when the heart, by grace, does not close entirely around its wound, compassion may become less naïve, less judgemental, and more enduring.

The difference is not merely psychological; it is spiritual. The heart has begun to trust that it is held by God even in the dark, and therefore does not need to use its hurt as a weapon or as an identity.

One key distinction here is between compassion formed by ideals and compassion formed by participation. Ideal-driven com-

passion often prefers clean narratives: helper and helped, innocent and guilty, strong and weak. It can be energising, especially in younger years, to be on the “side of the vulnerable.” But as you spend more time in the field of actual human lives, those lines blur. Victims sometimes behave badly; perpetrators sometimes carry unhealed trauma; people you wanted to admire entirely turn out to be divided and inconsistent. If you have known your own dividedness, this complexity no longer surprises you as much. You may still oppose harm firmly; you may still work for justice; but your compassion is now less dependent on categorising people neatly. It is sustained instead by a recognition that pain weaves through the human family in ways no one fully controls, and by trust that God's mercy is already at work within that tangle.

This widening touches how you see yourself as well. When suffering reveals your own capacity for envy, anger, or despair, it becomes harder to use other people's failures as screens for your projections. You begin to see how quickly unintegrated pain seeks outlets – through blame, self-pity, superiority, or withdrawal. You may notice, for instance, that the colleague who lashes out is driven less by pure malice than by fear; that the neighbour whose complaining exhausts you is holding a grief that has found no other language. This does not excuse harm.

Compassion widened by suffering is not an invitation to tolerate abuse or to confuse mercy with passivity. Rather, it invites a mode of seeing in which the other person's destructive behaviour is held within a wider field: your heart can say, “This is not acceptable,”

and, in the same breath, “This person is more than this behaviour,” and, deeper still, “God’s love for both of us is not cancelled by this moment.”

Within Christian faith, this way of seeing participates in the mercy of God not by imitating divine pity from above but by being drawn into deeper solidarity with wounded creation while allowing God to abide within you as within creation. The Gospels show Jesus moved with compassion toward the sick, the shamed, and even those who harm others, yet his compassion is never sentimental or vague. He does not confuse forgiveness with denial, nor mercy with the erasure of responsibility. His way of seeing reaches beneath behaviour into the tangled field of fear, desire, and pain, and it moves toward the person without surrendering truth. A heart that has suffered and stayed open begins, very imperfectly, to echo this. There is more patience, more willingness to listen, more reluctance to condemn, even as clarity about harm remains. Elena’s small shifts – fewer explanations, more silence, more willingness to be corrected – are the kind of changes that, over years and under grace, can deepen into something like this.

3. Living from a mercy that holds us

Over time, such compassion changes the texture of everyday life. You may find yourself slower to offer quick explanations for someone else’s distress. You notice how clumsy comfort can be when it tries to tidy what cannot yet be tidy, and you become more willing

to sit in silence or to say, simply, “I do not know what to say, but I am here.” You become less impressed by your own helpfulness; the story no longer centres on your generosity. Instead, there is a growing sense that you and the one you are accompanying are standing together in a field that belongs to God, in which both of you are being held.

This does not mean you become endlessly available or boundaryless. In fact, many who have suffered deeply develop a more precise sense of when to say yes and when to say no. Having seen what unchecked pain can do, they may resist colluding with patterns that harm others or themselves. Their compassion can therefore appear “stricter” from the outside: they may refuse certain roles, decline certain demands, or insist on shared responsibility. Yet the refusal carries little contempt. Even when they step back, they do not need to define the other person by their worst moment.

At prayer, this widening of compassion often shows itself as a change in how you bring others before God. You may find fewer words of complaint and more simple naming; fewer attempts to persuade God to “fix” people and more willingness to hold them in silence. Sometimes the only honest prayer may be, “Look,” or, “Remember them,” or, “Have mercy on us all,” as the heart recognises that the distinction between “their pain” and “my pain” has become porous. In such moments, the heart that has suffered and remained permeable discovers that mercy is not primarily something it extends. It is something it is allowed to participate in.

Within the D-group of Episodes, the contribution of this one is therefore modest and exacting. It does not ask you to seek suffering, nor to interpret every loss as a lesson. It asks you to notice, with reverence, what suffering has already done to your way of seeing – and what it might yet do if held in truth and entrusted, however falteringly, to God. Where pain has narrowed you into defensiveness or revenge, there is no condemnation here, only an invitation to bring even that narrowing into the light. Where pain has widened you, even a little, into more patient, less possessive, more durable compassion, this Episode invites you to recognise that movement as one of the quiet gifts suffering can bring when it is not allowed to rule and when grace is allowed to hold it.

