

First, let me offer a definition of compassion from Professor of Buddhist Studies, Robert Thurman:

The English word compassion is used to translate the Sanskrit karuna, which is etymologized as “suspending happiness.” To feel compassion, you must turn away slightly from your own focus on superficial happiness to sense the true condition of others, honestly facing their pains. This turn is considered the key to expanding awareness from its habitual imprisonment in self-centered states of mind, by nature always unsatisfactory, and to connecting with the feelings of other, through which real satisfaction becomes possible.

It is thus an open hearted empathy for the suffering of others and the wish to free them from it. It is the twin of another powerful emotion, “love,” Sanskrit maitri, which means the wish for the beloved others to be happy. To succeed in making others happy, it was long ago discovered, you must develop the kind of deeper happiness within yourself that only increases when you share it. ...ⁱ

I made a couple of claims in the write-up for this sermon – one that compassion lies at the heart of all our religious traditions, two, that it is a primary goal of spiritual practice and three, that we can increase compassion in our own lives and in the world. All of these claims are important for Unitarian Universalists.

Karen Armstrong’s 2006 book *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* convinced me or maybe reinforced for me that compassion is at the heart of religious tradition. She now has a new book (2010), *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*ⁱⁱ, and is working with the Charter for Compassion to increase compassion in our world.

Her 2006 book is a religious history of the Axial Age. Have you heard of the Axial Age? It was the period between about 900 and 200 bce. German philosopher Karl Jaspers named the Axial Age because “it was pivotal to the spiritual development of

humanity. ... The Axial Age was one of the most (important) periods of intellectual, psychological and religious change in recorded history.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In China, Confucius lived; Confucianism and Taoism developed. In India, Siddhartha, the Buddha, lived. Hinduism and Buddhism developed. In Israel, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible lived and monotheism developed. In Greece, Socrates, Plato and Euripides all lived and philosophical rationalism developed.

“The Axial sages put the abandonment of selfishness and the spirituality of compassion at the top of their agenda. For them, religion *was* the Golden Rule. They concentrated on what people were to transcend from – their greed egotism, hatred and violence. What they were to transcend to was not an easily defined place or person, but a state of beatitude . . .”^{iv} A feeling of deep happiness, blessedness.

Why does this matter? Armstrong maintains, “(W)e have never surpassed the insights of the Axial Age. In times of crisis, men and women have constantly turned back to this period for guidance.”^v

Of course, the vision of those ancient times has often been distorted or diluted. “The prophets, mystics, philosophers and poets of the Axial Age were so advanced and their vision was so radical that later generations . . . often produced exactly the kind of religiosity that the axial reformers wanted to get rid of.” (pp. xii- xiii) We can and do learn from these ancient sages today. Much of what they learned and taught still speaks to us.

Axial Age teachers were not interested in dogma or doctrine. Some refused to discuss theology at all. "Others argued that it was immature, unrealistic, and perverse to look for the kind of absolute certainty that many people expect religion to provide. . . . (They) "discovered a transcendent dimension in the core of their being but they did not necessarily regard it as supernatural. . . . (T)he only correct attitude (to this experience of transcendence) was reverent silence."^{vi}

Like contemporary Unitarian Universalists, "what mattered was not what you believed but how you behaved."^{vii} "The only way you could encounter what they called 'God,' 'Nirvana,' 'Brahman,' or the 'Way' was to live a compassionate life. Indeed religion *was* compassion."^{viii}

These early sages advised that you must dedicate yourself to an ethical life and you must be ready to change. "All the sages preached a spirituality of empathy and compassion; they insisted that people must abandon their egotism and greed, their violence and unkindness . . . (and) your concern must somehow extend to the entire world."^{ix}

It's also important to note that "Every single one of these faiths began in principled and visceral recoil from the unprecedented violence of their time."^x Like the 21st century, many people felt uprooted, disconnected or alienated. In this context they maintained that empathy is essential for morality, that we must be self-aware and honest with ourselves. We must face our own suffering and accept that suffering is inescapable in life. We must take responsibility for our own behavior, our own actions. Only, then can we take practical, effective actions of justice and mercy.

When we can face our own suffering and feel others' suffering as our own, we don't want to harm others. Repeatedly, over the centuries, people have shown that developing empathy and compassion increases psychological health and increases happiness.

I didn't know when I started a psychotherapy practice that I was embarking on a spiritual path, beginning a spiritual practice. But I was! I was making it my work to turn my focus slightly away from myself "to sense the true condition of others, honestly facing their pains,"^{xi} as Thurman says. It was my wish, my work to help them to be free from their suffering.

A few years ago, I met a woman who had been a psychotherapist for 35 years and had become an Episcopalian nun. Mary Macrina said practicing psychotherapy pushes spiritual growth – at least if you are awake and aware, if you practice from your heart.

I remember being told by a teacher long ago that empathy was a logical process, one didn't really feel what the other person was feeling and it could all be done from the head, not from the heart. Well, that just wasn't my experience. I felt things in my body and I cared about the people. I worked from my heart.

We all have a natural, in-born ability to be empathic. Like other abilities, there is a wide human variation in empathy. Some people are very attuned to others and other people have significant deficits in empathy. But we all can be empathic and we all can develop our empathy. Resonant empathy is experienced even by infants. We react to the non-verbal emotional communication around us, becoming tense when others are tense for example or anxious around others who are anxious.

