

The Compassionate Mind

A message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By The Rev. CJ McGregor

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One quick announcement before we move into our message this morning. We have officially moved on from our month of messages with the generosity theme. Can I get an AMEN from the congregation? Our theme over the next month is compassion and it won't ask you for anything except to take some time to reveal compassion for yourself, others, and our world. You might know, as expressed through my Sunday messages and newsletter articles, that for about a year now I've had a great interest in the primitive mind. That fight or flight mind, the survival of the fittest mind, the mind that creates reactions from us that are fed by fear or that someone is going to get what we think we need, that mind that lacks civility, the mind, well, of our current administration.

I've been studying the work of Dr. Paul Gilbert a professor at the University of Derby in the United Kingdom and a mental health researcher. Gilbert reveals the evolutionary and social reasons why our brain reacts so readily to threats. Because of this tendency, it's easy to slip into anger, fear, and depression, and compassion can be difficult for us. And so, primitive mindsets are characterized by a feeling of urgency, high stakes, rigidity, and repetitiveness. We try to put new brain competencies into old brain tribalism.

The human instinct to survive is our most powerful drive. Since animals climbed out of the primordial muck and as our early ancestors rose from all fours to walk upright, evolution has been guided by its ability to help us survive and reproduce. Just about everything that humans have become serves that essential purpose, in how we think, what emotions we experience, and the ways we behave and interact with others.

Our emotions have also evolved to our greatest survival benefit. So-called "hot" emotions, such as surprise and disgust, are experienced instantaneously and powerfully. These emotions signal an imminent threat to our survival which then initiates urgent action in response to its cause. In contrast, "cool" emotions, such as joy and love, typically take longer to be felt and are usually less intense initially because there isn't a pressing need to experience them strongly or right away.

The way we think and the emotions we feel that have survival value then produce behaviors that increase our chances of survival. Our "fight or flight" reaction may be our best-known expression of our survival instinct. This response set is triggered when we (and all animals) perceive a situation as a threat to our existence; our sympathetic nervous system activates rapid emotional, psychological, and physical changes. Emotionally, we feel either fear or anger intensely. Psychologically, our senses are heightened and we're able to make faster decisions. Physically, we get a shot of adrenaline, our heart rate increases, blood flow is diverted to essential parts of the body, and we experience increased strength and stamina. Without these essential changes, our primitive forbearers would have died.

But is our survival instinct failing us? Our fight-or-flight reaction worked well for many millennia. The most common threats to humans remained fairly simple and obvious, for example, the threat from a wild animal or a rival tribesman. Vanquishing the threat through fighting or distancing it through fleeing, our survival was ensured. Unfortunately, what worked as cave people doesn't necessarily work for us today. Life that has evolved as humankind has become more civilized and as technological advancements have changed our individual, social, and work lives. So what does this have to do with compassion?

Research has shown that our brains are hardwired to respond to kindness and compassion as well. Far from fostering emotional weakness, compassion subdues our anger and increases our courage and resilience. Wisely used, compassion arms us with the strength to pursue genuine happiness, peace of mind and peace in the world. Sounds very Unitarian Universalist to me.

I was talking with Carol Heilsburg this week and she reminded me of a great example, a story, of compassion that is hardwired. It started out as a typical day at the zoo. For Craig Demitros, lead curator of primates, his usually peaceful lunch was ruined that day when, to his horror, he became aware of an unforeseen life-threatening situation. A little boy whose name has never been revealed climbed and fell over a barrier, landing twenty feet down into the gorilla habitat. An 8 year-old female gorilla approached the motionless child and carried him about 75 feet, across a stream and to a log away from the other animals. Demitros rushed to the scene with two of his colleagues and when they looked below, they were horrified to see the gorilla that was carrying her own 17 month-old baby on her back, had the 3 year-old boy wrapped around her right arm. From their vantage point, the gorilla stood with her back to the other animals and seemed to rock the child back and forth lovingly. She did eventually set him down and join the other gorillas inside. As the child regained consciousness, zoo staff and paramedics descended the barrier, stabilized him and carried him away to a waiting ambulance. Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that this female gorilla saved the life of this little boy. Compassion as instinct must be hardwired.

