

Sunday Service, August 19, 2018
“Self-Compassion: May Your Fountain Be Full to Overflowing”
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2018 AUG 19 short version USH SPIRITUAL EXERCISE OF SELF-COMPASSION

Opening words:

“You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.” Buddha

ENTER QUAN YIN FROM BACK OF Fellowship Hall

SERMON PART ONE

Were you taught that it is selfish to think of yourself, to take good care of your needs, perhaps even a sin to be confessed? Were you taught you needed to be all things to all people, to measure up to others’ expectations, make do? I want to tell you a story of messages I got as a little girl. I am sure there are comparable examples for little boys perhaps about only tasting the bare bones of your emotions or simply not ever crying.

When I was a young child and we went back to TN for one week in summer, I remember being amazed that my Grandmother and my Great Aunt said they preferred the fried chicken back bone to other pieces, so “ya’ll go right ahead,” they’d say. I’m not sure at what age I figured out that when feeding a large family one cut up chicken, they took less so we could have more. But that was the message of womanhood I grew up with. Do without. Your needs are less important than others. Maybe the boys heard, “Suck it up. Be a Man.”

Yet my own experience of following this guide was to dry up, to burn out, to reach a point where I had no resilience to bend and not break. This is not just a female result. It happens for men too, many of whom die young as a result. What went wrong?

Well that brings me to my topic today of self-compassion. And what is compassion anyway, never mind self -compassion?

Compassion is “feeling as an equal with the universal suffering in others, including yourself.” Jesus guided us saying, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” What kind of love is it if it denies pain, avoids facing ones struggles, judges against a standard of unreachable perfection, punishes for every failure to live up to the standard? Not a kind love for sure, not compassionate love.

Loving compassion stands with pain, stands with suffering, stands with failure, stands with acceptance as we are. Compassion is a holding and witnessing that is calm kindness. And acceptance. And as Buddha said, no one is more deserving of this loving kindness than you are. And thus we have self-compassion.

During a tough period in my life, I developed an image of myself as a “wedding cake fountain” but there was no water overflowing in me at the time, contrary to this image before you which I sketched. I knew that to overflow, I had to figure out how to keep myself full of the waters of life first. I had to tap into some water source for myself. Then I might joyously overflow as I desired. And sustain giving to others as well as myself.

Years later I found a Goddess image that complimented this fountain one. It was the Asian Goddess Quan Yin. I have dressed today to give you a faint idea of her as she is often represented in art. She is the Goddess of Compassion shown sometimes riding on her dragon which she tamed with her Love, always with a jar of water in her right hand, “divine nectar of life, compassion and wisdom, and sometimes in the left, a willow branch [which is fluid enough to bend and not break] to sprinkle the divine nectar of life upon devotees as to bless them with physical and spiritual peace.” This morning you too can bless yourself in this Compassionate Way. On our chalice table next to Quan Yin’s vase is bowl of our communal water from Water Communion. If you wish when you come forward to light your candle, dip your fingers into this loving water and sprinkle yourself. Replenish yourself, just as you are, all that you are.

Turning Inward: “And now let us turn to a time of silent meditation and prayer. In this silence perhaps you will imagine Quan Yin gently pouring Universal Loving Kindness into your mind and heart.

PART TWO THE SERMON:

To begin again, first let’s get the word “practice” out of our way. Some of you have told me that you think of spiritual practice as mandatory Mass, Confession, rosary beads, High Holy Day services, Kosher kitchen, Buddhist meditation retreats or daily meditation for 20 minutes. And you say, “I don’t relate to those as a Unitarian Universalist. So I don’t get it. I don’t have spiritual practices.” So let’s reframe what we mean here.

When we have used the words Spiritual Practice in this series, we mean what you do to replenish your spirit, your deepest self, your fundamental life source. What actions do you take either outwardly or inwardly to develop and enrich your inherent (Universal) worth and dignity? However you do that replenishing is your “Practice”. Its not a religious obligation. It is your loving gift, hopefully given regularly, to yourself to replenish your spirit, your essential nature. So we have Life Giving, ie Spiritual, Loving

Gifts, ie Practices. I hope that works for you as one Unitarian Universalist explanation of "Spiritual Practice".