Observation and self-awareness can help us to understand others' emotional communication without absorbing it. You can learn to see tension and anger without becoming tense and angry and without dismissing the other's feelings. This practice helps increase compassion

When you fully attend to other people and empathize with their suffering, it can be like being refined through fire. We need courage to face our own and others' suffering. Yet it is essential to face and accept suffering in this life.

Work as a psychotherapist taught me a lot about people and about myself. Like many of us, I had to learn to be compassionate with myself and care for myself as well as to care for others. I learned that I could face deep despair, intense rage, and I didn't have to claim it as my own. I didn't have to respond with defensiveness, but could stay open, curious and caring. I needed to understand my own feelings and my own motivations in order to be as open and attentive to the other as I could.

I found a need for a more intentional spirituality, for a religious community, and for spiritual practice in order to find a way to accept and make sense of all the pain and suffering. For me, yoga and meditation, participation in a religious community and prayer all have led to greater acceptance, deeper happiness and a stronger faith.

There are many ways to grow compassion. Christian evangelist and church planter, Steve Sjogren wrote a book called *Conspiracy of Kindness*. He encourages "servant evangelism." He gives away bottles of water or packets of sunscreen or free car washes. He will take a team and go into a public place, like a fast food store, and clean the bathrooms. He writes about the importance of both giving and receiving kindness. For Sjogren, the Christian message is about serving other people.

At WellSprings Congregation, where I worked, some folks participated in a group, “Not So Random Acts of Kindness.” One man said, “Now, when I have a bad day, rather than trying to get something for myself, I do something for someone else and I feel better.” As a psychologist, I, too, found that if I went to the office feeling distressed, I would soon forget my distress when I attended to someone else.

Each of us can practice acts of kindness daily. Sometimes, we can see the ripple effects of kindness practice. Ken Beldon, WellSprings’ lead minister, had a practice of leaving \$10.00 at a little local café to pay for the next person’s meal. What most interested me was observing the effect Ken’s action had on the staff of the café. One young man said, “Wow, people really do care.” The staff saw people’s surprise and gratitude. They participated in the giving. They relaxed and smiled when they told us what they saw. One man accepted the gift of a meal and then left \$50.00 for the congregation. He wanted to spread the kindness.

It doesn’t take being a psychotherapist or giving away money to engage in acts of compassion. Buddhist psychologist, Lorne Ladner, points out, “The ideal of compassion is not feeling bad for what we cannot do; it is joyfully and energetically doing all that we can for others in any given moment.”^{xii}

Once, I had a simple conversation with a man who was also waiting at a bus stop. He was clearly a man with developmental disabilities. He asked me, “Are you a counselor? Because counselors are the only people who talk with me.” Sometimes, just talking and especially listening is both expressing compassion and helping to further develop our own empathy and compassion.

There are meditation practices for increasing compassion such as the Buddhist loving kindness meditation. Other meditations include envisioning all those who have loved and nurtured us, all those who have been kind to us. Accepting and appreciating kindness given to us can increase our compassion. We can practice being curious and non-defensive.

Compassion increases in the world when we increase our own compassion. In your order of service today, are some resources for increasing compassion. Let us practice the meditation, "Invoking the Presence of the Beloved."

Please center yourself. Take a long slow, deep breath. Let it out slowly. Let your body and mind relax. Connect with your longing to be held in unconditional love. Bring to mind the image or sense of a person, a spiritual figure or a deity you associate with compassion. You may see the face of a beloved family member or a dear friend. You may see an image of Buddha or Jesus, Mary or Kwan Yin or you may call to mind an all-loving, all-merciful God.

With a silent prayer, ask this being to be present with you. Look into eyes that regard you with understanding and complete acceptance. Place your attention on your heart and experience this compassionate being as absolutely present and available, wanting to be with you.

Now imagine this being's presence as a radiant and boundless field of light. Visualize and feel that you are surrounded by this warm light, held in this being's loving embrace. Let your hurt and fear, pain and sorrow dissolve into this merciful presence. Allow your entire body, heart and mind to release into this loving awareness.

Let yourself be filled with this compassionate presence and know that you, too, can contain the radiant light of compassion, can become the compassionate presence.^{xiii}

(Adapted from Tara Brach)

When you are ready, take another deep breath, open your eyes and return to this room. May we all become embodiments of compassion. May this love guide us. Amen.

ⁱ Thurman, Robert. "Foreword" in *The Lost Art of Compassion*, Lorne Ladner. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2004, p. ix.

ⁱⁱ Armstrong, Karen. *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Armstrong, Karen. *The Great Transformation: The Beginnings of Our Religious Traditions*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, p. xii.

^{iv} Armstrong, p. 392.

^v Armstrong, p. xii.

^{vi} Armstrong, p. xiii.

^{vii} Armstrong, p. xiii.

^{viii} Armstrong, p. xiv.

^{ix} Armstrong, p. xiv.

^x Armstrong, p. 393.

^{xi} Thurman, pix.

^{xii} Ladner, Lorne. *The Lost Art of Compassion*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2004, p. 23.

^{xiii} Brach, Tara. *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*. New York: Bantam Books, 2003, pp. 219-220.