

## **Opening words**

“We humans do not understand compassion. In each moment of our lives, we betray it. ...We know ...its worth, yet in knowing we then attach to it a value, we guard the giving of it, believing it must be earned.... Compassion is priceless in the truest sense of the word. It must be given freely. In abundance.” Steven Erikson

## **Opening music**

Indigo Girls, The Girl With The Weight Of The World In Her Hands <https://youtu.be/0BIOQCC-GtY>

## **Moment of Reflection**

“Let us not look back in anger or forward in fear, but around in awareness.” – James Thurber

## **Turning Compassion into Action for the New Year Shannon Anderson**

I have a confession to make. Sometimes I find it very hard to be compassionate. Don't get me wrong – I have no trouble feeling compassion for broad demographics of people – those living with disabilities or mental or physical health issues, people of color, immigrants and refugees, people living in poverty or the homeless, the politically or socially oppressed, or those without clean water or a safe environment to live in. It's quite easy for me to be compassionate toward people I have never met, assuming without any preconceived notions that they are deserving of my compassion. I have a strong affinity for our second UU principle on a broad and spiritual level. But beyond the demographics, it is the everyday interactions that test my level of compassion and empathy for others who are not like me or do not think or behave like me. The fact that my mom often shows up late, or that my brother has difficulty with his finances. The times when a co-worker rushes through a project, only to send it to me for too much editing and use of my time. The times when someone cuts in line at the grocery store or speeds driving down the street. Those that drive those big trucks that make too much noise. My neighbor who leaves his dog out on a rope tie only to bark incessantly at everyone who walks by. The people at the bar at the corner who drink and smoke too much. And the list goes on. Many day-to-day human interactions test my level of compassion and force me to acknowledge that I often don't know the reasons for the way that person may be behaving the way he or she is and to be compassionate requires a level of understanding about others I may never obtain.

And even for those demographics of people I do care deeply about, I often find it difficult to go beyond donating to organizations or otherwise finding ways to truly be compassionate towards them in a meaningful way. This time of the year it's easy to go down your end of the year giving list as if you're checking off items of a to do list, rather than actively contributing to the causes that the money goes to – poverty alleviation, food security, affordable housing, immigration reform, civil rights, and the like. It is often

difficult to go deeper as compassion requires – to find the time or perhaps to avoid the excuses.

In preparing for this talk, I read a lot of pontifications from people who write or talk about the distinction between being compassionate and being co-passionate. As we have been discussing over the past few weeks, compassion is a trait of empathy – or really sympathy – towards the position someone finds themselves in, either because of actions that person has taken or in many cases because of no act of their own. It is a broad belief set surrounding the principles of equity, inclusion, justice, and opportunity. It comes from acknowledging your privilege, and then being able to set aside that privilege to see others as equals. To act intentionally with love. It is recognizing the plight of others, whatever that plight may be, and wanting that plight to no longer exist. But being co-passionate requires more – it requires you to effectively walk in the shoes of another, to experience what they are experiencing, as that is the only way to understand how to be effective in your compassion. A co-passionate action could be as simple as serving lunch to the homeless or visiting the elderly in a nursing home. It could be sitting down with someone different than yourself and listening to them – really hearing them - without talking back.

Some in our fellowship are co-passionate by trade – teachers, therapists, and health care workers. Some in our fellowship are co-passionate by volunteer activities or just in the day-to-day interactions I was talking of before. I admire all of you, and you inspire me to take a step of self-reflection on how I too can bring more compassion into my daily life.

As many of you know, my day job involves working on climate change, and addressing the impacts of Wyoming's coal mines and power plants. As the world migrates away from coal, the environment and the global climate benefits in very important ways. However, there are people left hurting too – the miners and coal company employees who built a life digging up a product very few want to buy anymore. In my line of work there is this concept of a just transition – a way to transition the energy economy of the United States and the world in a way that provides justice for workers and communities where fossil fuels have been extracted and burned. As the new presidential administration readies to start governing, expect this just transition phrase to be heard a lot in places like Wyoming, Illinois, West Virginia, and Kentucky, and in D.C. It has already been loudly stated by the incoming Secretary of Interior, a woman who models this concept in her daily life. In accepting her nomination, Deb Haaland stated, “Let it be known: Our Interior Department will fight to address climate change and environmental injustice. We will empower communities who have shouldered the burdens of environmental negligence. And we will ensure that our decisions will once again be driven by science.”

