

What I Don't Understand about Compassion

~first in a sermon series~

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Sunday, November 5, 2017

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #360 (Here We Have Gathered, vs. 2 revised), #1034 (May I Be Filled with Loving Kindness), #1008 (When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place).

Pastoral Prayer (printed at end)

Personal Reflection by Marilyn Reynolds (printed at end)

Sermon

What I don't understand about compassion is how hard it is. It sounds appealing. Compassion, mercy, kindness, generosity, understanding, patience. These are humane and holy traits. We admire these traits in others. We would like to be known as compassionate ourselves. But it's hard.

We can be slow to treat ourselves with compassion, and slow to practice it with others. Our lack of compassion toward others is often a reflection of how little compassion we show to ourselves. Some people do treat others gently, but still can't give themselves a break, can't practice forgiveness of their own human imperfections. It is difficult.

In our world, the lack of compassion is dangerous and lethal. We can be downright hostile and cruel. In more snapshots of human history than we could identify, our impulses of domination, dishonesty, greed, and vengeance have shoved compassion out of the picture.

So let's define this thing we need to see more of. We want it in ourselves, in one another, and in this world. Compassion means respecting our common humanity.

The root of the word compassion means to *feel with* another, or to *suffer with* another.

Compassion means not wanting others to be endangered or hurt any more than we want to be endangered or hurt ourselves. It means wanting others to flourish and be happy. In Unitarian Universalism, we tie human compassion to the affirmation of every person's inherent worth and dignity. Furthermore, compassion means not wanting to cause suffering to other creatures or

cause harm to the natural world. Unitarian Universalism affirms that we are inter-connected. We are mutually dependent. The web of life makes kindred of all beings. You might say this is the UU riff on the Golden Rule.

Most of the world's enduring philosophical and faith traditions have something like the Golden Rule. For example, in China 3,000 years ago, Confucius taught this: "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself."ⁱ In India, the Buddha illustrated sharing compassion by thinking of your circle of concern—you and your loved ones, and making that circle wider and wider in your mind. Two thousand years ago, somebody asked Jesus of Nazareth to identify the most important commandment of the Jewish tradition. He answered, "You must love your God and you must love your neighbor as yourself." The Holy Quran urges Muslims to extend care, kinship and hospitality beyond one's group. The Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying: "Not one of you can be a believer, unless he desires for his neighbor what he desires for himself."ⁱⁱⁱ Compassion is the common possession of many traditions.

Last Sunday before church we had coffee with a few families to talk about the spirituality of rearing children. We invited parents in the room to reflect on their spiritual hopes for their children as they grow up in this confusing world of ours. One mother said she wanted her child's automatic response to any situation in life to be a response of compassion. This is why she values and wants a spiritual community like this one. For all of us, I hope, our participation in this community affirms our shared values and personal commitments. This woman's family seeks to conduct itself and shape itself as a school of compassion; that is how Karen Armstrong puts it. The family in which I grew up was not really a school of compassion—more like a school of ridicule. When I was a child, what I learned from parents and relatives was an automatic response of sarcasm. Sarcastic humor hides discomfort and fear; it creates distance between us and the lives of others and their feelings. Sometimes I saw sarcasm—saw it and felt it—used as a weapon. So for my deficiencies, I fault my family.

Karen Armstrong says yes, we can blame our ancestors for the countless unkind, selfish, and aggressive ways in which we treat one another. But she means reptile ancestors. She traces our greed and hostility way back in our evolutionary line, back to those cold-blooded ancestors whose brains and bodies were primed for survival. The reptile brain hasn't left us. It still plays a role to ensure our survival. The reptile brain provides our basic drives.

That is—we need to eat, we may need to defend ourselves, even more likely we need to get away from danger, and as a species we need to reproduce. Yet if all we do is live by our primal urges, by our survival urges, we won't survive. We are doomed if we heed only the reptile brain's impulses. We will mistrust one another, use, abuse, dominate and sometimes kill one another.

Fortunately, evolution has given us bigger brains, with more complex abilities. These abilities include human bonding, kindness, and cooperation. Indeed, compassion and cooperation are also our human survival traits. According to Armstrong, "We human beings are more radically dependent on love than any other species."ⁱⁱⁱ That's why the lack of love, the loss of compassion, the absence of cooperation are true threats to our survival.

