

Mini Lesson: Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion (Excerpt)

By: Gregory Boyle

Into:

1. Before reading the excerpt:
 - a. What is **compassion**?

 - b. What are some ways that we can show **compassion**?

2. After reading the excerpt: Initial Response
 - a. Write your first reaction or first thought about what you just read.
My first reaction after reading this passage was _____
Or
My first thought after reading this passage was _____

Through:

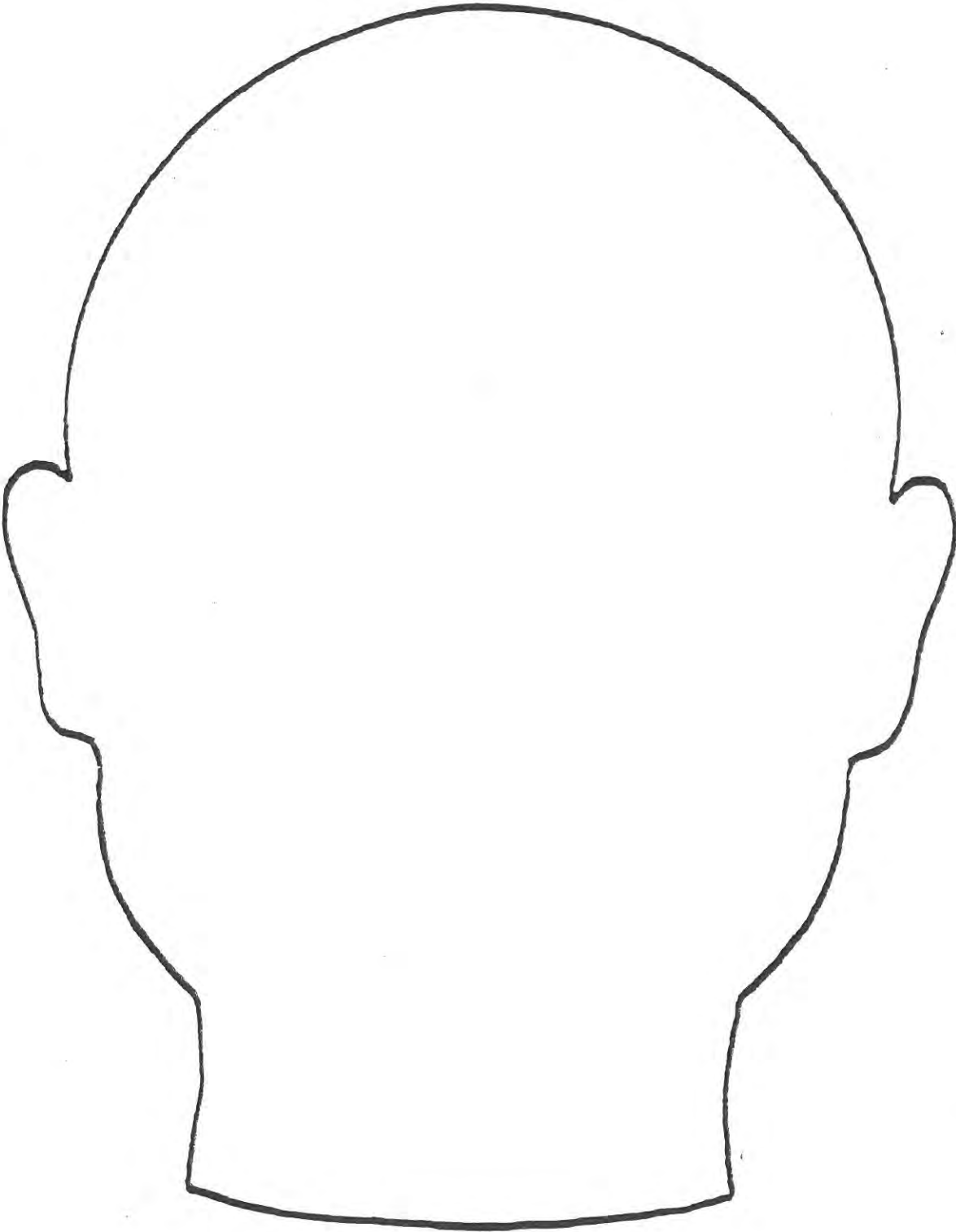
1. Story Map (see handout)
 - a. Characters: who are the main characters?
 - b. Setting: where, when?
 - c. Problem (in the beginning)
 - d. Action (the middle)
 - e. Resolution (the end)

2. Open Mind: inside the diagram you are going to represent the main character of the passage (see handout)
 - a. What is he thinking?
 - b. What does he think about himself?
 - c. What does he want or feel?
 - d. What are his dreams, wishes?

Beyond:

1. What are some possible challenges that Looney will be facing now that he's home?
2. Looney has enough trust in Father G to talk about his feelings, but what if he didn't have a positive adult role model to go to? How might he cope or deal with his feelings?
3. We may know people like Looney, who are going through similar challenges, how might we show him compassion?

