

UU PRINCIPLES II: COMPASSION!

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

In my first sermon in this series I talked about the way that our Unitarian Universalist Principles speak of Justice. Today I want to highlight the way that our Principles also call for us to act with Compassion. The very word compassion has gone somewhat out of style in recent years as we have come to use the word love to cover what earlier we might have distinguished as compassion, empathy, and sympathy as opposed to the more erotic passionate love. A word that first appeared in the Koine Greek of the Christian Testament, Agape, covered a more giving and caring love than the passionate Eros or Philos, the philosophical love. Only our second Principle directly mentions compassion, as an essential part of the way we understand human relations, along with Justice and Equity, but I would like to suggest to you that respect and acceptance of one another, true community, and our awareness of interdependence also depend upon compassion.

Compassion, now most identified with feelings of sympathy for another person, has a broader sense of engaged caring inspiring action out of the awareness of our interdependence and interrelatedness. Compassion is not just about our feelings for one other person, it is our attitude toward the rest of the universe and all life. The love of St. Francis for the creatures arose out of that great sense of compassion that he felt for all beings. That agape love of the New Testament is all about compassion with a capital C!

Now we could use the word love to talk about those engaged feelings, but compassion, the act of feeling with the other, really is more specific and easier to distinguish from the many other feelings of love that we may have toward certain other people such as lovers and friends, spouses and siblings, parents and children. Compassion is more of an awareness of our interdependence with all life, all existence, a feeling that we are all connected, all in this together.

We do not need to feel erotic or even philosophical love toward another being to respect his, her, or its inherent worth and dignity. We do need to feel agape or compassion to really appreciate and accept another person, especially one who may be flawed, physically, emotionally, or by his or her actions. Compassion is also an attitude with which we can approach the world, we can choose to see others, the other, the universe with compassionate eyes rather than just with critical judging eyes.

As Unitarian Universalists of an earlier time, we would have talked about tolerance, especially for other beliefs. Today we more frequently talk about acceptance, recognizing that one can coldly tolerate much without respect or acceptance. The language of respect and acceptance comes out of our compassion for the other beings of the universe.

When Our Principles call us to encourage spiritual growth and promote the search for truth and meaning, it is out of our feeling of connection with other beings. This is how we deeply value, respect, and accept others, by encouraging their growth and development, by walking alongside them on the pathways of our common journeys to discover wisdom and truth. Similarly, our commitment to the democratic process and to use our own consciences and support others as they follow their consciences is a sign of valuing, respect, acceptance. We recognize that we each have a voice, we each have a conscience, we each have something to say about any matter based in our own beliefs; we are led by our own consciences.

Compassion is not just about taking care of other persons in time of crises, it is about accepting and respecting others and sharing a deeply

felt perspective on reality. In times of crisis, our compassion connects us all.

Both locally and globally, we have felt the pain of death caused by the actions of other human beings this week past. It is easier for us to feel compassion for the family and friends of the young woman who died as a bank robber's hostage here in Stockton than for the robbers who also died, but they all left behind people who are suffering. Unless we knew somebody on the Malaysian Airliner shot down over Ukraine, our feelings are probably somewhat less intense, but I would expect most of us to have had some compassionate feelings toward all those families who lost loved ones in another expression of senseless violence. Those feelings of compassion, of agape love, that we feel toward those who are suffering are at the core of our humanity, but they are also at the core of our UU Principles.

Our 6th Principle, *the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all*, is especially dependent on compassion, for no community can succeed where there are no shared feelings, no common appreciations of the sorrows and joys of life. Though they sometimes lengthen the service and present planning challenges and other headaches for ministers, the sharing of joys and concerns is one of the best-loved parts of our UU services in many congregations. Shared joys and concerns help to create community precisely because they engender feelings of compassion, of commonality, of interdependence.

Our 7th Principle, *respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part*, goes on to recognize the connections between all persons and beyond that to all existence as well as to proclaim our full participation in the natural universe. We are not separate from nor above the rest of the natural world, we are fully a part of it, strands of the web of all life. We have compassion for all existence because we are fully a part of all creation. We feel with the whole fabric of life because we are it and it is us. Whether string theory describes existence or not, the metaphor of interwoven threads or strings for the fabric of existence is perfect!