She calls her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. (Twelve steps? Oh, is that all!) Well, if a great scholar and beloved spiritual writer like her defines a twelve-step approach, maybe I should give it a try. I do hope it helps, because I'm planning a sermon series on it and this is only the first one. The title *12 Steps* reminds us of the recovery movement, starting with the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. This choice was intentional. Armstrong says we human beings are "addicted to resentment, vanity, [egotism and] the desire to dominate others." She says: think of that "rush of energy" we can experience when we feel angry, hurt, or self-righteous. It's habit forming. Think of the high we can feel when we deliver an unkind remark, especially if we can be clever in saying it.^{iv} That rush—whether of anger or triumph, is powerful. That's why unkind habits are hard to change.

This makes me think of driving the car. When another driver makes me impatient, or makes a mistake, or is too close behind me, or somehow is

just plain rude, I want to teach them a lesson! I want to lean on the horn—that all-purpose instrument of spiritual correction. The honking horn can say so much, especially when paired with a judgmental stare. Surely, such a response by me is a helpful and enduring reminder for the other person to go home and ponder their misdeeds.

What a rush it is to give that reminder! Yet a few minutes after I blare the horn, the rush doesn't last long. I can even feel hung-over, unwell. I wish I hadn't done it. So, in recent years I've resisted the temptation to condemn others with my horn, even if I shout out my frustrations in the privacy of the car. After 15 minutes or so, I'm relieved that I was able to hold back. I was able to bring my better self to that situation, and I am grateful.

Nevertheless, the temptation may never go away—the temptation to be righteous when I feel hurt or offended, the urge to be angry or controlling, harsh or withholding, or unkind in some other way. So, what is it that helps the Golden Rule be more than a good idea, but a way of life?

If we seek a more compassionate life, Armstrong suggests that we start by watching for compassion. Notice actions and occasions when compassion is enacted. Whether a person shows compassion to you, or you demonstrate it, or you see it happening among other people, just notice compassion. But also notice the lack of compassion, the need for more of it. Consider as calmly as you can when a situation could use more compassion—a little more consideration, kindness, or acceptance, or *maybe a lot more* of it!

Perhaps we can take some time every day to ask: When did I show compassion today? When did I offer it to others, and how? Did I slow down to notice who else was in the crowd of people with me, and not rush ahead? When did I show compassion to myself? And when did I miss the mark?

This could be a useful practice of reflection by yourself or with other people at home, or on the phone or with friends online. Armstrong says this is how we begin to train our minds for compassion. This is how parents can make the family a school of compassion, how any of us can make a school of compassion out of our circles of kinship and friendship. Watch for compassion and for the need of it. If there is need of compassion, don't fall into

condemning yourself or another for the shortfall. Condemnation is not very compassionate. Instead, merely notice.

Sometimes we see compassion exchanged online, among Facebook friends, with a thumbs-up or a heart icon, or actual words of caring. Recently we've seen the brief, brave sentence, "Me too," a show of compassion and solidarity. But while the internet has provided such beneficial opportunities, it's also given us new tools with which to hurt one another. I gave up reading the comments posted after online articles—it's not the bad spelling that hurts me, it's the meanness people show. On Facebook, Twitter and internet chat rooms, there is something known as a flame war—unkind, often vicious verbal attacks. One factor that could lead us to change the term social media to the term anti-social media is the damage done by people who devote time and energy to attacking others online. Their abuse is known as trolling. They are trolls.

One trolling story struck me in particular. A young woman by the name of Lindy West is a comedy writer and outspoken feminist. In a radio story on *This American Life*, she recounts vicious insults and threats that people email or post as comments on her articles. She has gotten used to it, but it never feels okay.^v

The "meanest thing that anyone has ever done" to her took place after she watched her father die from cancer. Eighteen months later, she started getting emails as if her dad had sent them. Comments from him were posted on her articles from a Twitter account. Some troll had created a profile on Twitter using her dad's name and picture. His bio said: "Embarrassed father of an idiot—the other two kids are fine, though." It said his residence was a hole in the dirt.

Lindy West says she could have stopped those messages, but sometimes trolls are threatening. She says, "Colleagues of mine have had their addresses published online, had trolls actually show up at their public events. If I don't read comments, how will I know when they've crossed the line? I could stop writing altogether.... But it seems that our silence is what the trolls want."

She decided to write about it. On Jezebel.com, she published an article about the troll who wrote as if he was her dead father. She recalls,

"I wrote sadly, candidly, angrily about how much it hurt. How much that troll had succeeded."

"I did what you are not supposed to do. I fed the troll."

"And then," she continues, "the most amazing thing happened. The morning after that [article was posted], I got an email."

"Hey, Lindy. I don't know why or even when I started trolling you." It went on: "I think my anger towards you stems from your happiness with your own being. It offended me because it served to highlight my unhappiness with my own self. I have emailed you through two other Gmail accounts just to send you idiotic insults. I apologize for that."

