Why We Need Compassion and How We Can Nurture it in Ourselves and Others?

Victor Ashear, December 13, 2020

Jewish people are celebrating Hanukkah now and Christians will soon be celebrating Christmas. I learned from NPR yesterday that Hindus have a similar “festival of light” holiday at this time of the year. Perhaps it is compassion as much as any practice, that brings the light of hope into the world. Last week Lisa Grutzmacher give us a nice overview and introduction to our monthly theme of compassion. As we continue this morning, here are some questions I hope to touch on: Why do we need compassion in the world now? Why is compassion a part of every major world religion? What does practicing compassion have to do with being a person of faith? How can we enhance our ability to become more compassionate? What can we do to engage the world more compassionately?

As Lisa mentioned, compassion comes from the two Latin words *com* (with) and*pati* (to suffer). It literally means, “to suffer with.” Compassion involves more than empathy, which is to feel what another is feeling. Compassion also involves taking action to alleviate the suffering of another.

Compassion seems to be part of the hard wiring of our brains. Almost all of us would leap to save a child running into the street towards oncoming traffic. We would not stop to think about it. It appears likely that compassion like this serves to enhance the survival of our species. Compassion is also central to a spiritual life as I hope to show. As people of faith we can, and perhaps feel an obligation to, cultivate this natural tendency?

Leaders whom we admire the most embody compassion as a central aspect of character. I would include in my list Dorothy Day, Gandhi, Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, John Lewis, Brian Stevenson, and others. And among Unitarians the names of Florence Nightingale and Albert Schweitzer come to mind as models of compassion. I am sure you can name some yourself. In our admiration of these heroes we hold up compassion as a supreme virtue, and the people who embody compassion as the most worthy role models.

I am a psychologist and it has been my job to listen to and address the suffering of others. My professional duty to my clients is to be compassionate. Because I was fortunate to receive help for my own suffering while I was in training to become a psychotherapist it facilitated my ability to approach my clients with compassion. There is a connection between compassion towards oneself and the compassion we show to others. I will say more about this later. Some people feel the need to turn away from the suffering of others because they expect to be overwhelmed by the other’s suffering. I believe that the more familiar we are with mental and physical suffering, both in ourselves and in others, the less we feel the need avoid it and the more comfortable we are in addressing it.

I regard it as both an honor and a special moment when a client chooses to share personal suffering. I have found that when I am able to be fully present to the suffering of another, some healing often occurs in that moment. Compassion promotes healing and helps to enhance connection with others. I was in my late teens when I felt this very strongly. My dad had always led the Passover Seder with a large gathering of family. On this occasion, my dad suddenly felt ill. About 20 family members were gathered around the table enjoying the holiday, when it came to an abrupt halt. I instinctively followed my dad into the bedroom where he was lying down. I don't remember what ether of us said but I remember vividly that I was very attentive to his physical pain and his suffering. After a few minutes quietly talking together, miraculously his suffering lifted. My dad stated he was well enough to return to the table. Even though I was bewildered at the time, and remain bewildered about that event, it convinced me as much as any other that I wanted to become a therapist.

Karen Armstrong, the well-known and respected scholar of religion said this about the practice of compassion:

… those who have persistently trained themselves in the art of compassion manifest new capabilities in the human heart and mind; they discover that when they reach out consistently toward others, they are able to live with the suffering that inevitably comes their way, with serenity, kindness and creativity.

Armstrong issued a challenge to religious leaders and to the world at large. She believes that compassion is needed now more than ever in order to counteract violence, environmental degradation, poverty and injustice. In her book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, she said:

The religions [of the world] should be making a major contribution to what must be the chief task of our day: to build a global community where all peoples can live together in mutual respect and where the powerful do not treat other nations as they would not wish to be treated themselves. If we do not achieve this, it is unlikely that we will have a viable world to hand on to the next generation. Any ideology – religious or secular – that breeds hatred and disdain for others is failing the test of our time.

Armstrong continues:

All faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality and that it brings us into relation with the transcendent.

What makes this so? We say that love is divine. When we act in loving ways we embody what is most sacred and of greatest importance. Compassion is love in action.

Compassion is central to our UU faith. Our second UU Principle states that we affirm and promote, “Justice equity and compassion in human relations. According to our sixth principle we aspire to, “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” In our fellowship during every service we sing “Spirit of Life” which emphasizes compassion: “Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.”