Compassion widened by suffering is not a technique and not an achievement. It is the slow, often reluctant, reorientation of a heart that has discovered, again and again, that it remains held in mercy even while it suffers – and therefore need not refuse that mercy to others.

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Practice Box

– Allowing Compassion to Widen

These practices do not manufacture a widened heart, which takes years and divine grace. No exercise can make suffering fruitful by effort, and no one should be asked to turn their pain too quickly into wisdom. What practice can do, gently, is help us notice where the heart tightens, where it hurries to manage pain, and where grace may already be softening our way of seeing.

In a quiet moment, bring to mind a person whose suffering is difficult for you to stay near. This may be someone you love, someone who has disappointed you, someone whose distress feels exhausting, or someone whose actions have caused harm. Do not begin by trying to feel kindly. Begin only by noticing what happens in you.

You might ask, slowly:

What do I want to fix, explain, avoid, or control here?

Where do I feel tempted to turn this person's pain into a pattern I can manage?

Where do I feel tempted to withdraw because the pain is too raw, too complicated, or too accusing?

Is there any small place in me that recognises this person's fear, grief, shame, or confusion, without needing to approve of what they have done?

Then let the prayer become very simple. You may hold the person before God without solving anything: "Look upon them." "Have mercy on us." "Teach me to widen without lying." Let the words be few. Let silence do some of the holding.

This practice may also be turned toward your own suffering. Notice whether you treat your own wound as an embarrassment, a badge, a weapon, or a secret court of appeal. Ask whether it might be brought before God more plainly, without performance and without disguise.

For group use: invite participants to sit for a minute in silence with the phrase, "compassion widened without denial." Afterwards, those who wish may share one word or image that arose. No one should be asked to disclose personal suffering.

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Discernment Box

– Widened Compassion and Its Look-Alikes



Compassion widened by suffering can resemble several other movements of the heart. Some of them may look generous from the outside, and some may even begin with sincere care. Over time, however, their fruits differ.

Rescue often moves too quickly. It cannot bear the helplessness of another person's pain, so it rushes to intervene, advise, organize, soothe, or explain. Rescue may feel loving, yet it often centres the rescuer's need to be effective. Elena's early mistake in the prison group belongs near this pattern: she wants to help, but she reaches too quickly for shape and meaning while Liam's grief is still raw. Widened compassion is usually slower. It may still act, and sometimes firmly, but it first allows the person's reality to stand without being converted into the helper's lesson.

Indulgence – indulging the sufferer - confus-

es compassion with permissiveness. It sees the wound and therefore hesitates to name the harm. It may say, in effect, “Because this person has suffered, their destructive behaviour must be understood so gently that it is never resisted.” Widened compassion does not work in that way. Marcus honours Liam’s grief, but he also refuses to let that grief become a weapon. He recognises suffering without handing it the right to injure the nearest person. This is one of the signs of mature mercy: it can say both “this pain is real” and “this harm must stop.”

Collapse occurs when another person’s suffering overwhelms the heart’s capacity to remain present. The person trying to be compassionate becomes flooded, ashamed, paralysed, or absorbed into the other’s distress. This can look like depth, because it feels intense. Yet intensity alone does not widen the heart. Widened compassion remains in contact with pain without disappearing into it. It knows when to stay, when to pause, when to ask for help, and when distance is needed so that love does not become confusion.

Sentimental compassion prefers tenderness without truth. It may speak warmly of mercy while avoiding the rough facts: damage done, responsibility evaded, boundaries needed, grief still unresolved. In the play, Anna’s presence protects the room from sentimentality. David remains David, not a symbol for Marcus’ healing. Widened compassion does not borrow another person’s wound in order to make itself feel noble.

Hard clarity is another look-alike, moving in the opposite direction. It sees harm accurately,

ly, but with a coldness that refuses the wounded humanity of the person who caused it. This may feel morally clean, especially after injury. Yet suffering that has truly widened the heart usually makes contempt harder to sustain. It does not erase accountability; it places accountability within a larger field of mercy.

A useful question may be: what happens to truth here? *Rescue* often tidies truth too quickly. *Indulgence* softens it until it loses shape. *Collapse* is overwhelmed by it. *Sentimentality* decorates it. *Hard clarity* freezes it. *Widened compassion* allows truth to remain whole – painful, unfinished, morally serious, and still held within the mercy of God.

