

Self-Compassion



~Part of a Sermon Series~

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #347 Gather the Spirit; #34 Thou I May
Speak with Bravest Fire; #201 Glory, Glory,
Hallelujah

Special Music: “Three Haikus for Resilience,” by
[Ross Hammond](#), guitar

Reflection by Larry Boles (printed at end)

Sermon by Roger Jones

The religious historian Karen Armstrong says no matter the religious tradition with which you identify, the practice of compassion is the essence of the spiritual life.

The definition of compassion is an awareness of the experience of suffering in others—or in ourselves. Compassion is the willingness to not ignore or turn away from the pain felt by others—or by ourselves. Compassion includes the desire to act to reduce and alleviate suffering—in others, or in ourselves. In her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Armstrong names as her third step: Compassion for Yourself.ⁱ This is foundational for how we treat others. Armstrong says: “The Golden Rule ...asks that we use our own feelings as a guide to our behavior with others. If we treat ourselves harshly ...we are likely to treat other people [this way too].”ⁱⁱⁱ

Dr. Kristin Neff notes that our culture is big on promoting kindness *to others*, but we have a

harder time treating ourselves tenderly when we suffer. Why is compassion to oneself under suspicion? Perhaps we mistake it for letting ourselves off the hook, and ignoring morals and ethics. But Neff says it’s not a free pass at all. Taking responsibility for the needs of the world includes responsibility for ourselves and our self-care. Self-compassion is one aspect of self-care. It’s good for us: like dental hygiene, exercise, nutrition, rest and play and community. Yet self-care seems to have a reputation as being self-indulgent.

To be sure, there’s money to be made in marketing self-indulgence under the name of self-care. Various cosmetics, clothing, automobiles, and food are sold as ways to “pamper yourself.” Marketing will tell us: you *deserve* a vacation, a luxury car, a fancy watch, a pint of ice cream. We may choose those things if we can, and we may enjoy them, but it’s a stretch to say we deserve them. What we *deserve* is based not on our merits, money, virtues, or privileges. It comes from our basic humanity. Every human being deserves respect, compassion, dignity and understanding. That seems a lot harder to come by than a pint of ice cream.

Self-compassion is not self-indulgence. It’s not even the same as self-esteem, which means thinking well of yourself. Self-esteem comes from the weight and value we give to our traits, like being attractive, smart, generous, athletic, hard-working and so on. There’s nothing wrong with praising our qualities, but Neff says that self-compassion is not based on self-evaluation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Self-compassion is the practice of unconditional friendship with your own feelings. Treating yourself with patience, the way you would a friend, is especially helpful when we are grieving a loss, Neff writes. Painful emotions can arise unexpectedly in the grieving process. Feelings can surprise us and confuse us many months after a death or other big loss. Self-compassion means not rejecting your experience, but seeing it with tenderness.

Yet our hurtful habits of self-criticism can be strong. Neff says: “When we make a mistake or fail in some way, we may be more likely to beat ourselves up than put a supportive arm around our

own shoulder.... And even when our problems [come] from forces beyond our control, such as an accident or traumatic event, we often focus more on fixing the problem than calming and comforting ourselves.”

Neff is a professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas in Austin. She calls herself an “evangelist for self-compassion.” Yet unlike Armstrong she does not use religious history to make her point. She draws on empirical studies. With many articles to back her up, Neff says that the practice of self-compassion is good for our sense of well-being. It can provide “resilience ...against negative states of mind.” It can reduce self-criticism, anxiety, depression and harmful habits. It can make us feel better physically too.

So what *is* self-compassion? According to the *Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science*, self-compassion consists of “three main elements: kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness. These components combine ... to create a self-compassionate frame of mind.”^{iv}

#1: Kindness.

What comes to mind? Not harshness, but gentleness. Not exasperation, but patience. An attitude of tender acceptance. Paying attention. Self-compassion is about giving yourself the gift of your own company. Neff puts it this way: “Treat yourself as you would treat a good friend.”

#2: A sense of common humanity.