Even the psychopathologies that describe the most disturbed persons suggest the idea of disconnections from the fabric of society, existence. There are those who experience dissociative episodes and states, brief disconnections. There are those who experience deeper sociopathic and psychopathic states, disorders including a disconnection from society involving a loss of feeling with others, a loss of compassion. To have a compassion connection is the ordinary state for humans and perhaps all of life, but to be without feeling for others involves deep psychopathology. Soldiers are trained to disconnect from the enemy, to see them as without value, for to take the life of one with whom we are linked is to do harm to ourselves. Isn't PTSD often likely a result of that disconnection soldiers are trained to make in order to destroy our own kind? Meaningless violence is a disturbance in the force, in the natural order of the universe, a tear in the fabric of existence. War and violence tear the threads apart leaving us somehow less than we were and less than we ought to be. Those who feel too sharply the pangs of violence cannot help but be disturbed. When compassion is lacking, we become disconnected and our society cannot sustain community, existence itself comes to be at risk.

Our Principles call us to Justice and Compassion, because both are needed in our lives, our churches, our society, and our world. Justice without compassion is meaningless, as is compassion without justice. They are both essential for the health of each of us and of every human gathering, community, society. Even the animals evidence the balance of Justice and Compassion, but they are the core of human society and of our principles. Without justice and compassion our world will tear itself apart, and it is at the hands of those lacking or denying one or both that the world so often is damaged. One of the greatest risks to our world is from those who claim a religious right to differently define Justice or Compassion, denying one or both to large segments of the population.

Our Principles call us to seek the highest philosophical understanding of Justice and Compassion, in line with the highest core values of world religions and philosophies which have stood the test of time. Those who would proclaim violent crusades or jihads just as those who declare wars

of greed and acquisition must have their values tested in light of universal truths, for too often it is precisely justice and compassion that they lack.

Jesus's great commandments were to love God and to love another like we love ourselves. Other religious founders and exemplars had similar messages. The idea of loving others, respecting, accepting, and having compassion for others appears frequently in core religious teachings as well as philosophical teachings for the healthy society. The Golden Rule teaching to do unto others as one wishes them to do unto you is a basic teaching of religious systems and societal systems of organization. It is a matter of justice and compassion, as well as good if not always common enough sense!

In a world where we don't need to often see others, in which we can connect with others through our computers and smart phones, in which we can order food, books, music or almost anything else to be delivered to our door or instantly downloaded, and soon to be delivered by drones, what does compassion mean? We can spend our days engaged in educational or amusing apps, skipping the news of the day or having it delivered in byte-sized pieces, engaging others through our devices only when we wish to do so. In our cities we often do not know our neighbors. We may work in cubicles and can choose to attend mega-churches where we can have as little contact as we wish with other beings. Even as we approach a human population on earth of 8 billion, we can practice a far greater level of isolation and experience a kind of loneliness far greater than those who settled the high prairies. Compassion requires a level of engagement with others that has become optional. In so many ways we can shut ourselves off from the world for moments, hours, days, or for our lifetimes. Our Principles call us to compassionately engage with others, to look into their faces, talk and walk with others, to share this human journey through the universe.

Sometimes we talk of the ways that head and heart have alternated in driving our religious tradition. At times the Unitarians were religious philosophers requiring little of their hearts or bodies to sustain their lofty

religious ideas. The Universalists and transcendentalists were always more deeply embodied beings requiring a religion that fed and sustained their hearts. They were keepers of compassion, those who felt deeply the needs of humanity, individual persons, and the world. For balance, the Unitarian heads needed the transcendentalist and Universalist hearts. Today we are a religion of both head and heart, though there has often been a tension between the two! We need each other just as humanity and the universe need Justice and Compassion. Ideals of justice mean nothing if they are not embodied and practiced in the acts of loving engagement.

The next episode of this series considers the ways that our UU Principles create the possibility of deeply meaningful and enduring communities and the idea of community itself. I invite you to continue exploring the ways that our UU Principles lead you to Justice and Compassion, and how they may help us to create and sustain community!

Shalom, Salam, Amen and So be it!