

What If You're Not Feeling Compassionate?

February 7, 2021

For many of us, in particular the last several years, months and weeks, has been a time of anxiety, fear, over-thinking, over-worrying, and fervent praying – to name a few. For others, the past several years have not been a time for anxiety and worry and prayerful petitions; it's been a time of satisfaction, perhaps some happiness, and hope. I know the concurrent existence of these two opposing emotional states to be true because they exist very powerfully in my own immediate family.

It's fair to say most Americans agree that over the past few years, our body politic has become a great divide, where civil discourse and intelligent opinion-sharing between differing view-points have pretty much died; and acrimony, viciousness, deafness, vitriolic name-calling, and skewered judgments – on all sides of the debate, have become all too commonplace. Unless you've been successfully living in a state of war-time black out, it's been pretty difficult not to be affected by the upsetting state of American democracy and civil society we've all been living in these past few years, months, and days.

In 1968, I was in the fifth grade and fell in love with all the red, white, and blue patriotism I watched on television during the Republican convention where Richard Nixon had been nominated as their candidate for the presidency. I've been an engaged citizen ever since. Before I could vote, I listened and watched. After I could vote, I haven't once missed casting my vote in a national election.

And here we are, fifty-three years later, and the feelings I have about being a citizen and taking my role in the American democracy seriously, have not reached a state of calm and confidence that surely, they should have by now.

Because I pay attention to the multi-dimensionality of the world in which I live, and as I've grown older, I'm finding that reconciliation between differences, especially stark differences, is sometimes elusive and difficult. Take this month's theme of compassion. In the broadest sense of the term, it refers to both an understanding of another's pain and the desire to somehow mitigate

that pain. On an academic level I get it. On a common-sense level I get it. But on a soul-deep level, these days I've really been struggling.

As a Unitarian Universalist, and especially as a Unitarian Universalist minister, I am called to embrace and exemplify that set of life-affirming principles:

- The worth, dignity and capability of every human being
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process
- 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.

It never fails to make me feel better when I affirm these principles which have shaped and informed the person I am today – someone I actually enjoy spending time with! But, and there always is a but....

How do I reconcile my UU beliefs when I'm not feeling like I even want to go swimming in that existential pool of compassion that beckons to me every day?

With all due respect to my Catholic brethren, and even though I don't have any Roman Catholic blood in my veins, I feel like I need to offer my confession. And so, as a person who highly values education and learning, why am I feeling like, what looks and sounds like a lack of education and learning are part of what is causing my anxiety? Why am I feeling like deeply-seeded wrong ideas about the supposed supremacy of the Aryan gene pool have caused, and are still causing, violence and hatred against anyone who does not have white skin and genes which can be traced to a certain geographic location in northern Europe? Why am I feeling like I am not someone who sees themselves as better than anyone else, but some days I find solace in being able to articulate concisely why I don't have a confederate stars and bars bumper sticker on my car. And at the same time, I'm trying very hard to understand my own white privilege and not succumb to white liberal guilt.

One of the most difficult experiences I had while I was in seminary, happened during my 'preaching class.' It wasn't listed as a preaching class, but that's what we called it because it was where we were being taught how to craft and deliver a sermon. One of my earliest attempts had

to do with the idea of euphemisms – which was a doomed topic from the moment my untrained brain landed on it. Essentially what happened is my sermon failed miserably for several reasons; but the most important one was shared with me by a fellow classmate whose brutal honesty was like a dagger to my heart.

I had tried to pose a difficult question, along the lines of what I just shared in my confession with you, and what I heard from my peer reviewer was that to question the inherent worth and dignity of other human beings, especially from the pulpit, was something that just is not done. Wow, abuse of the pulpit! Like I said, it was pretty harsh and after the hurt subsided, I've always been grateful to my peer for being brutally honest – well maybe the honesty without the brutal wouldn't have hurt so much. But I have thought a lot about what he said.

It's been over a decade since I received that scathing review of one of my first attempts at writing a sermon, and I've had a lot of opportunities to put that advice to the test – like right now. Is posing questions about motivations; public behavior; the character, or lack of, which is documented by social media posts; and in-your-face offensiveness off-limits to liberal religionists – ordained or not?

How do we as a denomination of individuals who are actively striving to further the state of compassion, actually talk about un-compassionate behavior?

Am I the only one who comes out of a mental reverie with a sudden awareness that I'm actually thinking and feeling un-compassionate? Well I do, and so I find myself in an existential wrestling match of sorts. On one hand, I really want to be empathetic and find ways to understand the pain and frustration of other people. But then I find myself thinking, 'Wait a minute, if the shoe was on the other foot, would the individuals who are upsetting me, extend compassion to me if and when I'm upsetting them?' I want to be a compassionate person, but what if the person I want to extend compassion to sees it as a weakness to be mocked and exploited? Am I being a bad UU and an un-compassionate person when my better angel seems to be taking a break?

I mentioned earlier that within my own immediate family, we have both ends of the spectrum. My son and daughter-in-law are both law enforcement officers and I know what ugliness and brokenness and danger they deal with every single day. And as a mother, it's heartbreaking to see how this demanding work drains the love and light from the very soul of your beloved child.

It is my experience, the vast majority of law enforcement officials go into law enforcement because they are, on some level the idealists - the good guys, the ones who are willing to stand up and say no. Most of them understand themselves as the front line of defense against the ugliness and brokenness and danger that, unfortunately, is a real part of our society.