When we feel pain about things we’ve done or those things we have left undone, when unhappy with our life situation, when grieving, when filled with stress or fear, it’s easy to feel alone. “We feel cut off and separate from other people who are presumably leading ‘normal happy lives,’” writes Neff. She calls this falling into “tunnel vision” about our lives. To get out of the tunnel, we need a reminder that imperfections and regrets affect the whole human family. We need a reminder that many people in the world experience loss, trauma, or pain from causes beyond our control.

Self-compassion involves gaining this broader perspective, remembering our common humanity. The feeling that certain things

“shouldn’t” be happening can make us feel shame and isolation. “Why am I the only one having such a bad experience?” “Why is my family singled out for this misery?” Such questions are understandable. This is why it can be so helpful to participate in groups of people dealing with similar struggles: disease-related support groups, parenting or caregiver support meetings, grief groups, coming out groups, and addiction recovery programs. Thus, reaching out to others has two benefits. We gain empathy for the struggles of other people, and we don’t feel as isolated in our own experience. Truly we can treat our neighbor *and ourselves* with respect and care.

#3: Mindfulness.

Paying attention to your experience can help you recognize that you *are* suffering. Neff says: “Many people don’t acknowledge the extent of their own pain, especially when that pain stems from their own self-criticism. [Likewise,] when confronted with life challenges, people [can] get so absorbed by the process of trying to fix their problems that they don’t pause to consider how much they are struggling in the moment.” To notice you are struggling is a kind thing to do for yourself, just as it is with another person you care about.

Mindfulness allows us to bear witness to our experience. Being aware of our feelings, we might be able to meet unexpected challenges with reactions that are less extreme. We might be less likely to berate ourselves or lash out at others if, instead of suppressing unwanted feelings or numbing them, we look at them openly. Instead of rushing to fix things, we can bear witness to our feelings. Slow down the breathing, pause, and merely notice: “This is a moment of suffering.”

Out of care for our well-being, sometimes we may decide to make a change in our life, or choose a new path of behavior. For example, think about recovery from addiction to smoking or drinking. In the long run, we may be happier, but pain is inevitable along the way. We can be honest and aware of the pain. Another example: to leave a house we’ve lived in for many years and move to a new city, a smaller home, or a facility with support and medical staff may be a wise decision, but many people say the process is not easy. Transitions like

leaving a job, ending a relationship, watching a child grow up and move away—all are normal human experiences, and they can hurt. Self-compassion means noticing your experience with kindness. Paying attention.

This kind of attention is not the self-preoccupation that drives us away from the world. It is the self-awareness that allows us to engage with others and strive to be good for the world. There's very little space left in our hearts to care for others if we don't make enough space to care for ourselves. But if we are grounded in in friendship to our own experience, we can choose to respond to others with respect, kindness, generosity and courage.

Dr. Neff has posted a self-compassion survey on her website.⁹ You answer a few questions, and it shows how you measure on self-kindness, mindfulness, and seeing your pain as part of our shared humanity. I took her self-compassion test. My overall score was, well, barely above average. I was surprised it was that good, but I also was relieved. I wouldn't want to seem too satisfied.

Neff asks: "How do you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you typically respond to a close friend when he or she is suffering?" If you think human beings deserve dignity and respect, treat yourself in that way. There are self-compassion workshops in our local area and online. There are descriptions of self-compassion practices online, like a meditation called affectionate breathing. If you are a person who doesn't like meditation or prayer, consider the alternative of writing down what you're feeling—that's another way of being mindful. If you can't sit still very long or feel you are just too busy, consider taking a Self-Compassion Break. It's not a scoop of ice cream or a shot of bourbon. As outlined by Kristin Neff, a Self-Compassion Break is a brief, self-directed moment of recognition of what we're going through.

I wish I'd known about this a year ago. During my sabbatical, I was finishing work on a dissertation for a doctor of ministry degree. The research and writing seemed unending. I was distracted and restless. Countless times I got up from the desk in my corner window to make tea or

coffee. Then I'd need a snack. Then more coffee. So many distractions. I felt miserable. Week after week, that unfinished and unformed book hung over my head. "Oh, why did you wait so long!" I scolded myself. I felt like withdrawing from the school. However, by this time it would have been more painful to explain why I had given up than to plow ahead. What I didn't know then was this: rather than escaping to another coffee break, snack break, or internet break, I could have taken a Self-Compassion Break.

