

## **SPIRITUALITY AND COMPASSION IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM**

### Part II

This is part II of this year's August series on Spirituality in Unitarian Universalism. Last Week I talked about Spirituality and Justice, today I will be sharing ideas about Spirituality and Compassion or Love in UUism, and next week I will be talking about the importance of a Spiritual understanding of Justice with Compassion in Unitarian Universalism. As I mentioned last week, the amount of baggage that is carried when we talk about spirituality often leaves me feeling it is preferable not to talk so much about spirituality but rather to simply focus on what it means to live a good, healthy and responsible life. Try to remember these sermons if you want a sense of the spiritual undergirding my life and preaching! I will try harder to mention the spiritual throughout the year as long as you understand that this is not the Christocentric spirituality that has become popular for some Christian groups to promote, but is a more earth and space centered awareness of the interconnectedness of all things!

It is out of that sense of interconnection that I want to talk about compassion. We could talk about love, but I like the sense of caring for and about that is suggested in compassion. The Greek Christian term *agape* has the same connotation and is popular in Christian churches. When we talk about compassion or *agape* love it is clear that we are not talking about *eros* erotic love, or *philos* philosophical love, but about a caring connecting love. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles hint at the importance of compassion, especially in the first and seventh principles, respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all persons and the interconnected web of all existence, but the principles really are stronger in describing our commitment to justice. For me it was in studies of Creation centered Spirituality with Matthew Fox that I really came to embrace the combined importance of compassion and justice, though I think I always felt and knew it.

I will speak more about the connection between justice and compassion next week, but today I want to talk about the ways that we are called to practice compassion toward our fellow beings. And yes, while many Christians believe that stewardship of the earth means the freedom to use all natural resources including plants and animals for human benefit, I take our calling to be more along the lines of protecting the earth and her plants and animals and even inanimate resources. I do admit that in many cases I have not done all I could to protect life and resources, and that I have chosen my own well-being over that of another being fairly frequently, especially over certain insects. Yet, I do believe it is our responsibility to think about our choices and do what we can to mitigate the damage to the earth that we have caused. So I have planted trees and bushes, refrained from hunting other than with a camera, cleaned up my messes as well as I could, and generally tried to leave the world better for my passing. So yes, I believe we are called to practice compassion toward all our fellow beings on the earth and wherever else we might venture.

It is relatively easy to speak in general terms about practicing compassion in regard to friendly animals and people. It is not hard to be compassionate toward those beings that already are inclined to like us, such as most dogs and horses and people. Even cats and goats are usually friendly enough to easily justify a positive response. Bulls and Bison, Bear and Lions, Elephants and Rhinoceroses and Hippopotamuses and wasps and mosquitoes present somewhat more of a challenge. Most of us believe that the large animals ought to be protected but perhaps not free to roam everywhere. We are not all so protective of wasps and mosquitoes and cockroaches! Yet, while our relationship to the earth is critically important, and our commitment to preserve and protect species is also critically important, I really want to focus today on our relationships with other human beings. I will therefore leave the other matters for another day.

I am tempted to say that I will now address the effort to practice compassion toward difficult people, but that is not really fair either. Practicing compassion is really a way of life, a way of relating to ourselves, our family, our friends, and yes, even those who are difficult!

There is no quick formula for dealing with those who are difficult, but I do believe it is easier to deal with even them if we regularly practice compassion toward all our fellow beings. Most religions include teachings about practicing compassion toward others, some include even minute insects while others mainly talk about how we relate to other human beings. This is not a new concept and some versions of this golden rule are thousands of years old. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love your neighbor as you love yourself.* There are many similar sayings, some phrased positively and others negatively, but the idea is clear that we ought to treat others as well as we would treat ourselves. Throughout history, the golden rule has frequently been set aside for another kind of golden rule, one in which he or she who has the gold, rules, but the disparity between those with the gold and everyone else has rarely been so great as it is today in our country.

