



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Compassion: From Empathy to Transformation

Matt Vasko, Church Member, Guest
Speaker

June 28, 2015

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

We are probably all familiar with that ache... that feeling we get when we know that someone is suffering, and we feel as though we are suffering with them... as if it's not happening to us yet *is* happening to us at the same time. We are one with them in spirit. Either we've felt what they are feeling before or have felt something so similar we could easily place ourselves in their shoes. We think, "That was once me," or maybe, "That could be me." We are right there with them and we feel pulled to relieve their pain, to do whatever we can to make it better.

I invite you to reflect upon a time when you felt that pull. Perhaps a family member was sick, a close friend had lost a loved one, an acquaintance was having a bad day, or a stranger was hungry. What were some of the feelings it evoked in you? What happened next? Perhaps there was immediate action we could take and did take that turned things around for them. Maybe we couldn't think of what to do, or we did something and it didn't help, or we started to try to do something but stopped ourselves for whatever reason. But the ache happened. We were there. We felt what they felt. We suffered with them and we were moved to act.

The feeling of connectedness is the empathetic response. Science has taught us that the same mirror neurons fire in our brain when we perform an action as when we observe that action being performed by another. Neuroscientists like Marco Iacoboni of UCLA believe this is the neurological foundation of empathy. We observe a behavior and our mirror neurons respond as if it we were experiencing it ourselves. This is empathy. The stronger our empathy, the more connection we feel with others.

The pull to relieve other's suffering is compassion. The word compassion comes from the Latin *cum patior*, or "to suffer with." But that doesn't tell the whole story of compassion, because compassion is suffering with the other person *combined* with the strong urge to relieve that suffering. Compassion is empathy for suffering plus a swift kick in the pants.

Empathy is the catalyst – the spark that ignites the flame. The flame is compassion. It is the red-hot tinderbox that powers the steam locomotive of action.

Compassionate action – it is a driving force for positive change. It can change pain into relief, suffering to joy and strife into peace. The power of compassion is transformative. It can feed the hungry, heal the sick, and free the oppressed. It has happened before and it will happen again. We see it all the time – people helping people. From aid organizations with big hearts and deep roots in compassion to everyday people on the street reaching out with a helping hand – yet there can never seem to be enough to cure all the suffering in the world.

What causes that spark of empathy, and what keeps it from happening? Can we fuel the flame of compassion? If so, then how? Can we generate more compassion within ourselves and outside of ourselves in the greater world?

Once in my lifetime – almost 14 years ago now – I saw compassion spread across this country like a beacon of hope and promise in a time of sudden and severe hardship and pain. Maybe you felt it too.

It was immediately following September 11, 2001. We were a nation – a world – in shock. The destruction of the World Trade Center towers and attack on the Pentagon had been brutal, horrific, and seemed to cut each and every one of us deeply and affect us personally – even if, like me, a person didn't know someone, or know someone who knew someone, who was killed or injured on that tragic day.

After all, the victims were just regular people on those planes and in those buildings. It could have been any one of us or our family members, friends or neighbors. We felt deeply for the families we witnessed grieving on news coverage. We grieved as they grieved. We ached for the loss of those brave first responders who rushed into the twin towers as they hurried others out, only to have their own lives cut short.

We could easily put ourselves there, because perhaps we had been there. I once visited the World Trade Center and stood on the observation level of one of the towers, marveling at the bustling, vibrant city below... a city that now stood still. The towers were gone now, and with them a sense of safety and security once shared by all of us.

Empathy. We all seemed to empathize with one another. Everyone was hurting and we all knew it. And out of that empathy there seemed to arise a compassionate energy that enveloped us all in a webbing of love and kindness. I've heard people comment many times since then about how we were all nicer to each other in those days following 9/11/2001. Even here in Southern California, separated by a continent from the epicenter of the tragedy, we were better to one another. We cared more deeply. We behaved more gently. We were more courteous to one another in grocery stores, at the malls, and on the freeways. We hugged the people at our offices, held hands with strangers at vigils, and moved through our days with a tenderness that said, "I know you are suffering, I care about you, I want you to be okay."

This was an awakening for me. I saw the transformational power of compassion at that time like I had never seen it before. It changed me. Now, I thought, things will be different. How can we possibly go back to the way life was after we've seen what a loving world we can create when we truly care for one another?

But with time, life returned to a sense of normalcy. Our nation's attention was diverted toward war, and within months people seemed to forget about how – for a few days – we had all cared for one another so deeply, tenderly and completely.

But I couldn't forget. It kept at me, that palpable feeling of compassion. I didn't want to change back to my old self. I liked the compassionate me more. I wanted to do what I could to make something positive come out of that tragedy. So I became a student of compassion. I read everything I could find on the subject and dedicated myself to acting upon my empathetic

yearnings. I started a volunteer group with some friends and we worked together to make the world a more compassionate place one service project at a time. And – as luck would have it – I stumbled upon Unitarian Universalism.

My wife Delphine and I started out attending the UU congregation in Studio City and then went on to join Neighborhood when we relocated to this area, and we've been members now for almost 11 years. One of the things we love about our stumbled upon faith is the set of seven Principles, and you can bet I'm especially fond of the second one – "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations."

