

November 9, 2014 – Compassion I

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

The dew of compassion is a tear.

– Lord Byron

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Reading by Marc Ian Barasch¹

Being able to feel our way into another's soul, to sense what is going on behind their social mask, is the passcode to kindness. A friend gave me a quote a few months ago, a one-liner from the Jewish sage Philo of Alexandria. "Be kind, for everyone is fighting a great battle." I've found, with a little practice, I can at least get this far.

"Sorry about the wait," the cashier apologizes. It has been a long time. She's been moving like molasses; the line at her register creeps forward by millimeters. According to the unwritten laws of retail, I'm entitled to a small display of petulance. Instead, I try to take her point of view. She's been on her feet all day. She's harried and underpaid. The job is repetitive, and impatient customers treat her like an appliance.

"Hey, it's okay," I tell her, looking back at the line. "There's only one of you and ten of us; we've got you outnumbered."

She smiles, shooting me a relieved look, and I feel good to have made someone's day easier. I've been lately trying to do this — a compassion miniaturist — as much as I can. It's a trick of sorts — I feel like a kid with a new magic kit; the multiplying rabbits, or more, the disappearing thumb — but amazingly, it works almost all the time.

1 from <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/quotes/quotes.php?id=19467>

Theodore Parker, the 19th century Boston Unitarian minister, Transcendentalist, and abolitionist is a particular favorite of mine. Parker's theology was based on what he determined to be the great truths at the heart of Christianity. Parker felt it important and more authentic to separate those truths from the *life* of Jesus and the history of Christianity. He elucidated those truths in 1841 in a famous sermon called "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity."

Parker said, "It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid."

Instead, the great truths of Christianity are eternal, he argued; Jesus merely gave voice to them. The truths of Christianity derive their authority from their own truthful character, not from the fact that Jesus preached them.

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I love that quotation because, for me, it opens the door to the possibility that all world religions capture some truths, that they hold in common. What are the eternal truths of all religions? What are some of the threads world religions hold in common? Those two questions could prompt a lifetime of sermons. Today I want to begin to explore just one great truth the world religions hold in common: an emphasis on and pursuit of compassion.

This is the first of four sermons exploring compassion. The others will be scattered throughout the year. To set the stage for future exploration, and to guide our

contemplation today, let us consider the fact that all major religions state, in their particular ways, what has come to be known as the Golden Rule. Listen to the words of 17 world religions or traditions:

Confucianism (the first known source of this sentiment): Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no resentment against you, either in the family or in the state.

Islam: No one of you is a believer until you desire for your neighbor that which you desire for yourself.

Buddhism: Treat all creatures as you would like to be treated.

Hinduism: This is the essence of morality: Do not do to others which if done to you would cause you pain.

Christianity: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Judaism: What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor – that is the basic law; all the rest is commentary.

Sikhism: Do as you desire goodness for yourself as you cannot expect tasty fruits if you sow thorny trees.

Baha'i: If your eyes be turned towards justice, choose for your neighbor that which you would choose for yourself.²

2 That first batch of quotations comes from https://www.google.com/search?q=the+golden+rule+in+all+religions&client=firefox-a&hs=PYJ&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&channel=sb&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=0pJdVLzxNMTbsATdh4LODw&ved=0CCYQsAQ&biw=1366&bih=640#facrc=&imgdii=&imgrc=-1xBcZev3Xzx_M%253A%3BuTWs3ZoQVGDamM%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252F2.bp.blogspot.com%252F-cAHwMt1WARY%252FUpz22ZbUsSI%252FAAAAAAAAYtk%252FTHCRxneh7c%252Fs1600%252Fgoldenrule_G

Taoism: Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

Zoroastrianism: That nature alone is good which refrains from doing to another that which is not good for itself.

Jainism: A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.

Native American (Of course there are many Native American tribes, and they are all different. These words are from Black Elk.): All things are our relatives. What we do to everything, we do to ourselves. All is really One.

Shinto: Be charitable to all beings. Love is the representative of God.

Sufism: If you haven't the will to gladden someone's heart, then at least beware lest you hurt someone's heart, for on our path no sin exists except for this.

Wiccan: An it harm no one, do what thou wilt.

Yoruba: One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to see how it hurts.

Unitarian Universalism: We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Each of those expressions represents some form of reciprocity... that doing good for you creates good for me. Hurting you hurts me.

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Notice that none of the expressions qualify whom to consider our neighbors. Our neighbors are not just people who live on our block, or Maine, or the U. S. Not just Unitarian Universalists. Not just Democrats or Republicans or people who voted for or against the bears in the last election. Our neighbors are not necessarily those who think like us, dress like us, or look like us. Our neighbors are not even necessarily people. Our neighbors are all living creatures.