He told her that he had deleted the accounts created in the name of her father. "I can't say sorry enough. It was the lowest thing I had ever done. When you included it in your latest *Jezebel* article, it finally hit me. There is a living, breathing human being who is reading this [crap]. I am attacking someone who never harmed me in any way and for no reason whatsoever. I'm done being a troll. Again, I apologize. I made a donation in memory of your dad. I wish you the best." He attached a scanned copy of the receipt for \$50 to the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, where her dad had been treated.

She wrote back: "Is this real? If so, thank you." In the next exchange he provided his real name. He knew that she could have published his name online, but she has not.

Lindy had some lingering questions. So a year and a half later, she called him on the phone. A producer from the radio program was part of the call, and the troll agreed to be recorded. She learned that he had a "passionless job," his girlfriend had split up with him and he hated his body. Lindy told him: "This is the meanest thing anyone's ever done to me." He apologized and promised he was done with trolling. He said: "I never told a single...human being until now that I did this. So it's good, in a way to get that off my chest." Though they had started their conversation anxiously, it became easier for them as they went over what he had done and why he had resented her and how his life was now getting better. They sounded almost like high school classmates reminiscing about old times—that's how the radio producer describes it.

Reflecting on this experience, and on the climate of cruelty on the internet, Lindy says: “I don’t wish [trolls] any pain. Their pain is what got us here in the first place.” She is pointing out the need for more compassion, and she’s extending it.

She concludes that “Humans can be reached: empathy, boldness, kindness—those are things I learned from my dad, though he never knew how much I’d need them. Or maybe he did.”

Trolling on the internet remains an unsettling example of human cruelty, adding to the headlines and history books filled with acts of domination, violence and greed. It can seem as if hostility has the upper hand over compassion in this world of ours. On the other hand, most acts of compassion, kindness, or generosity don’t appear in the headlines or the pages of history because they are so plentiful and ordinary as to not make news very much. Of course, we may hear about the heroism of compassion. In extreme situations of danger, some people stick their neck out and show mercy to others.

But the heroism of compassion happens every day. It occurs in ordinary places and simple exchanges among neighbors, families, friends and strangers. Compassion happens in prayers for peace and meditations of loving kindness. Compassion happens in generous gifts of money and service to help the vulnerable, rescue those in danger, dismantle systems of domination, and build a better world. In preparation for this sermon, after I started noticing compassion, I’d seen it so much that I had trouble deciding which stories to include. It is plentiful.

So let us watch for it—compassion in action. Let us notice when we receive it, when we offer it, and when we see it happen among others. Let us take some time every day, to reflect: When did I see compassion in action today—how and where, and by whom? When did I see the *need* for compassion? Let us be aware when more compassion, kindness, generosity of spirit, patience or self-control could help a situation. In particular, let us recognize when more of it could improve our own situation.

When we see it lacking anywhere, in anyone, this can be a reminder to bring more of it

into our own lives—compassion for ourselves as the starting place. Then compassion for coworkers, neighbors, loved ones, and those we don’t know. Compassion, mercy, generosity and care for those who need it most, whether they live near or far.

When we notice compassion we can give thanks for it as a true blessing and as a gift. Let us give thanks for this gift, remember to notice it and receive it and pass it along. Amen. ~

Pastoral Prayer by Roger Jones

Gentle spirit of healing, fall fresh on us this morning. As cool rains promise new green life in the valley, stir in us the promise of peace for our souls and for the whole human family.

Today we hold in our hearts the friends and loved ones who need our prayers, good wishes, encouragement, and joyful appreciation. We send compassionate warmth from our hearts in all directions, embracing those who shiver in the cold outside at night, those who ache with hunger or sickness, and those who tremble in zones of conflict and oppression. We honor all those people showing their strength and courage as they name the sexualized abuse, harassment and assault that others have committed against them. Remembering that our quiet presence can provide more support than pressing questions will, let us offer our silent witness in the spirit of humility.

As the sunshine invites the green blades of grass to bring themselves forth into this new day, may the spirit of courage call us to bring forth our better selves in meeting every challenge that comes. So may it be, now and in the days to come.

Personal Reflection by Marilyn Reynolds

My father was 58 when he died of alcohol related cirrhosis, and my overwhelming feeling was not of sadness but of relief. I was 31. It was 1966. I thought, thank God that’s over, and went about my business of taking care of my two young daughters and finishing work on a teaching credential.

