

“The Courage to be Compassionate”

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My precious niece is getting married in April. I am delighted and honored that she and her soon-to-be husband asked me to officiate their wedding. We recently met to plan the ceremony. As you would expect, the ceremony is filled with many references to love – falling in love, being in love, and loving each other all the days of their lives. Weddings are indeed a time to celebrate love!

Generally speaking, weddings are not times when we talk about compassion. Being compassionate and kind to the beloved person you are marrying is certainly a big part of what each person is promising to bring to the marriage, so why is it less common to talk about compassion in a wedding ceremony?

I got curious about this and wondered – what is compassion anyway? The Latin root of the word means “to suffer with.” In the original Buddhist text, compassion is defined as – “a trembling or quivering of the heart in response to pain and suffering.”¹ Compassion arises when we are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to see that suffering relieved. At its core, compassion is a response to our shared human condition of experiencing pain and sorrow – and our desire to alleviate suffering.

As I reflected on compassion and why we don’t often hear it mentioned in wedding ceremonies, I realized that we certainly feel compassion for those we love, but it can also be impersonal. We can feel compassion for strangers, and sometimes even for those people we experience as difficult or “hard to love.”

Compassion is central to the first Unitarian Universalist principle – “To affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people.” This principle doesn’t ask us to love, or even like, all people. It doesn’t ask us to condone all behaviors. It’s asking us to honor the other person’s dignity as a fellow human being and equal part of the interdependent web of all existence – the 7th principle.

As a scholar of world religions and author of *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Karen Armstrong recognizes a common thread in religion – compassion is at the heart of spirituality and is a common ground for all major religions. Compassion is that which brings one into relationship with a transcendent reality and is lived according to some variation of the “golden rule” – to treat others as you want to be treated.²

¹ <https://www.sharonsalzberg.com/compassion-a-way-of-being-in-the-world/>

² <https://charterforcompassion.org/12-steps-compassion-booklet>

According to Armstrong, compassion is central to our nature. We can easily see that compassion is part of our everyday experience of being human in the way we love and care for our children; how we instinctively feel pain in our own hearts when we see someone in pain; the way we desire to alleviate suffering when someone who is in distress reaches out to us for help.

Although compassion is an innate quality, in our Western societal culture, rugged individualism and autonomy are valued. We are encouraged to develop these qualities. Therefore, if we want to be compassionate, we need to develop our capacity. Just as you would work out in the gym to enhance your physical fitness, we can also build our compassion muscles. One way to do this is to have compassion rituals.

Last summer I did a chaplaincy internship at Holy Family Hospital in Methuen and had a compassion ritual. For 12 weeks, I entered hospital rooms of strangers. The only thing I knew about them was their name, date of admission, and their religious affiliation. I entered the room not knowing who I would find in the bed and with no expectations of where the conversation would go. I was anxious about going in the room and I was pretty certain the person I was about to meet was also anxious, after all, they were in the hospital.

As chaplains, we were instructed to always stop at the Purell station and cleanse our hands before going into a room. I began using this time to create a compassion ritual. As I Purelled, I took a slow, deep breath, and focused my attention on bringing the energy of the person I was about to visit into my heart. Then I was ready to enter the room, introduce myself, and ask if they wanted a visit. The Purell ritual was simple, but it had the powerful effect of creating the space for being in compassionate relationship before I even met the person.

When I left the room, I completed the compassion ritual by stopping to Purell again. I took a deep breath, held the person and our sacred conversation in my heart with a prayer – May you be free from suffering. May you be peaceful and at ease.

Compassion takes courage. It took courage for me to walk in the room and it certainly took courage for the patient to decide if they wanted to share their intimate feelings with someone they just met.

Here at Winchester Unitarian Society, we have compassion rituals. Our practice of lighting a chalice, offering opening words, and having a check-in at meetings is a compassion ritual, especially if we do it with that intention. The opening words invite us slow down, take a deep breath and move into a heart-centered place. Then, someone asks, “Who wants to check-in?”

Do you notice that many times this question is followed by a small sacred pause? There’s a moment when we decide how much we want to share about our personal lives, especially if we are feeling tender. In that brief moment, we choose what to say and how open we want to be. It takes courage to be vulnerable, even with people we know and trust. It also takes courage for others to respond. We may not know what to say or how to help.

In our desire to alleviate suffering, our first impulse may be to want to fix it and make it better. Sometimes practical offers of help are exactly what's needed. Other times, the compassionate response might be to say, "Whew, I don't even know what to say right now. I'm glad you told us." The truth is, rarely can a response make something better. What often makes something better is making an emotional connection and letting the person know they are seen and heard and loved.

