

Compassion (Begins with Self-Care)
Sermon preached at Shoreline UU Church

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Chalice Lighting/Opening Words

Come into the circle of caring,
Come into this community of gentleness and restfulness.
Come and you shall be refreshed.

In this human circle,
Caring is a calling.
ALL of us are called,
So come into this circle of concern.

Let loving-kindness pass through you,
Let the healing power penetrate you,
Let hope interfuse you,
And, let peace be the law of your heart.

-Richard Gilbert (adapted)

SONG: LITURGICAL DANCE

Here I am.
Feel me with you now.
I am yours.
Offering so much more.

Here I am.
Petals that unfold
Like a Flower
With mysteries to behold

I open my arms
I open my heart
Can't resist your love
Calling me higher

Here I am.
In the dark of night
Reaching out
Longing to touch your light

Here I am
Sending up my prayer
Like a child
Trusting that you are there

Nothing to hide
Nothing to fear
I feel you everywhere
Drawing me nearer

Here I am
Finding my way home
On my own
Going where I must go

Here I am
And the song I sing
From my soul
This is the love I bring

(Repeat first two stanzas)

Minister's Prayer/Reading:

Every human being is a gold mine of hidden capabilities.
We are in awe of human durability, of our power to survive extreme trauma.
May we encourage each other to use this power.
May we mirror our pronouncements and assumptions in order to prod a more objective view of ourselves - and others.
May we ask questions of one another to elicit thoughts about specific behaviors that might be causing dissension and pain.
May we question what can be done differently,
what alternate view about the discord is possible.
May we encourage each other to voice feelings and expose vulnerabilities,
to take risks on our own behalf.
May we encourage each other to find our own answers to the problems we face
and to accept the face of our humanness – our fallibility.
May we teach tools to work with new behaviors
and, test for a reality fit.
May we encourage one another to “act as if” we are worth the pain of change.

-Adapted from the words of:
Yetta Bernhard,
The Art of Selfcare in Intimate Relationships

Janet has had surgery on her hip. She can't walk for two weeks. For the first time in her life she is unable to care for herself. She is single. She feels a vulnerability that is unfamiliar. She has always been the independent sort.

Paul's wife has died. He finds himself aging and alone for the first time in 60 years. This is uncharted territory. His wife has been a good caretaker. There are many things that he is going to have to learn how to do without her. Right now, he simply finds it hard to face the next day.

Susie's grad school commencement is coming up and she wants to celebrate. But, her workload has been so heavy that she has not formed a very close group of friends in this new city that she has been in for the last two years. She is lonely . . .

You know it is ironic. I think that sometimes we think of church as the place where we come together to celebrate life – to bring our joys and hopes for the future into focus. And, it is true that we do this.

But, what is also very true is that often people come to church when they are in trouble. They want to find what is there that will give them strength – what will help them deal with the tragedy and sorrow that has descended in their life. The truth is, there are many reasons that people come to church, but often it is our suffering and despair that brings us through the doors. Or at least, wishing that life could be a little different . . . maybe more fulfilling.

I have often said that church is not for God it is for the people. On some level, our pre-Unitarian ancestors understood this basis for spiritual community. In 1648, the Massachusetts Bay Puritans wrote the Cambridge Platform – They were resisting any hierarchical structure that would organize and rule their communities of believers. Instead, churches were established as gathered communities of fellowship by the believers. Their relationship with one another was based on the idea of covenant. Covenant was understood as a promise of mutual support.

Actually, the idea of religious covenant goes way back to Israel's ancestors in the Hebrew Bible who modeled the idea after the feudal states that they lived in.

Vassal states were supposed to operate like this:

the people would pledge homage and allegiance to the landholder.

However, in exchange, they were to be properly cared for and provided for.

The key here is the arrangement of mutual exchange and responsibility.

Covenant also became this iron-age people's understanding of right relationship with God. They believed that if they pledged their allegiance and homage to God, then God's portion of the agreement was to watch over them,

guide them, and provide for them.
Covenant included their responsibility to God,
but it also included God's responsibility to them.

And, now . . .
even though we have outgrown any idea of subservience to a controlling God,
this idea of mutual responsibility continues in our own religious tradition today.
A covenant of mutual care is unarguably at the foundation of our tradition.

This conscious promise of support and care is a sacred one.
In fact, we can view it as a spiritual practice.
Actually, it might be our most challenging spiritual practice of all.
Love can seem easy and carefree at first, but eventually
it is a demand of living as difficult and rigorous as any other.
This may be why learning how to love is often one of the central lessons of religious faith.

People say that caring requires compassion.

I like asking people what compassion means.
It usually takes people a minute to answer . .