Notice, too, that although each expression represents a central moral position of a particular faith, none of the expressions has to do with belief. Practicing compassion is central for monotheistic, polytheistic, and non-theistic faiths alike. Instead of pronouncing an article of faith or a statement of belief, the expressions address behavior – or the way we are called to be in the world.

And notice, lastly, that although there are connections between some of those religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for example; or Confucianism and Taoism; or Hinduism and Buddhism), the moral value of compassion emerged among disparate people in distant locations all across the world. It emerged at a time when sharing thoughts and values with people distant was nearly impossible. Thus, I believe the moral value of compassion sprang forth from the human heart, a value shared across cultures and religions all over the world.

We are called to treat our world with kindness and compassion. I believe doing just that – every day in every way we could – would be spiritual practice enough for most of us.

There is a great irony where compassion is concerned: Too often religions forget the common morality that weaves them together. Too often people forget the value of compassion applies to all living creatures and, instead, apply it only to those like themselves. Too often, religions get twisted up by matters of belief, allowing points of religious disagreement to sidetrack them from living into the calling to be compassionate to their neighbors. How tragic that something that could unite us is easily pushed aside.

In 2007, religious historian Karen Armstrong was awarded a prize from TED³. Armstrong, in her study of the world's religions, had become both fascinated with how each one held compassion central – at least in lip service and in sacred texts – and alarmed at how thoroughly compassion had been swept from most religious practice.

The rise of religious fundamentalism and violence is the most extreme indication of how religious peoples have jettisoned compassion. Compassion has become unpopular, Armstrong says, because “religious people often prefer to be right.”

Yet Armstrong saw the power and potential of drawing people from all faiths all over the world together, organized around their shared moral value of compassion. So with her prize money, Armstrong launched the Charter for Compassion, an organization that brings people from all over the world together for trainings, sharing their experiences and stories, disseminating resources and information, and providing a vehicle for communication.

Their vision is this: “A world where everyone is committed to living by the principle of compassion.”

Here is the text of the Charter for Compassion:

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

3 TED stands for Technology, Entertainment, and Design – a nonprofit organization whose goal is to spread good ideas for positive change and also to fund projects that would have a significant beneficial impact on the world.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.⁴

One can go on line and sign the Charter for Compassion as I have done. Or one can simply learn and devote oneself to its practice. Simply. As if it were simple to open our hearts to those who seem scary, mysterious, or annoying.

As if welcoming the stranger is ever simple.

As if exploring the reality and unpredictability of pain and suffering is ever simple.

⁴ One can find the charter and vision statement and more information about the Charter for Compassion's work at their website: <http://charterforcompassion.org/>

As if witnessing the suffering of another being is ever simple.

As if the seemingly small action of speaking kindly and reassuringly to the harried cashier is ever simple.

“He ain't heavy; he's my brother,” the choir sang a little while ago. Hmm. Actually he *is* heavy. *And* he is my brother. And my heart will not allow me to abandon him here, even though I do not know him, even though I disagree with him, even though he seems so strange to me. That is never simple.

Such actions require attention, focus, commitment – and the faith that one's small words and actions could make a difference. I believe they can make a difference.

In 2010, three years after Karen Armstrong won her TED prize, she published a book called *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. Step one is to learn about the centrality compassion has in the major world religions. So today we have already worked on step one. Later, I will explore compassion from other angles, with the goal of lifting it up as a spiritual practice each of us can undertake, regardless of our individual theologies.

Karen Armstrong says, “...*compassion is possible... Even in our torn and conflicted world some people have achieved heroic levels of empathy, forgiveness, and 'concern for everybody.'* We are not doomed to live in misery, hatred, greed, and envy...Any one of us can become a sage, and avatar of compassion. When we feel cast down by our pain and by the misery that we see all around us, we should experience that dejection as a call to further the effort...Instead of becoming depressed by our repeated failures, we should remember that constant practice does indeed make perfect and that if we persevere, we too can become a force for good in the world.” (*Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, p. 192.

I fall short of the mark plenty of times. I get busy and preoccupied. I get impatient and exasperated. I get scared. I get overwhelmed. Perhaps most of all, I go numb to all the

pain in the world. Yet, even though I stumble, I believe the pursuit of a world governed by compassion is one important way little people like us can take back our power and effect healing change in our world.

I leave you with those thoughts and with one tangible way to practice compassion. It's called guerilla compassion, and it comes courtesy of Sharon Salzberg. She suggests we silently bless the people in line at the bank, at the supermarket, and in the cars next to us in traffic.⁵ Maybe we could silently bless the people sitting in the seats around us in the movie theater or at a restaurant... or at church. Each blessing is a secret sanctuary offered to a hurried, harried, and unsuspecting world. We could start on the drive home. We could even start right here in this moment. Whether such a blessing changes the person we bless, who knows? But offering the blessing is sure to change us.

May we each go forth and bless the world.

Benediction

1 Corinthians 16:

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

⁵ Paraphrased from: <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/quotes/quotes.php?id=19462>