It could have gone like this. I could have written in a journal or written a letter to myself. I could have sat quietly and said something along these lines:

"This is a moment of suffering. This is hard right now for me. But I'm not alone. Suffering is part of the human condition, especially for dissertation writers. Others have been here. May I be patient with myself. May I stay connected to my sources of encouragement. May I trust the process."

That's what I could have done, a Self-Compassion Break. Unfortunately, instead I was hard on myself. But Kristin Neff and Karen Armstrong have reminded me of this: The voice inside us that can criticize, minimize, belittle and find fault is a voice that can be trained to be tender. With practice and support, we can learn to give ourselves a little more kind attention in moments of distress or self-doubt. We can learn to sit with ourselves as we might sit with a good friend. Not blaming, not fixing, only bearing witness.

Another way to learn self-compassion is to develop a sense of community. During my writing project, others helped me more than I might have helped myself. First was this congregation. You sent me off with the message: "Get that thing done." Your wishes and prayers kept me going. Then, my faculty advisor, Dr. Randi Walker. As I finished a draft of a new chapter, I'd email it to her and start working on another one. She would send it back with her comments and recommendations. And she'd write, "You're going in the right direction. Keep writing." Finally, a few friends recalled their own writing projects. They could

relate to the agony and confusion of being in the middle of the work.

It is good to stay connected to others. Cultivating community is a form of self-care.

Before closing I would like to show you how a Self-Compassion Break might work. For just a few minutes, you are invited to take a break as I offer some words to think about in silence. If you don't wish to follow along, perhaps you can be a kind presence to the others around you.

Rest your eyes, whether open or closed. Notice your body resting where it is, and notice your breathing, in and out. Now I'll ask you to think about a situation in your life that's not easy. It doesn't have to be anything major, but something that's a source of stress or sadness or pain, something where you could use more kindness and ease.

As you bring it to mind, notice the feelings that come up. Now offer yourself this insight: "This is a moment of suffering." Or think: "Ow-- this hurts. This is stressful for me. This is a moment of suffering."

You are paying attention to the feeling. By saying this, you are being present for your experience.

Now offer yourself *this* insight: "Suffering is a part of life. We all struggle in our lives. We all have pain. I am not alone. Suffering is a part of life."

By saying this, you affirm our common humanity and your place in the human family.

Now consider how you'd like to treat yourself. Put a hand over your heart. Feel your warmth. Notice the gentle touch of your hand on your chest. Offer a wish, like one of the following: "May I give myself the compassion that I need. May I learn to accept myself as I am. May I forgive myself. May I be strong. May I be patient."

By saying this, you affirm your wish to be kind to yourself. May your wish for kindness be like a seed you are planting, and may it grow tenderly and blossom in your life.

Okay; that's the outline for a self-compassion break. Thank you to those who participated and thank you to those who supported the participants.

I must confess that if I had set self-compassion as my New Year's resolution last week, I would have broken it by now. And probably beaten myself up for it.

Perhaps, in the interest of kindness, maybe setting one more task for ourselves, setting one more goal for self-improvement, is not the best approach. Perhaps instead of making a resolution, we can set an intention.

Of course, we will not always make it. This means we will not run out of opportunities to practice. Indeed, Karen Armstrong says, the work of becoming "a compassionate human being is a lifelong project. It is not achieved in an hour or a day.... It is [work] that will last until our dying hour. Nearly every day we will [fall short, but...we can] pick ourselves up and start over again," she says.^{vi}

We can aim to treat ourselves as we would treat a good friend. We can practice. We can make the intention: to be open our feelings and experience, to remember our common humanity, and act with tenderness toward ourselves as well as with others.

So may we aim to live, for our own sake and for the good of our human family, of all beings, and of this world. Amen.