Part of the reason people of different faiths have been at war with each other is because of a tendency to regard one’s own religion as uniquely correct and all others as false. However, a thirteenth century Sufi said this:

Do not praise your own faith so exclusively that you disbelieve all the rest. If you do this, you will miss much good. Nay, you will fail to realize the real truth of the matter. God, the omnipresence and omniscience, cannot be confined to any one creed.

And I would add that even agnostics and atheists could acknowledge that when it comes to an overarching explanation for the origin of the universe and of life there is much we don’t know, “String Theory” not withstanding. No religion and no scientific disciple have a total corner on the truth.

Yet, every major religion, and even ethical humanism, teaches compassion as a central tenant. That is something just about all agree with. Confucius was identified as the first religious leader to articulate compassion as a religious principle. When asked what principle ran through all of his teachings he said, "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you."  Similarly, many of you know the story of Rabbi Hillel. A religious neophyte asked to be taught all of Judaism while standing on one foot. The essence of Judaism is, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” was the rabbi’s reply. The same guidance is found in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Jesus carried the principle to a higher level when he proclaimed, “Love your enemies.” The leader of Tibetan Buddhism, H.H. the Dali Lama has said often, “My religion is compassion.”

The Hebrew word for compassion is *ra-cha-mim* and it literally means, “that which is related to the womb.” While empathy is the process of feeling what it might be like to experience what another person is going through, compassion goes a step further. Compassion asks us to act to assist another to relieve suffering. Returning to the Hebrew word for compassion, we can think of a mother carrying her baby in the womb as a part of herself and then caring for it post partum, as if an extension of her own body still. All who nurture a baby must rely on compassion in attempting to understand the baby’s needs so that one can respond to them adequately. A baby cannot communicate with words and doesn’t come with an owner’s manual.

The Buddha lived about 2400 years ago and discovered a path to inner peace and peace in the world. He taught meditation on the “four immeasurables:” The first being loving kindness, the desire to bring happiness to all; the second being compassion, the desire to liberate others from pain; the third “sympathetic joy” or taking delight in the happiness of others; and the fourth “even mindedness” the capacity to love all beings equally. It has been pointed out that during the Axial Age, roughly from 800-200 BCE the religions of the time, Hinduism, Confucianism, Judaism, and the Greek religion independently identified compassion as a central focus all sought to promote. Here is Armstrong again:

…. [just about all] faith traditions agree that compassion is natural to human beings, that is the fulfillment of human nature, and that in calling us to set ego aside in a consistently empathetic consideration of others, it can introduce us to a dimension of human existence that transcends our normal self-bound state…. The fact that this ideal surfaced in all [major world] faiths independently suggests that it reflects something essential to the structure of our humanity.

When we act compassionately, we are less focused on our own egos, more focused on the needs of others and more connected to them. Compassion seems to be basic to our nature as spiritual beings and appears to be universally acknowledged.

Armstrong observed that throughout history, religions have been a force both for good and evil. In spite of the fact that religion has been the cause of warfare and other forms of violence against those who fall outside the faith, religions also emphasize kindness to strangers and being a “Good Samaritan.” Remember that the Good Samaritan helps a stranger, someone who is not part of his tribe. That is what makes the story so meaningful.

Our country and our world are very divided now, as all of us know. In addition to clashing of ideologies and values, there are great disparities in the distribution of wealth and resources. Although we have the Internet we remain more and more alienated from each other and more mistrustful of those who appear different and/or hold different views. Some nations and other groups have the desire and the power to bring about significant harm to other nations. We are all aware of those who regard the solution to this danger in terms of closing borders and disenfranchising people seen as different. “America first” became the cry of the isolationists in our country. Similar populist cries are heard in parts of Europe, South America and Asia.

Armstrong has taken the opposite approach to isolationism, nationalism and populism. She has advocated applying the Golden Rule on a worldwide basis.

This is what her “Charter of Compassion” movement is all about. Our Opening Words this morning are from the Charter. Armstrong among others has pointed out that the Golden Rule, much like the principle of compassion, is also a core principle of all the major faith traditions. She writes:

Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow human creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

Armstrong’s views are closely aligned with our UU principles. Is it any wonder she was invited to give the Ware Lecture at UU General Assembly in 2011? Here is the goal she said she is striving for:

…it seems to me, quite clear, that unless we now learn to implement the Golden Rule globally so that we treat all peoples, all nations, as we would wish to be treated ourselves, we're not going to have a viable world. This is the task of our time, to build a global community where people of all persuasions can live together in harmony and respect.