Then let's talk about the value of Self-Compassion in our lives and in our world. Recently Rev Heather on her fb page gave one very important social justice reason when she quoted Zawn Villines who said

"Self-care isn't about face masks and flower baths. It's about protecting yourself from the steady trauma this world offers. If you fall apart, then you can't resist. If enough of us fall apart, then it really is over. Practice self-care. It's not selfish to take a day off to spend time with your family, to stop reading the news, to decide not to educate yourself about the latest crisis. Do what you need to do to protect yourself, even if it means taking a few days off from doing anything at all. A short break is far superior to being completely unable to function and completely useless...."

But having the ability to sustain working for justice through self-care is not the only reason for being self compassionate, nor is self-care the full extent of it. Self – compassion changes the way we feel about ourselves, opens us to give ourselves our own best love. This is healing and helpful to the way we manage our own lives. It leads us to greater maturity, to be able to be in the world in a wiser way.

[Psychologist and compassion researcher Kristin Neff says Self-compassion is...](#)

"...being touched by and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness. Self-compassion also involves offering nonjudgmental [understanding](#) to one's pain, inadequacies and failures, so that one's experience is seen as part of the larger human experience."

The science goes on to tell us that giving yourself such loving gifts has tremendous benefits to your health and well being including reducing depression and anxiety by 1/3 to 1/2 and even reduction in unhealthy dietary habits. We more likely see ourselves as one with all humanity in self-compassion which makes us happier and kinder to others. For better or worse, we're all in the same boat!

If your fountain is dried up, it can't overflow. Plus you feel lousy when you are dried up. Self-compassion is about the natural cycle of life energy, circular like our Earth water cycle. Think of clouds forming and rain falling. Tap a source, fill up, overflow, return to the source. The Source here being the larger human experience, Universal Truth or God, however you define Source. Repeat the cycle over and over.

Here is a small personal example. Recently I have been working to improve my fitness using the feedback of a Fitbit. See this is mine, it records how many steps I take and my heart rate and sends data to my smart phone so I can't lie to myself about how active I

am. So I had 3 open days and during that time I planned to write this sermon, at least the first draft. But the third day came, I hadn't started it. I woke not feeling well, so I didn't go for a walk then. I decided I better focus on the sermon as a priority. And I did. And I worked all morning and into early afternoon until I had a first draft. And then I was too spent to exercise. I only had 600 steps of my 5000 goal and no cardio active minutes. So my self-criticism started in one me, "Oh you're not exercising, eh. You'll fall off the horse and never keep your goals again. You always have an excuse. You should do your walking today no matter. You ought to keep to the schedule you set." And on and on. I was beating myself up and not for the first time. Then I thought, "Wait a minute, I've just spent hours researching and writing about self-compassion. Now I'm beating myself up. Hey you guys – get off my back. I made my choices and I'm ok. I am not going to play your "should and ought" games. I'm going to celebrate I have a draft of the sermon. So go away." And they did.

We all have stories where we know we withheld loving kindness from ourselves. So for me it is really important and helpful to know that today science is looking at compassion and self-compassion as well. Here I generously quote Wiki and Kristen Neff, PhD. who has written several books on this topic:

“Self-compassion is extending compassion to one's self in instances of perceived inadequacy, failure, or general suffering. Researcher Kristin Neff has defined self-compassion as being composed of three main components – self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.^[1]

- First, Self-kindness: Self-compassion entails being warm towards oneself when encountering pain and personal shortcomings, rather than ignoring them or hurting oneself with self-criticism.
- Second, Common humanity: Self-compassion also involves recognizing that suffering and personal failure is part of the shared human experience.
- Third, Mindfulness: Self-compassion requires taking a balanced approach to one's negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. Mindfulness is a non-judgmental.^[2] ...Further, Self-compassion is different from self-pity, a state of mind or emotion of a person believing to be a victim and lacking the confidence and competence to cope with an adverse situation.”

Here's an example of transformed self-pity from my own life. Sixteen years ago I found out I needed open heart surgery to fix my mitral valve. My dad had died in open heart surgery. I was terrified and felt very sorry for myself. I was working on these feelings by making a collage of them. I cut out pictures of broken hearts and dripping blood, doctors invisible in masks, a hurt child and so on. I was miserable. I began to write about the feelings and what I wanted and needed. I wanted a momma, a nurturing momma to take care of everything. Then an insight occurred – perhaps we could call it mindful awareness. I had such a caring momma in me. I could be my own Nurturing Mother. So mentally I, as nurturing mom, took the hand of myself as terrified child and reassured

her that we would get the best doctors and health care and fix our heart and be well again. And we did. And thus it was.