Compassion grows out of our sense of connection to others, and the place that most of us experience that most deeply is in the communities we create together. And if we are able to cultivate compassion, we create deeper and more meaningful communities. Many years ago, I was struck by a piece in the Unitarian Universalist World magazine by the Rev. Bill Schulz. His final line was this: "What the world aches for is not louder voices, but kinder hearts." We are good at being loud voices. Sometimes for very good and important causes. But how kind are our hearts? Developing a kind heart, or cultivating a heart of compassion, maybe the most central task of the religious life. Compassion is not pity. Pity allows us to keep our distance. But the word compassion comes from two Latin roots that literally mean "to suffer with." True compassion requires that we see the other as equal to, and indeed part of, ourselves. It's not enough to be sorry that they are suffering. We must feel their suffering and want to eliminate it if we can.

Compassion is the foundation of the Golden Rule – and some form of that rule is found in every major religion of the world. We are told to want for others what we want for ourselves. And just as we ourselves don't want to suffer, so too we shouldn't want anyone else to suffer. Compassion allows us to feel the connection between us in a way that softens and opens our hearts. It would be nice if something so important were easy to cultivate. But religious historian Karen Armstrong reminds us that it's a difficult, life-long spiritual journey and practice.

I spent a day in Port Charlotte last week with my colleagues. We discussed compassion and kept returning to the work of our colleague Karen Armstrong and her TED talk from 2008.

Armstrong followed up with a little book called *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. I think she realized that telling us how important it was to put compassion at the heart of our faith and our life was not enough – we needed some help on how to do it. She's convinced that humanity is suffering from an addiction to egotism. So she created her own 12 step program to help us fight that addiction and learn how to cultivate compassion.

(All further references are drawn from Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life by Karen Armstrong, Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.)

She points out that compassion is at the heart of every faith tradition she has studied. But religion has been used as a tool to judge and conquer other human beings more often than it has been used to cultivate compassion. Maybe the reason that religions emphasize compassion so much is precisely because it doesn't come naturally to us. We have that old, reptilian brain that tends naturally to competition and survival. But with her vast knowledge of history – and religious history in particular – Armstrong also insists that we have a natural and indwelling tendency toward altruism and compassion. It just takes a lot of work to override the first in order to live out of the second. We must actively and intentionally nourish our compassionate nature and resist our tendency to judgment, competition and self-interest. Her book is a how-to manual.

I want to name all twelve steps this morning, and expand on a few that have especially helped or challenged me. Armstrong suggests that we should take them one at a time, practicing each one until we have made it a part of who we are and how we live in the world before moving on to the next. Some steps could take years of work. This is a life-long journey, not a morning's education. Her first step is simply to learn about compassion. She traces the development of the golden rule through each major religion and the emergence of compassion as a central value in each tradition. And she encourages us to look to our own faith traditions for their teachings.

Step two is simply then to look at our own world. What are we seeing, in our families, workplaces, communities, country? Where could we be making a difference?

Step three is to have compassion for ourselves. I want to say more about that one because it's harder than it sounds. In Buddhist meditation there is often a call for “compassion for all sentient beings, beginning with myself.” It's a reminder that we can't have true compassion for others until we develop it for ourselves. I have a lot of resistance to this step. I'm convinced that most of our “bad” behavior – our aggression, our anger, our judgmentalism – is rooted in our self-judgment, our self-hatred. To give a very simple example. If I'm running late, and angry with myself for running late, I'm much more inclined to get angry at anyone who slows me down. . . . whereas when I'm on time, or when I've forgiven myself for being late, I don't have those reactions. I'm calmer, and kinder.

You know, in a question and answer session with the Dalai Lama once, someone asked him about how to work on self-hatred. He didn't understand the question, because he had no framework for understanding that concept. Can you image feeling like that, how liberating it would be? When we are open and compassionate toward ourselves, it softens our heart. We are

less self-protective, less prickly. When we have compassion for our own weakness, and compassion for our own suffering, we have a better understanding of the weakness of others, and are more inclined to wish that they not suffer. It starts here.

Step four is empathy. We need to open our hearts to the pain of others, and feel it as if it were our own. This is hard, especially with people who we feel on some level deserve their pain because they've done such bad things. Haven't we all said "well, he was asking for it." Can we hold the tension in our hearts of judging the action, but still feeling the pain of the one who suffers for it, and not want them to suffer? Here I really see the way the steps build on one another, because if I have compassion for my own suffering – even when it has grown from mistakes and bad choices that are my own fault – then I'm more likely to feel compassion for another's suffering – even if I think they have brought it on themselves, even if I dislike or mistrust them.