In her book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Armstrong provides a guide for personal transformation. She chose 12 steps in order to emulate AA. She believes that most of us are “addicted” to our egos and our base desires for food, gain, sex, avoiding harm, and the other drives associated with what she refers to as our “reptilian brains.” If we are to become more compassionate we need to rise above these drives.

Armstrong tells the story of the young Buddha to be. The child was sitting in a field and he noticed a spot where the plow had passed, leaving behind some dead shoots of grass and insects killed by the plow. The boy felt a deep pang of grief as if a relative had died. This moment of empathy took him out of himself and he then felt joy because he had discovered the release from his ego. He was transported to a different level of consciousness. Thus it was through empathy that the boy received an insight that led to the development of Buddhism.

We don’t have time to review all of Armstrong’s 12 steps today but we can touch on the first 3. The first step on the path to a more compassionate life is to “learn about compassion.” The Buddha taught others about enlightenment once he had found it. He set as a goal the end of suffering for humanity. Confucius taught to help others acquire what you want or have yourself. We learn about compassion, referred to as “*ren,*” by taking care of others beginning with your family members. The wider the circle of ren grows the more one learns about compassion. We have reviewed how Judaism and Christianity emphasize compassion as a way of life. The first of the12 steps is to learn what the religion in which you were raised, if you were, has in common with others about compassion. We see how our UU Principles align with other faiths in this way.

Step 2 is called, “Look at Your Own World.” Armstrong reminds of the “hero’s journey” as as described by mythologist Joseph Campbell. The hero undertakes a journey of discovery, making oneself vulnerable to danger and enduring challenges. The hero does this in order to foster a vision that is brought back to the community in order to improve it or save it. Armstrong invites us to take this journey. See what our community, our country and our world are in need of. You can begin by asking what those closest need from you. Is each member of your family supremely valued? How can you help to transform your workplace to become more compassionate? Who in your workplace mostembodies compassion? Can you learn from that person? What can we do to enable our schools to teach compassion to a greater extent? What has our country done in the past on a compassionate basis? What can we do now? Are we willing to help countries that have less resources than we do?

Step 3 is “Compassion for Yourself.” Armstrong tells the story of Rabbi Albert Friedlander who taught that the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” includes the part about loving yourself. Friedlander grew up in Nazi Germany. As a child his classmates belittled him for being Jewish. His way of coping was to make a list of his positive qualities. He told himself that he was not what the Nazis and the other children said of him. He vowed that if he survived the Holocaust he would use his positive qualities to make the world better. Those who knew him have regarded Friedlander as a very kind and compassionate spiritual guide. When we are compassionate to ourselves, it shows us how to be that way with others. We can benefit from making a list of our positive qualities just as Friedlander did. I created an exercise like this in my self-acceptance group that I used in my work at the VA. It can be a powerful tool. Likewise we can approach our own misdeeds with compassion and that too can help us be more compassionate about the misdeeds of others.

Armstrong asks us to be accepting of our own anxiety and sadness and not berate ourselves for having them. I would agree. And we can’t manage and overcome our emotional challenges if we don’t begin by accepting them and ourselves compassionately. This is also how psychotherapy works. If we are going to transcend our ego through compassion towards others we need to begin with self-acceptance and self-compassion. Perhaps paradoxically as we enhance our compassion for others our happiness grows as well. Armstrong recommends practicing a self-compassion practice every day. This doesn’t need to be complicated or long. For example, in a relaxed pose you can repeat the phrase, “May I be happy, may I be well, may I be free from suffering.” You can also imagine yourself surrounded by people who love you. Or you can do as Rabbi Friedlander did and make a list of your positive qualities and rehearse it to yourself.

We have seen that all the major faiths and humanism have held up compassion as a means to a better life and a way to contribute to a better world. Armstrong tells us this message is more needed now than ever before. If you agree you can go to the Charter for Compassion website and you can read *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life.* You can also listen to or read the Ware Lecture she gave at UU General Assembly. It is on the UUA website. I wish you all well on your journey of compassion.