Have you had a time when you were able to accept your own pain, your failings and be kind to yourself about it, seeing your place as one in the great community of humanity where we all experience similar feelings and travails? I hope so. And if not, begin now. You have it in you to see that your own fountain is filled. We all have a Quan Yin within.

I think you are mostly with me on this but always the big question for me is “so HOW do I actually do that?” Other researchers including Kirby have noted five loving gifts we can intentionally give ourselves to help fill our fountain. Loving kindness guided meditation, education, self-reflection, imagery and writing.

1) Loving kindness Guided [Meditation](#) involves deliberately fostering a sense of warmth and care for others and oneself. Think of hymn #131 that we often sing, “Love will guide us through the hard night.” There are many guide books and audio visual aides to use in a guided loving-kindness meditation.

And by the way, such meditations are given to every surgery patient at pre-op at the Cleveland Clinic because their research shows if people use them daily for a week or more before surgery, the patients require less anesthesia, have less blood loss, and leave the hospital one day sooner than the control group.

2) [Education](#). Simply learning more about compassion and self-compassion can increase our ability to enact it. We may find that just by being more aware of the concept, we're better able to practice it.... I hope today's reflections make all of us more lovingly aware of self-compassion.

3) Self-Reflection. When we take time to think about our own experiences of compassion, we might discover things that can get in the way. For example, we might find that being overextended lessens our access to compassionate responses, or that overly harsh expectations of ourselves make it hard to be self-compassionate. Reflection can help us discover ways to remove these blocks.”

Consider this advice from Hannah Cheatem “If you are feeling blue, paint yourself a different color.” Hannah is wise at age 8.

4) “Imagery. We often resist compassion from ourselves and even from others. It takes practice to open ourselves to receiving love and care, and that practice can begin through imagery.” Want to try it?

This will take less than 3 minutes. Try closing your eyes and taking 3 slow deep breaths. Then lightly touch your lips with your fingertips. Give your fingers little kisses if you like. Smile at yourself. Think of a person in your life who is/was very

loving to you and try to recall a specific moment with them. If you have no one to recall, perhaps you have a pet that loves or loved you or a place that is sanctuary for you. Think of that specific moment for a minute. Keep touching your lips. PAUSE. Gently open your eyes. Repeat whenever you like as a gift of loving kindness.

5) “Finally, Writing. Some studies had participants write a letter to themselves from the perspective of a compassionate friend, since for some reason it's much easier to be compassionate with others than with oneself.”

I tried writing to myself several years ago at year end when I was looking back over what I valued in my life and what I wanted to pay more attention to. I wrote the following and have reread it every year since. I called it

“Compassion for myself and others”

I am grateful for the Spirit in my life. Let me be compassionate with my responses to it and welcome Grace.

I am grateful for my health. Let me be compassionate with my habits and welcome moderation.

I am grateful for my relationships. Let me be compassionate with my path and accept theirs which are all different.

I am grateful for the bounty in my life. Let me be compassionate with the larger systems governing us, including the earth's and aware of my place in them.

I AM HUMAN. TAKE IT EASY. LET GO. I AM TRANSFORMING. BE MYSELF. MAKE SABBATH TIMES. LET SPIRIT GUIDE ME.

Your love note to yourself will be different but it is worth writing one. Maybe you'll try it this week.

Let me close with another more playful love letter that filled my fountain. I wrote this in January as a Valentine wish to myself and also sent it family and friends after doing all these things I mention.

LATE JANUARY

May you be happy today.

May you snuggle and giggle with those you love

or smiling, remember when you did.

May you see narcissus and amaryllis shoots grow before your very eyes against snowy windows.

May you buy yourself red flowers for Valentines Day and send silly cards to friends.

May you dance to lively tunes if only in your mind.

May you find your favorite chocolate hidden away and savor every roll of your tongue on its sweet goodness.

May you nap on the couch under a warm lap robe at 3PM with no alarm.

May you write a poem in your journal.

May someone stronger shovel your snow.

May you share cookies you saved "in case".

By MG Harrison 1/27/2015

Please reach out and touch the hand or shoulder of someone nearby so we may all be connected.

Benediction:

May you keep your fountain full to over flowing.

May you help others keep their own fountains full and over flowing.

May we never forget the water in each of us and all other living things, is made of the common hydrogen born in the universe at its birth over 13.5 billion years ago. We are all part of one greater whole.

May you keep your fountain full to over flowing.

Go in peace, sharing love, and creating justice.