When we do reach out with compassion toward others, we too are one of its beneficiaries. We become happier. Have you noticed that when you do something kind for another person, you feel good yourself? It can be something as simple as letting a stressed mom with a restless child go ahead of you in line at the grocery store. We feel happiness that comes from alleviating the suffering of another, no matter how seemingly small.

It's no surprise, then, that scientists have identified positive effects of compassion on the brain. When we help someone with genuine concern for their well-being, levels of endorphins, which are associated with a euphoric feeling, surge in the brain, a phenomenon known as the Helper's High. In studies in which participants were asked to consciously extend kindness to another person, the reward centers of the compassionate brain were activated – the same brain system that lights up when we think of chocolate or another treat.³

So, does that mean all acts of compassion are selfish? Not necessarily. Mother Theresa is a common example of selfless compassion for the poor. But, there was also something in it for her. She experienced a sense of purpose and fulfillment from her selfless service. These were a by-product, not the goal. Her primary motive was to bring help and solace to the poor. This is the happy catch about compassion: the more we are in it for other people, the more we get out of it ourselves and the happier we are.

With all this happiness arising from compassion, why aren't we being kind to every person in every moment? Is there something we're afraid of? A pioneer in compassion-based therapy identified some common fears in expressing compassion for others.

- If I am too compassionate, others will become dependent on me.
- I can't tolerate others' distress
- There are some people in life who don't deserve compassion.⁴

I can identify with some of these. Can you? When we're stressed, sad, scared, or angry, it's natural to turn inward and have less capacity to be kind to others. When our ability to be compassionate is low, it may help to remember that doing even a small act of kindness for another can help nourish our own spirit. We can kiss a loved one good bye in the morning; give

³ Thupten Jinpa, *A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to Be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), 15.

⁴ Jinpa, *A Fearless Heart*, 54.

our seat on the bus to a pregnant woman; let a driver who is in a rush pass us; or offer a co-worker a caring ear.

If we're talking about compassion, we also need to talk about self-compassion. Unlike compassion for others, which is almost highly regarded as a positive quality, self-compassion is more complicated. In the West, our social culture has strong roots in the Puritan work ethic, which emphasizes hard work and discipline. In this context, self-compassion can be confused with being self-indulgent or weak.

In truth, when we relate to ourselves with kindness, understanding and genuine acceptance, it recharges our battery. Self-compassion is like replenishing a well-spring of kindness that lies within us, allowing compassion to flow more easily toward others.

What does self-compassion look like? At its essence, it's giving ourselves the same care and kindness, we'd give to a good friend. Simply asking yourself how you might respond to a close friend when they are suffering can change how you care for yourself.

Even with dedicated compassion rituals, we are human and will not be perfectly loving towards ourselves and others at all times. Having compassion for ourselves means that we honor and accept our humanness. None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes, bump up against our limitations, and lose our temper. The more we open our heart to this reality instead of fighting against it, the more we'll be able to feel compassion for ourselves and others.

You may have heard me say in a sermon last Fall that church is a Sacred Playground. Although, we all come to church for different reasons, my sense is, many of us come because this is a Compassion Playground – a place where we can nourish our spirits by giving and receiving kindness to each other and the wider world. The testimonials that members of this congregation give each month often speak to how acts of compassion made indelible imprints on their heart. The testimonials speak to the gratitude of receiving kindness and also the joy of witnessing expressions of kindness that others are doing.

One of the most exciting recent findings in the area of compassion is that kindness is contagious.⁵ Other people's kindness makes us kinder. Not only do we feel good when we see someone help another person; we are moved to help someone ourselves. I invite you to see for yourself if this is true.... The next time you observe someone being kind, see if you can notice how you instinctively react. Without any conscious thought, do your eyes light up? Does your heart feel lifted? Does your mouth shape into a smile? Do you feel inspired to be kind?

Imagine this.... Imagine a ripple of kindness spreading from each of our hearts and spreading outward from the center of this Sanctuary. The effects of kindness spreading outward, with each person whose life is touched by kindness, creating another circle of kindness and so on, eventually resulting in multiple overlapping circles with others who are spreading kindness....

⁵ <https://helix.northwestern.edu/article/kindness-contagious-new-study-finds>

With all these ripples of kindness, what kind of world do you imagine is possible? Can you see it? Can you feel it?

May a world that is fashioned out of compassion, courage, and kindness be made manifest. And, may we be the creators and the recipients. Amen.