I am also very sad to say that as someone who worked in a maximum-security prison for six years, I know there are some individuals who are broken; who for whatever terrible awful reasons, are unable to find their way back. Even sadder, is that sometimes a safe healthy place for them to return to, never even existed from day one. For them, life has not been fair, right from the beginning and their chances at holistic health and civic vitality were slim to none. Even though I am a liberal trying to journey toward enlightenment, I know that life is very complicated and so complicated remedies are required. At some point, I have learned that you have to make the really hard choice to let go and let “God.”

As an unashamed progressive liberal, I have been accused of being all about political correctness, and with good reason. I do think it is important to evolve things like language, for example, the use of pronouns like the non-gendered ‘they’, and titles like Ms. I also have come to believe the extreme-end of political correctness is just that: too extreme. As someone who hearkens from the great out-West, when in the company of some who are on the cutting edge of political correctness, I’ve been accused of falling substantially short of being appropriately politically correct. And, for me, this is another example of what I find myself wrestling with: at what point is it ok to be brutally – or even just candidly honest, even if it falls short of the extreme end of political correctness and liberal compassion?

My son, the cop, describes it this way. He says, ‘mom, when you get called out to a domestic disturbance in the middle of the night and burst into a horrific situation where the two adults are on day three of a drug-induced screaming match; one is wielding a knife; the children are hungry and scared, huddling in a corner surrounded by total filth; and there is a real possibility you might become the object of a lethal attack – you don’t just stretch out your arms and say, ‘wow, it looks like someone needs a hug.’

Well, obviously, a hug is what someone probably needed at some time in their life, but is it politically incorrect or un-compassionate to say, sometimes the only thing that will de-escalate an

ugly situation is a bigger threat of violence and the commanding voice of someone who actually knows how to use a gun.

Now just because I'm saying this, doesn't mean I approve of violence-first. It doesn't mean I think law enforcement needs to use guns to de-escalate every situation. What I am saying is sometimes we liberals don't really want to hear the front-line side of the truth – the brutal part of honesty. And so how can we be compassionate when an emergent situation doesn't call for compassion?

Like I said, I wrestle with existential conundrums like this a lot – even when I wasn't a minister. How about all of you? Do you ever find yourself feeling un-compassionate? Do you ever wonder if we're born as compassionate beings? Is compassion the opposite of hatred? And since I believe hatred is a learned behavior, is being compassionate a learned behavior? What about the peace and hope and joy so many of us were looking forward to after January 20? Is it reasonable to not to want to offer compassion and empathy to those who shattered the peace on January 6th?

One of the other things I learned about being a minister while I was in seminary, is that if you bring up all these hard questions, you'd probably better offer some answers. One of my first suggestions is to think about how important confession is to the practice of Catholicism. As a Unitarian Universalist, I think we've learned modern psychology builds on what Catholics have known for ages: confession is good for the soul and so there are some mental health benefits to be gained from confessing, or just naming the truth out loud.

Maybe that's why so many of us enjoy opportunities to visit with fellow UUs and friends. Our spiritual communities are organized around a covenant – a promise to strive to be in right relationship with each other. We create places which are accepting and even welcoming of our confessions – be they in the form of rants, complaints, questions, or even prayers. To share openly and honestly, with an awareness that a little political correctness does go a long way. When you name your fears, your uncomfortable questions, your confusion, and your anxieties – especially in a covenanted UU setting, it's upon all the rest of us to hear you, to not pass judgement. Even if we may not agree with you, we must always find a way to respond compassionately first, argumentatively or with advice second. This is a good model to share with the rest of the world.

The other thing I would share with you is that, euphemistically speaking, sometimes you do have to let go and let God. Take my family for instance. As the mom, I have perfected the art of over-analyzing my children, but as they've become adults, I've had to discipline myself into not doing that any more. And when I quit over-analyzing, I'm left with..... what? Faith? Faith that I've raised my children to think for themselves. To have strong and resilient spirits? Faith they know the difference between right and wrong, and if they make a mistake, they'll learn and grow from it. Faith, that when I'm wrong, they will forgive me. Faith that when they're wrong, I'll forgive them?

Sometimes, to keep insisting we have the conversation is like putting gasoline on the fire. Instead, we must choose to walk away and trust in the faith we have put in all the right stuff, like forgiveness, the brain's capacity for intellect and common sense, and our innate ability to heal. When we calm our thoughts, worry transforms into compassion, and once again, our heart is ready to be refilled with love.

With all humility, I figure if this works for my family, it'll probably work for everyone.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I like to think about our set of seven principles as the perfect gift. I get to start each day knowing this is a gift I had searched for and had the great fortune to find. I have come to rely on the power our principles and covenant have to make me happy, to bring assurance and confidence, to remind me of that which is worthy of investing my heart and soul. They give me confidence to take pride in my beliefs and how I live my UU values – even when I express them in ways that may not pass an uber-politically correct test. This is a spiritual power inherent within a sacred gift that, I believe, will never fail me.

Most everyone does not have the transactional power which comes with a national elected office, but every one of us drawn to Unitarian Universalism actually has an even greater power – the power to choose. How blessed are we by the choice each of us made to come to this church service this morning? How blessed are we because we share so many life-affirming values? And how blessed are we to have the power to forgive – each other and even those who for, at least for now, we may be feeling a bit un-compassionate toward? Life always finds a way to break free, and with it comes all that is worthy and good about being human. May it be so, Amyn.