First of all, I dig the fact that compassion is in the company of justice and equity. The structure of the Second Principle signals where compassion should fit into our lives as Unitarian Universalists. It places it right there alongside of fighting for social justice and equality. Unitarian Universalism acknowledges that part of the function of society should be to relieve the suffering of the less fortunate. It confirms that a world lacking in justice and equity must surely be lacking in compassion. The Unitarian Universalists Association began the Standing on the Side of Love campaign in 2009, because it saw that justice and equality help to relieve suffering; among which was the suffering of those who had yearned too long for the opportunity to marry the person they loved. Love is love. Justice. Equity. Compassion.

So, how do we as Unitarian Universalists cultivate compassion within ourselves and our congregations? We can start, as it says in the faith statement in our hymnals, by drawing from the wisdom of the world's religions. We respond to the Jewish and Christian teachings that call upon us to love our neighbors as ourselves. There are many references to such teachings in the Bible, perhaps most notably in the Gospel of Luke. Here, Jesus expands upon the call to "treat your neighbor as yourself" in the Old Testament by using the parable of the good Samaritan to demonstrate that our "neighbor" is anyone who is suffering or in need of aid.

As UU's we can then turn to Buddhism for further inspiration, a faith based upon the idea that we all suffer and should strive to relieve the suffering of others and ourselves. The Buddha said, "See yourself in others. Then whom can you hurt? What harm can you do?" Contemporary Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh said, "The source of love is deep in us and we can help others realize a lot of happiness. One word, one action, one thought can reduce another person's suffering and bring that person joy."

It has been argued by scholars such as Karen Armstrong in her book "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life" that compassion lays at the heart of all religions. She writes, "All faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality and that it brings us into relation with the transcendence we call God, Brahman, Nirvana, or Dao."

But we don't have to stop with religious insight. We can look to humanist traditions such as living by the Golden Rule, which philosopher Simon Blackburn points out can be "found in some form in almost every ethical tradition." The Golden Rule is essentially an expression of

empathy, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It tells us to put ourselves in the place of the other, then look back at ourselves and say, “Here’s the best way to help me.”

Then, we can continue along the humanist path to the arts and sciences. Music and the visual arts stimulate our senses and draw us into deeper connection with one another. In recent years, the field of positive psychology has produced a great deal of scientific insight into how we can cultivate compassion – which I’ll return to shortly.

If you want to see a moving secular perspective of how compassion has the power to motivate people to action, then check out the documentary “Batkid Begins” that just opened in theaters on Friday. It tells the story of how tens of thousands of people were inspired to help to transform San Francisco into Gotham City to fulfill the wish of a five-year-old boy battling Leukemia.

Where else can we search? As UUs we honor the earth centered traditions which teach us to hold the natural world sacred. We believe in the interdependent web of all existence. Since we are a part of that web, then we can be moved to respond to the suffering of anything that lies within it, be it animals or one might go so far as to say the spirit of the Earth itself. Maybe global climate change is the Earth’s way of signaling to us that it is suffering and in need of some serious compassionate action.

It seems that our UU resources for cultivating compassion are practically boundless. This being a free faith we can pull from myriad resources to find the path to the flame of compassion we find most truthful, where we find the most meaning.

A resource I enjoy returning to often is the Greater Good Science Center at greatergood.berkeley.edu. There, you can find articles on everything from, “Why Should You Love Thy Coworker?” to “Can a Pill Make You More Compassionate?” As UC Berkeley’s center for the study of the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being, the Greater Good Science Center’s website strikes a nice balance of being scientific, academic and accessible.

Part of the reason I like Greater Good so much is because their research consistently reinforces something that I have found to be true in my own life. Once I made the decision to be a more compassionate person, I discovered that through practice I could increase my compassionate response. Research shows that this is fact – through conscious effort we can become more compassionate individuals, and through our example of compassionate action, we can even increase the compassionate response of others who observe it. News to which I imagine the Dalai Lama would probably respond with, “I told you so.”

I want to leave you today with five practical tips for increasing compassion within yourselves and others.

First, See Yourself in Others

The more we see others as being like us, the more likely we are to be drawn to help them. That feeling of similarity generates a strong sense of empathy – the feeling that we are suffering with the other person.

Next, Don't Worry, Be Helpful

The fear that others' suffering will become our own can be a roadblock to compassion. Clear your path by reducing your sense of worry. The less you worry, the more likely you are to help others.

Believe in Yourself

The more confident you are that you can reduce another person's suffering the more likely you are to do it. So, believe in yourself – not just for your own sake, but for the sake of others.

Don't Play the Blame Game

Blame limits our compassion. So, be careful not to blame others for their misfortune. Keep in mind that we all suffer and that you suffer too. If you think of someone as your equal, then you are more likely to reach out to them with a compassionate and generous spirit.

Finally, Easy Does It

Be careful not to take on too much of other people's suffering as your own. Doing so can lead to a form of burn out known as Compassion Fatigue. Instead, practice the art of Self Compassion by maintaining a healthy sense of self and practicing self-care.

Though easy in theory, these tips can be challenging to put into practice and stick with, especially on our most challenging days. But it's worth the effort, because increasing our compassion can help transform our lives in a variety of positive ways. It can deepen our relationships, increase our sense of wellbeing, and help us feel a greater connection with everyone we meet. And with dedicated practice, as we grow our own compassion, we can help spread compassion in those around us, and little by little transform the world.