THE OPEN MIND FOR _____



Date/Fecha: _____

Story Map/Mapa del Cuento

Characters/personajes:	Setting/escenario: Where? ¿donde? When? ¿cuándo?
Problem/problema: the beginning/el principio	Action/acción: the middle/el medio
Resolution/resolución:	the end/el fin

Tattoos on the Heart

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“Compassion”

In the midnineties, I returned to the office after a morning meeting to our storefront sandwiched between the Mitla Café and the furniture store. It’s noonish. I stand in front of the desk of the receptionist, Michelle, who hands me my messages. As I sift through them, someone taps me on my left shoulder. It’s Looney. He gives me a big *abrazote*.

“Oye, *mijo*,” I say, “when’d you get out?”

The smile is bigger than he is.

“Ayer.”

Looney is a fifteen-year-old from a gang located close to our office. He is a *chaparrito*, barely reaches my chest, and he has just been disgorged from one of the twenty-four probation camps in Los Angeles County. His sentence was a mere six months, but it was his first such detention. Having been put on probation for writing on walls, his probation officer cited him for a violation when he stopped going to school and sent him away.

Emily, one of our office workers, sidles up to Michelle to cheerlead and add to the welcome, project style.

Emily turns to Michelle and conspires.

“Oye, look at Looney...he’s so ttttaaaaaallll.” Her words seem to elbow Michelle in her side.

“Yeeeeaaahhh,” Michelle adds, “He’s so bbbiiigggg.”

“He’s a maaaaaan already,” Emily plants the finishing touch.

Looney is both loving this attention and thinking maybe six months more in camp would not be so bad.

Michelle and Emily have taken it upon themselves to kill the fatted pepperoni and welcome home the prodigal Looney. When five extremely large pizzas arrive, they hand me the bill, which I don’t seem to recall from the gospel account.

We cram ourselves onto the tiny couch in the even sparser reception area and eat our pizza. All of the office staff join in. Looney is luminous and giddy in his awkwardness, eyes darting to all of us gathered around, trying to measure our delight in his return. He can barely believe that it’s so high.

I’m sitting on the arm of the couch, eating my slice, and Looney leans in to me, with a whisper, “Can I talk to ya, G...alone...in your office?”

I gather my grub and sit behind my desk. He moves a chair, situated too far for his liking, and presses it very close to the front of my desk. He extricates a long envelope, squished in his side pocket, and proudly slaps it in front of me on my desk.

“My grades,” he announces, “from camp.”

His voice has moved to a preadolescent octave of excitement, and I scurry to join him at the parade.

“*De veeras*,” as I relieve the transcript from its container. Looney straightens his back and hops a little in the chair.

“Straight A’s,” he says.

“*Seeerrriioo?*” I say.

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“*Me la rallo,*” he says. “Straight A’s.”

Like a kid fumbling with wrapping on a present, I get the transcript out and extend it open. And, sure enough, right there before my eyes: 2 C’s; 2 B’s; 1 A.

And I think, *Close enough*. Not the straightest A’s I’ve ever seen. I decide not to tell Looney he’s an “unreliable reporter” here.

“Wow, *mijo,*” I tell him, “*Bien hecho*. Nice goin’.”

I carefully refold the transcript and put it back in the envelope.

“On everything I love, *mijo,*” I say to him, “if you were my son, I’d be the proudest man alive.”

In a flash, Looney situates his thumb and first finger in his eye sockets, trembling, and wanting to stem the flow of tears, which seem to be inevitable at this point. Like the kid with the fingers in the dike, he’s shaking now and desperate not to cry. I look at this little guy and know that he has returned to a situation largely unchanged. Parents are either absent at any given time or plagued by mental illness. Chaos and dysfunction is what will now surround him as before. His grandmother, a good woman, whose task it is now to raise this kid, is not quite up to the task. I know that one month before this moment I buried Looney’s best friend, killed in our streets for no reason at all. So I lead with my gut.

“I bet you’re afraid to be out, aren’t you?”

This seems to push the Play button on Looney’s tear ducts, and quickly he folds his arms on the front of my desk and rests his sobbing head on

his folded arms. I let him cry it out. Finally, I reach across the desk and place my hand on his shoulder.

“You’re gonna be okay.”

Looney sits up with what is almost defiance and tends to the wiping of his tears.

“I...just...want...to have a life.”

I am taken aback by the determination with which he says this.

“Well, *mijo,*” I say to him, “who told you that you wouldn’t have one? I mean, remember the letters you used to write to me from camp, telling me about all the gifts and goodness you discovered in yourself, stuff you didn’t know was there? Look, dog, I know you think you’re in a deep, dark hole, *pero la neta*, you’re in a tunnel. It’s in the nature of tunnels that if you just keep walking, the light’s gonna show up. Trust me, I can see it, I’m taller than you are.”

Looney snuffles and nods and seems to listen.

“You’re gonna be just fine...after all,” and I hand him back his grades, “Straight A’s.”