But, as wonderful and welcome as these words are, I struggle with the concept of just transition almost daily. The phrase is often too amorphous to do anyone any good. For me, it goes back to that difference between compassion as an abstract set of beliefs to a class of people you have never met and compassion as something that directly

applies as actions toward another human being. It is much easier in the abstract sense to say we should fund job retraining for coal miners. It is much harder in reality to find a coal miner who wants to be retrained and welcomes your actions of support. And to some extent, I also struggle with offering compassion to miners who built a living off of an industry that is so environmentally destructive, an industry that is not compassionate to our earth's water, air, or climate. These individuals are sometimes hateful toward me and the organization I work for, and do not reciprocate any compassion I may offer them. But then I also feel guilt knowing that I make a good salary and obtain employment benefits from a job that indirectly – and sometimes directly – is an affront to their salary and employment. In the end, there is a tension that can't be overcome by broad concepts of justice or compassion.

Another part of my day job that runs into my personal life is our state's movement for food justice and food freedom. If you're wondering how food can be just and free, don't worry you're not alone. But during these times of some of the worst COVID outbreaks in the country at meat packing plants, immigrant farmworkers dying of pesticide exposure, and our family farmers and ranchers being land rich but cash poor, the food industry is facing a major reckoning with its lack of justice and compassion.

A ProPublica article came out this past Monday describing in great harrowing detail how COVID has exposed the socio-economic and political problems of our nation's food system. An excerpt of the article says, "A new company, which would become Tyson, reconfigured the work, slashing wages and demanding faster labor in tighter quarters. When workers across the Midwest balked, the industry turned to immigrants and refugees from some of the most vulnerable parts of the world. It was a population for whom exploitation was also an opportunity, and desperation silenced complaints."

I have been reading these stories for months now. Every new one of these articles seems worse than the last, and they all render me speechless, often in tears, and wondering what the heck I can do about it sitting in my home hundreds or thousands of miles away from where the latest meat packing COVID outbreak is. Buying more local food, yes, that is something I can do. Advocating for policies and state spending that enhance consumer choice and facilitate local purchasing, yes, that too. But overcoming the complete lack of compassion in the meat packing industry? Ensuring that immigrant laborers aren't exploited by the system that creates most of the food Americans eat? That one is a bit harder.

Unfortunately, compassion can cause you to feel a pressure that you are not doing enough, making you feel hopeless or lacking power. But if you are forgiving of yourself, and if you have faith in others to act with you, there is always hope. When faced with whole systems that, at their very core, are built on exploitation and injustice, it will take all of our combined compassion to bring them down.

We may not be able to uproot every socio-political system to build a more compassionate world, but all of us can bring more compassion into our daily lives and our interactions with others. And we can all use our power of the purse to donate to

organizations that create justice and buy items that are created with justice as a part of their main ingredients.

Building on the other talks this month, and especially Cal's from last week, I have been reflecting that perhaps one of the best things one can do to maintain compassionate action is to stop and think before reacting. This goes for turning annoyance and anger into reflective compassion as you meet another human or interact with others. It also goes for purchasing that carton of eggs or that bag of coffee – read the label, and stop and think.

My former colleague Megan, co-founder of the Edible Prairie Project in Gillette, was featured in a Modern West podcast last week. She tells us “You’re not a passive actor. You’ve got purchasing power, you’ve got the ability to change the food system and build the food system that you want. Everybody can take ownership of their role in the food system, because we’re all a part of it. And I think just realizing that it’s not just the farmers, it’s all of us.”

So, as we turn into the new year and the time of resolutions and reflections, I am hoping we can all move forward together and hold each other accountable to be better and more compassionate and co-passionate. I am hoping this month's theme continues into the new year to make us contemplate how our actions affect others and how we can be better humans out there in the world. It is certainly not easy, and we all could use a little bit more compassion from ourselves and to ourselves. I know I could.

### **Closing words**

“I would like my life to be a statement of love and compassion—and where it isn't, that's where my work lies.” - Ram Dass