

Cultivating Compassion

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The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves.
--from the "Charter for Compassion"

Readings

From the Buddhist "Metta Sutta"

Let us cultivate boundless goodwill.
Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state.
Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
Even as a mother watches over her child, so with boundless mind should one cherish all living beings, radiating friendliness over the whole world, above, below, and all around, without limit.

From "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life" by Karen Armstrong (in part quoting the poet Wordsworth):

...one small act of kindness can turn a life around.

...we can all create "spots of time" for others, and that many of these will be the "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love" that, Wordsworth claimed in a poem, form "that best portion of a good man's life."

Sermon

Cultivating Compassion. Compassion: "Feeling with" or "suffering with" – and then acting accordingly.

Among our stated UU Principles are those that affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, acceptance and encouragement to spiritual growth, and justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

Dry words, but good words... yet how do we better live them? That of course is the hard part.

How, to begin with, are we to live in a world with so much suffering? How can we keep our hearts open when there is so much to break them? And how can we – or even should we – keep our hearts open to those who are mean-spirited, cruel, or worse?

I've spoken with folks these days who sometimes feel their hearts closing or hardening as they read or watch one more news story about this or that disaster or death or terrible inequity, or hear too many hateful words. And to a person they don't want to shut down; sure, they realize

that the shutting down or hardening is a sort of unconscious defense mechanism, self-protective... but they don't like it.

What then? For we know that the world needs people who care, needs kindness, needs love, needs compassion – to put it another way needs the broken-hearted who keep on anyway.

But how can we do this? How can we cultivate compassion without being overwhelmed by suffering? All the religions and ethical systems enjoin us to this way of living, often summarizing the message in one or another version of the Golden Rule. I could quote half a dozen iterations for you, and that would be just a start. But though put in many ways, it is simply said: Don't treat others as you don't want to be treated; instead do treat others as you want to be treated.

Simply said. Not always so easily lived.

Clearly we need to go deeper than words in the brain to move to feelings in the heart and then to the work of our hands.

Stories can help. Jesus used stories to help us open our hearts. The story of the Good Samaritan, for example, to illustrate the command to love your neighbor with compassion. The vividness of the story reaches the heart. We have so-called respectable folks passing by the beaten man on the street – too busy and too important to even notice the suffering, much less help. Then the Samaritan, who Jesus's Jewish listeners would not have expected to be the good guy... he notices, stops, and helps. He was the neighbor, he was the one who had compassion.

"Ah..." says our heart and not just our mind. Then we might be more likely to really hear and take to heart Jesus' words: "Go and do likewise."

Our own stories can help us become more compassionate too. For we know that if we've gone through some loss or hard time, our hearts naturally become more open to others going through something similar. This is why bereavement groups help. This is why 12-step recovery groups work.

So it is no accident that that Karen Armstrong titled the book from which we heard earlier *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*.

I won't outline her twelve steps this morning, only to say that they address what she calls our addiction to ego, moving us from learning to paying attention to feeling to doing – in other words from head to heart to hands. As the last lines of her book put it: "We know what we have to do. This is the end of the book, but our work is just beginning."

Ah, but that summary line skips over everything in between learning and doing. So, again, how *do* we get from brain to heart to hands? Stories help, our own experience helps, but what else?

What else can get us out of ourselves, out of our egoistic concerns and worries and fears, and into a more attentive awareness of everyone else?

There are indeed practices for this. Here's one: The lines we heard from the ancient Buddhist text, the Metta Sutta, or lines like them, are words we can if we choose repeat in meditation, driving the message deeper and deeper from our brains to our hearts. It can be as simple as the words I often use in meditation: May all beings be well, be happy, be peaceful, be at ease.

Though as some of you know, that's not where we are to start. Before we get to "all beings" Buddhist teaching invites us to direct such thoughts first to ourselves, then to those we love, then to those we don't know, and then to those who trouble us – this step not always easy to be sure, as we bring to mind troubling people in our personal lives or in the life of our nation. Perhaps you have someone in mind this morning in that category, and some of us might be saying to ourselves, "What? That person too?" Yes, the teaching says, that person too – though, as noted, you don't necessarily start there. Just as you work on the scales before you learn to play a Beethoven sonata.

This said, do we really want our heart hardened to anyone? Yes, we must protect ourselves from those who would hurt us, and none of this has to do with accepting or tolerating harmful or dangerous behavior – whether personally or nationally. But this doesn't have to mean hardening our hearts – which is of course quite the reverse of cultivating compassion.

So, stories, our own experiences of suffering, meditative practices, prayer can all help us cultivate compassion. It's a lifelong journey. And not once and for all or ever that we become supremely compassionate. We will stumble and we will fail. We will find ourselves closing our hearts even when we know or would wish that we could open them, and then actually do what we deeply know we want to do. After all this is why we have and need religious or ethical teachings, to remind us of our better selves. This is why we have spiritual practices, to help us to more often bring what we know into what we say and do.

One more thing. Gratitude. How might a grateful heart help us have compassionate hearts? Maybe it is as simple as this: Gratitude is a quality of the heart, isn't it? So when we are feeling grateful for our circumstances or for what someone has done for us or for the beauty of a day or for whatever it might be, our heart becomes more open.

I invite you to feel that now. Think of one thing or one person or one circumstance for which you are grateful... whatever else might be going on in your life.

Do you feel at least a little opening of your heart... softening of your heart? I know I do. Well, an open heart is an open heart. So if gratitude opens our heart, maybe it leaves us open also to others, so that we can more fully (wholeheartedly) celebrate with them their own good fortune and more fully feel with them their sorrow or suffering.

More fully present... which, as most of us eventually learn, is often all that our friend or neighbor needs – our full, wholehearted, presence.

All this said – and more of course could be said – may we support one another as we each live the ongoing journey of cultivating compassion, from mind to heart to hands. Often simply, as we heard earlier, by offering "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love," which, after all, never cease rippling into the world, as each act of kindness, love, and compassion inspires the next... and the next.

And in these days of contention and too much meanness and hate, we must have the faith, I tell myself and I suggest to you, that the accumulation of small kind and compassionate words we say and things we do matter, indeed matter a great deal.

It will always be so.