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Meet the Witnesses

St Isaac the Syrian (c. 640–c. 700)

St Isaac the Syrian was a seventh-century monk and bishop in the Church of the East, remembered for homilies on mercy, asceticism, and the hidden movements of the heart. His writings sound like someone who has watched pain, failure, and longing work through a human life over many years, and who speaks from within that observation rather than above it. Isaac is central to this Episode because, for him, mercy is

born from suffering. Compassion is not a gentle mood but the fruit of a heart “burned” by its own weakness and by the suffering of others until it can no longer judge from a safe distance. A saying widely transmitted in his ascetical works makes this explicit:

What is a merciful heart? ... It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for people, for birds, for animals ... and for every created thing.

“This image highlights why Isaac matters for our current Episode: suffering, carried truthfully, widens the heart’s concern beyond preference or tribe and breaks down the cool



detachment that can masquerade as compassion.

St Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226)

St Francis of Assisi is often remembered as a gentle lover of creation, yet his life moved through war, imprisonment, illness, and the painful disillusionment of youthful dreams of honour. His conversion did not

spare him from suffering; instead, it led him into closer contact with the poor, the sick, and the despised, especially lepers whom he had previously feared and avoided. Francis matters for this Episode because his compassion took shape in shared vulnerability rather than sheltered idealism. His chosen poverty



and frailty drew him into the same weather as those who had no choice, gradually shifting his stance from benefactor to brother. A line from his admonitions captures the levelling this involved:

“For what a man is before God, that he is and no more.”

Our current Episode draws on this word to guard against condescending compassion; once suffering has shown you your own smallness before God, it becomes harder to stand over another’s pain as if you were fundamentally different.

Dorothy Day (1897–1980)



Dorothy Day was an American journalist, Catholic convert, and co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, who lived for decades among the poor in houses of hospitality. Her life wove together earlier wounds (including an abortion and broken relationships), arrests and imprisonments, and the ongoing strain of running communities that were noisy, conflicted, and often ungrateful. Day’s importance for our current Episode lies in the way her compassion became realistic and durable rather than romantic. She did not sentimentalise the poor or herself; journals and letters reveal anger, fatigue, and disappointment alongside a long obedience to concrete works of mercy. A line from *The Long Loneliness* distils this:

“We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”

Here, suffering is named as universal, and the response is not a feeling but shared life; D3 uses her witness to anchor its claim that compassion widened by suffering tends to move toward companionship and fidelity rather than remaining at the level of emotion.

Etty Hillesum (1914–1943)



Etty Hillesum was a Dutch Jewish diarist whose journals and letters were written during the Nazi occupation **of** the Netherlands and the persecution of the Jewish people. She was born in Middelburg on 15 January 1914 and died in Auschwitz on 30 November 1943. Her writings record an extraordinary inward ripening under historical terror: self-examination, spiritual awakening, refusal of hatred, and voluntary service among Jewish prisoners at Westerbork before her deportation. A brief sentence from her diary gives the exact resonance we need for our current Episode: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/etty-hillesum>

“Suffering is not beneath human dignity.”

The line is widely attributed to An Interrupted Life and is cited in material devoted to her witness of suffering. https://www.academia.edu/79603534/The_Existential_Philosophy_of_Etty_Hillesum?utm_source=chatgpt.com Her credentials for this Episode are unusually strong because she did not turn suffering into bitterness, abstraction, or heroic self-display. She allowed the horror around her to deepen her moral attention. Her compassion was not sheltered compassion. It was formed among threatened bodies, frightened families, and the administrative machinery of cruelty. For D3, Hillesum witnesses to compassion that has passed through fear without surrendering to hatred; she shows how suffering, when not denied or weaponised, can enlarge the heart’s capacity to remain human in the presence of the inhuman.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022)



Thich Nath Hanh was a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, poet, peace activist, and teacher, widely associated with engaged Buddhism. Plum Village describes him as a global spiritual leader, poet, and peace activist; it also notes that he was ordained at sixteen, called for peace during the Vietnam War, and lived in exile because of that peace work. His short teaching, “Our own life has to be our message,” stands as a concise summary of his witness <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh> Even more directly for D3, a Plum Village page preserves a reader’s citation of his teaching:

“When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself.” (Plum Village)

His credentials for our current Episode lie in the way his compassion was forged in war, exile, political fracture, and contact with both victims and perpetrators. He did not teach compassion as vague kindness. He taught it as disciplined understanding in the presence of injury. For this Episode, he helps caution against sentimental compassion by showing that widened compassion does not excuse harm, but looks deeply enough to see suffering even in those who cause suffering. That seeing does not remove the need for justice, boundaries, or truth. It helps the wounded heart resist becoming a violent echo of the violence that wounded it.

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