Step five is mindfulness – familiar to any of you who have done any Buddhist practice. We need to pay attention, notice what we experience and how we react. Mindfulness allows us to gain more control over those reactions. Maybe we have one of those old, reptilian responses – feeling threatened, or angry. But if we stop and pay attention to it, we can choose, with practice, not to identify with those reactions, to say "This is not my true self." We can notice how anger or resentment make us feel bad, and cause us to focus on ourselves instead of others. Once we notice that we're happier when we are reactive, less angry, we may be motivated to learn to respond differently.

So mindfulness leads naturally into step 6, which is action. Armstrong suggests making a resolution to act even once each day according to the Golden Rule, and treat someone else the way you would like to be treated. And then turn it around, and also refrain from doing something you would not want done to you. Applied to driving habits, this would transform the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Or think about your daily interactions, your daily speech. That quick comeback that has an edge to it? That bit of juicy gossip you're dying to share – only with a trusted friend of course. Would you want it shared if it were about you?

Step 7 is to recognize how little we know. I think this one's especially hard for Unitarian Universalists because we don't have a foundation of humility in our tradition. Armstrong writes "Religion is at its best when it helps us to ask questions and holds us in a state of wonder – and arguably at its worst when it tries to answer them authoritatively and dogmatically." We get that when it comes to theology, but when it comes to social and political issues, we are so sure we're right that that we may not know how to listen to anyone with a different perspective. We have to be willing to learn from people, even when we disagree with them.

Step 8 then follows right on the heels of that, asking us to consider "How should we speak to one another?" So often we use dialogue and discussion as an opportunity to score points and put forth our own opinion. What would happen if we allowed dialogue to open our minds and help us learn from each other? Can you imagine a presidential debate where the focus was on learning, rather than winning?

Step 9 asks us to have concern for everybody, including those that we think are "not like us." We are simply too interconnected to think we can ever thrive at the expense of someone else. Armstrong suggests spending a day being mindful of every person who contributed to your life that day. Think about it for a minute. Put on that shirt made in China and think about the

workers who created it. Sit down to breakfast and think about every person involved in bringing that slice of toast to your table. Do that for even five minutes and you can't help but feel connected and concerned. Step ten is knowledge. Learn about other people. Distrust hearsay and stereotypes. Develop appreciation. Step 11 is recognition. Recognize yourself in others. Recognize that of the holy in others.

And Armstrong's twelfth step – and remember, these all build on each other, so we're not expected to try this one until we have slowly and consciously practiced and internalized all the others – is to love your enemies. There's a moment in Wendell Berry's wonderful novel, *Jayber Crow*. The title character, Jayber, is a bachelor barber and something of a philosopher in the small Kentucky river town of Port William. He's cutting the hair of a man he particularly dislikes, and struggling with how to respond to that man's hateful and racist remarks. The dialogue goes like this: "It was hard to do, but I quit cutting hair and looked at Troy. I said, "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you." Troy jerked his head up and widened his eyes at me. "Where did you get that crap?" I said, "Jesus Christ." And Troy said, "Oh." it would have been a great moment in the history of Christianity, except that I did not love Troy."

Every religious tradition calls for us to have compassion, not only for those we think of as our own people, or the people we happen to like, but for all people, difficult though it may be. But "loving" our enemies is not necessarily about having warm fuzzy feelings toward them. The book of Leviticus (which Jesus was quoting when he told his followers to love their enemies) says "you must love your neighbor as yourself." In that context it is invoking not emotional language but legal language. The word translated as "love" was used in legal treaties to indicate a promise to be helpful, to give support and aid, even when it one's not in one's own immediate best interest to do so. So, we don't have to feel all mushy and sentimental toward our neighbors, but we do need to learn to wish for their well being and regret their suffering. We must see in those neighbors a reflection of ourselves, and want for them what we want for ourselves.

This is not work for the impatient, and it requires great courage. Whether or not any of us choose to undertake it is a personal matter. I share it with you because of my conviction that compassion is at the heart of true religion, and because I crave for my impatient, judgmental heart to be otherwise.

May it be so.