Not long after his death he showed up in a dream. He was dressed in a long white robe, and he had a glowing, golden aura. When I awakened, I was disappointed to realize that my unconscious mind was so cliché ridden. I couldn’t remember any conversation from the dream, but he was alert and sober, so that in itself was memorable.

It’s another 20 years, sometime in the 90s, before he manages to force himself into my consciousness. I’m just out of Fresno, on Highway 99, on my way to Southern California, and there he is, sitting in the passenger seat. I think he got in while Willie Nelson sang “Precious Memories . . . Precious father, loving mother, fly across the lonely years. And old home scenes of my childhood in fond memories appear.”

He's smelling of Old Spice after-shave and I'm reminded of a time when I was very young and he would sit me on the bathroom counter while he shaved, humming "Shall We Gather at the River," as he lathered his face with a soft bristle brush.

Every morning of his life, at least of my observation of it, he hummed the old Baptist hymns he'd been raised on while he shaved. Then, once the danger of cutting himself was over, he'd add the words: "Shall we gather at the river, where the saints of God have trod," or Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling , , ,"

When I'd grown too big to sit on the counter, I would sometimes lean against the door jamb, taking comfort in the sights and sounds of the morning ritual. Mostly, though, I was still in bed and gently wakened by the familiar humming and singing.

By the time I was in my mid-teens, I would first be awakened by the hacking cigarette cough, and then I would hear the water running, and the humming, and then the singing.

Later still, when I and my two young daughters stayed with my parents for a while, I would be awakened first by the coughing, then the wracking vomiting, and then, finally, would come the humming and singing. Always there was the humming and then the singing.

But back to 1966. Approaching Delano, his thirty-year-old image sits beside me. His hair is thick and curly, and his brown eyes sparkle. My mind jumps to the healthy young man cleaning the cases in his meat market after closing time, while I sat in the sawdust, mounding hills and engineering roads. And then I'm holding tight onto the high hanging scale, dangling like a side of beef, while he checks my weight, then records it on the wall by the walk-in refrigerator, next to phone numbers for fat renderers, packing houses, and bookies.

And then I see him 58 and near death. He is begging me to go buy half a pint—just enough so he can stop shaking. Then he'll quit. He promises. I switch to the news, turn up the volume, and will him to disappear. But he doesn't. He stays right there beside me in the passenger seat.

I give up. I grant the yellowed old man with the broken blood vessels lining his nose full recognition.

"You know, you really pissed me off, drinking yourself into the grave like you did."

"Watch that mouth, Young Lady."

"Well you did piss me off."

"Life was hard."

"That's no excuse. . . All of those promises to quit, and then . . ."

"The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak."

"I lost respect for you."

"There was always food on the table and a roof over your head," he says.

And now it's as if he just got up from that long ago dining room table.

White shirt, tie loosened at the neck, brown gabardine pants with a brown belt.

No sawdust on his shoes because it's a Sunday. He's in his mid-forties and he's setting up the board for our after-dinner checker game.

"We had some good times, didn't we Shug?"

"Those last ten years were awful."

"But we were partners, weren't we? You and me?"

We ride in silence for another twenty or so miles, then—"You probably haven't been a perfect mother."

"No, but I haven't been blotto, either. I haven't abused my body to the point that I can barely walk, or digest food, or think straight."

Old, and yellow, and bleary-eyed again, he says, "It's not right that you only think of me like this. What if your kids only remember the last 10 years of your life? How will you like that?"

He's right. I want my grown-up babies to remember me reading to them, and tucking them in bed at night, and kissing away their tears.

I want them to remember the fun we had together.

Softening, I remember that he and I made up stories from the rough plaster ceiling in our Temple City home. Long before 1st grade, he taught me to read with the sing-songy poems of Edgar A. Guest. I absorbed his values of honesty and hard work.

On that 1966 trip down 99, his image and song slowly fading, sadness finally replaced my long-held anger and disappointment. I was sorry and ashamed that I'd had so little compassion for him as he drank his *Early Times* and got sicker and sicker. I felt for him in a way that had been beyond me as he was dying. Perhaps his final and greatest gift was to awaken in me a growing sense of compassion.

I've hardly become a Mother Theresa. Every day I fail the test of empathy for a multitude of our nation's so-called leaders. But the balance has tipped, and compassion is stronger than angry judgment. And if my father ever shows up again, in some dream, or on a road trip, I'll thank him for demanding compassion.

ⁱ Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York, 2010: Anchor Books), 42.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 59.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 19.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 12.

^v "If You Don't Have Anything Nice to Say, SAY IT IN ALL CAPS," *This American Life*, #545, aired January 23, 2015. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/545/transcript>