Personal Reflection by Larry Boles

In the 70s there was a thing. The thing was "I'm OK, you're OK." I had only passing knowledge of it in its day, mainly because I was too busy getting high. I wish I was just kidding about that, but during 12th grade a lot of goals were secondary to me. Goals like mastering geometry, interpreting poetry, understanding political science, or pretty much anything academic. It was all about being accepted in a social group, and in my adolescent mind, that involved getting high.

There wasn't much risk with mastering geometry or political science, but with getting high there was considerable risk, and that's what got me suspended from school. One of the conditions for my return to school was enrollment in the Discovery Center. The Discovery Center was a converted house downtown that had daily meetings that were called encounter groups. "What could be more cool than that?" I thought. And really, it wasn't the getting high that was important as much as it was the being cool. So I eagerly attended the first meeting, where I was not yet in a group, but was met by Peter Strauss, the director of the Discovery Center. Peter had been my freshman English teacher and he had disappeared. I learned that he had disappeared because he had struggled with drugs and alcohol while he taught us English, and was now drug and alcohol free and running the Discovery Center. So Peter introduced me to "I'm OK, you're OK." It was simple—perhaps too simple—but if you feel OK about yourself, you are being self-compassionate. If you feel another person is OK, you are being compassionate. Self-loathing, then, equates to "I'm not OK," and so on.

I learned that my desire to get high was really rooted in feeling that I'm not OK and everyone else was OK. Peter asked, "so why do you not feel OK, Larry? Start there." The truth was that I didn't feel worthy of my membership in any group. Like Groucho Marx said, "I'd never want to be a member of a group that would have me as a member."

But I needed to engage in the rituals of the group to feel worthy. I was bright enough to be in with the brainiacs, but I didn't know it at the time. There was a group affectionately called "the greasers," but I didn't own a car or motorcycle, and my curly hair would not work with that group anyway. So I chose the hippies, and—well, getting high went with that.

But the Discovery Center was full of hippies who didn't get high. That was new to me. These kids seemed cool and self-confident and I couldn't understand why. I came to realize they thought of

themselves as OK. What was equally hard to grasp is they seemed to think I was OK too. How did that happen? Yet the more I listened, and the more I hung out with these folks, the more I let go of the self-loathing I had been gripping so tightly. I was beginning to feel OK. Even the brainiacs and greasers seemed OK to me, eventually. After all, they were just like me. We all wanted to run in one herd or another. There was the self, and the herd that the self ran with. It was just a question of whether you sacrificed a part of yourself to join the herd.

I wish I could give the gift of OK to someone. It's such an amazing gift. It's more complicated than that of course. If there's one thing I learned it's that this is not my gift to give. I work as a speech therapist with people who have lost language following a stroke. Some of these folks have amazing resilience and good support. But others no longer feel OK. Early in my career I thought part of my job was to help restore their self-compassion—their OK-ness. Somehow at the Discovery Center we never got around to discussing HOW we get to OK. One by one most of us got there, what with the acceptance and support of those around us. The closest I can come to simulating that environment is the aphasia group that I run. Our agenda is minimal. If I tried to call it an encounter group I'd probably decrease the membership by half. Similarly I don't use terms like "I'm OK you're OK." But truly these are some of the most OK people I know. They became members of this herd while they were in the emergency room. By helping each other struggle with language, cheering each other on, and backing off where appropriate, I can see the growth in self-compassion in them. They seem to get there at about the same time they express compassion for their fellow group members. Funny how that is. I can't take credit for their OK-ness, and like I say, it is not my gift to give, but it feels good to be in the room when it happens.

ⁱ Armstrong, Karen (2011). *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. Anchor Books.

ⁱⁱ Armstrong, 177. Anchor Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Neff (2018). "What Self Compassion Is Not." [www.self-compassion.org](http://self-compassion.org). Accessed Jan. 6, 2018. <http://self-compassion.org/what-self-compassion-is-not-2/>

^{iv} Neff, K. D. & Germer, C. (2017). *Self-Compassion and Psychological Wellbeing*. In J. Doty (Ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science*, Chap. 27. Oxford University Press.

^v Neff (2018). "Test How Self-Compassionate You Are." [www.self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are/](http://self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are/). Accessed Jan. 6, 2018.

^{vi} Armstrong, 192.