The idea of the golden rule is that we are all better off if we treat each other fairly and with compassion. One alternative is that some end up with all the riches and the rest of us struggle to get by. It will be particularly interesting to see what happens in the coming election with one rogue 1 percenter trying to take over.

In any case, the paradigmatic story of compassion is the parable of the Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke, wherein the priest and Levite pass by the man who was robbed and beaten, while the despised Samaritan stops to care for the man, going out of his way to return him to health. Through this parable Jesus is thought to challenge the cleanliness rules of the priests and Levites when weighed against human needs, teaching that people come first.

I guess the big question with compassion is how far we are willing to go to reach out to others. Here at the church we frequently get homeless individuals coming asking for handouts or for work that would lead to some kind of payment. Some of them are quite insistent, and most of them really would have a hard time finding and keeping any kind of job. More often than not, I give them a few dollars, sometimes in exchange for a little bit of work cleaning up the parking lot or pulling weeds, and usually I talk

to them about going to St. Mary's to get more help. Obviously we have limited resources and with the little I can give them these individuals have to ask at many places to get by. Our society is not very compassionate to persons who are out of work or who cannot hold a job or who are addicted or have other problems. There was a time when our society would do much more to care for such individuals, but now there is not much of a social safety net. If the republicans ever succeed in dismantling the Affordable Care Act, there will be even more of us having a difficult time.

I'm not really sure of when it happened, because I was always taught to help others in need, but our society is currently oriented only to help those who are successful. It isn't even those who help themselves, because lots of people who work hard cannot afford a decent standard of living. We need a living wage and we need to expand affordable health care rather than cutting it back. Those things would help us move toward having a compassionate society. Currently, we have a competitive capitalist society in which only the really successful win, and they win at the expense of the rest of us. No other nation now or historically has had such a wage disparity between managers and owners and the rest of us. The top 1% have most of the money and control most of what happens in our country, while the other 99% suffer. Cuts in governmental programs to help the poor have been frequent in recent years, mostly to offset tax cuts to help the rich. Churches and other non-profits have been left to take on an ever growing effort to care for the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill, and those unable to find work. Most churches do what they can, but the needs are just too great. Governmental entities would be only too happy to let churches and non-profits deal with the poor and those with disabilities, but the need is just too great.

With such huge needs, what can we as members of a small older congregation do to show our compassion for those in need? We probably need to start by recognizing our limitations in energy and trying to figure out how our efforts can be most effective. Sometimes those who come asking for food or money can be a little scary. Some of them have been on the streets a long time and they often only rarely are able to clean up, wash clothes, or get a shower. Many of them have some kind of mental illness,

addiction, or other disability. Many of them have stories of problems they have had with shelters or food kitchens, and some can be violent. Some will lie, cheat, or steal to get what they need. Many are just down on their luck and don't have the resources to turn things around. Some were thrown out of their families when they came out of the closet.

Compassion is about caring for and about people who are different from us, about risking to try to make a difference. Compassion starts with ourselves and our families and friends, but then it reaches out to all those around us. It is this compassion for others that brings out the best of our humanity. We may not be our brother's or sister's keepers, but we can be their healers and heroes. This is what we can do to make our world better, more sane, more compassionate, and more just.

As a congregation we already share our plate offerings with worthy groups once a month. With the gifts given to my discretionary fund we help several people in need each year. Those who are volunteering at St. Mary's are also helping to make a difference, to show compassion to those in need. There likely will always be a greater need than we can even think about addressing, but there are probably many things more that we could do now. After the service and coffee hour today, I'd like to invite anyone interested to come back into the sanctuary to talk about the sermon and share ideas.

As Unitarian Universalists we know that we don't have all the answers and we know that as a small congregation in a small movement we can only accomplish so much. I do believe that there is more that we can do and that we are called to live out our compassion as much as we are called to work for justice. Let's think together and talk about what more we can do! I challenge us to love more, to bring greater compassion to our city and our nation!

So may it be! Amen