"Com-compassion means to live with-passion."
"There are different expressions of compassion."
"Compassion means the responsibility to fix things that are wrong in the world."
"Compassion means *not* fixing things. It is the ability to just simply be present."
"Peace requires compassion."
"Compassion requires forgiveness."
"Compassion means to 'suffer with' another, to walk with another who is in despair."
"Compassion is an *anti-dote* to suffering. Both giving and receiving compassion reduces suffering."
"Taking care of someone requires compassion."
"Sometimes it is easier to practice compassion with those that we do not know."

Many of us have a conflicted relationship to compassion.
And, we have received all kinds of mixed messages about compassion.
In modern American culture, women have been trained to care for others at the expense of themselves.
Women tend to take care of all the details of life, so those around them are free to live their lives to the fullest. So, often when women focus on their own health and wellbeing, they feel selfish.
Men have also been robbed of chances to nurture themselves and others due to societal prescriptions and gender role expectations.
These conditioned ideals generally move us to give out of a sense of duty and obligation.
If I just do enough, or do enough of the right thing, I will be a good person.

Sometimes IT IS easier to practice compassion with those that we do not know. Giving money to an organization for hungry children in another country is much easier than organizing for peace in our own hometown. And, organizing for peace in our own hometown can be much easier than caring for a declining friend or relative in our own home. It seems that the closer we are, the more threatened we can become by another's needs, or by our own needs.

My good friend Susan told me part of her story:

“Indeed if you are caring for aging parents, or teens, or sometimes both at the same point, you actually DO loose a sense of yourself and you don't care for yourself. When my mother slipped away into Alzheimer's, I felt so much anger and sorrow at loosing the vibrant person I had always known. If you are dealing with a parent with Alzheimer's you loose them in spirit and in person, before you actually loose them in body. And, I projected this anger onto her. I wanted to blame her. She was not present in the way that she always had been. I just kept wanting her to respond to me in a familiar way, and, it just was not going to happen.”

It *can be* harder to be compassionate with our intimates. And, it doesn't seem to matter which side of the care equation we are on: It can be just as difficult to be the one needing support, as it is to offer support.

So, how DO we find the balance of give and take?
Or better yet, how do we find balance *IN* the give and take.

A wise teacher once said,
“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

This powerful statement has reverberated for more than 2000 years.

To me, this means:

In order to love our neighbor, we *must* love ourselves –

It means that the ability to truly care for one another comes from an inner strength that can only be derived from a love of self, which then extends to another.

Now, when I say “love of self,”

I am not talking about a destructive self-focus that is *self-ish*,
but I am suggesting a deep sense of self, that is *self-full*.

We can distinguish between a self-centeredness that has no regard for others,
and an authentic self that is rooted deep inside our being.

This kind of self-love means that we must know who we are and what we need
so that we can equip ourselves to cope well with the challenges and conflicts that life brings.

Coping well with the challenges in life is the central idea of self-care.

If you are constantly being a caretaker for others and never caring for yourself,
You will end up with nothing left to give – the well will be dry.
At the same time, if self-care meant only living into your gifts and fulfilling your own dreams in
life, this would ultimately be self-defeating and you might find yourself empty and without
meaning.

As the Jewish koan states:

If I am not for me, then who is for me?
If I am just for me, than who am I?
And, if not now, when?

Famous Therapist, Virginia Satir, says that we know about self-care but do not do much about it
for two reasons:

1. We don't really believe that it is important
2. If we believe its importance, we don't know how to do it.

Ms. Satir says that effective self-care takes two things:

1. We must learn how to **define, limit, make specific our everyday negotiations** with
people in our life, with whom we live and breathe.

This goal reminds me of the serenity prayer:

We find ways to accept the things we cannot change,
We muster the courage to change the things we can,
And, we engage wisdom to know the difference between
what we must accept and what we must change.

Buddhism shows us that the place of wisdom is the place where our thoughts and our feelings
overlap. To be in wise-mind, we don't believe everything we feel about something, and we don't
believe everything we think about something.

My friend Susan continues about her mother with Alzheimer's:

*"The only way that I began to cope - was that I had to move spiritually to the
place where I could simply be present to my mother in whatever state she was in,
albeit diminished. At some point I realized that my job was to meet her exactly
where she was. **It was the only compassionate thing that I could do for myself .
. . and for her.** This was an enormous challenge and it took a lot of work to move
to this place spiritually . . ."*

Susan's willingness to acknowledge some responsibility in the conflict that she was
experiencing, created some ease around it. By becoming more aware of her feelings and her

values, Susan became better acquainted with herself and her impact on her mother. This is spiritual practice.

Susan turned and faced her reality as it was. She was never going to will her mother out of Alzheimer's. But, she *could care about herself* enough to enter a place of compassion. This shift led Susan to greater mutual consideration for both herself and her mother. Ultimately, this self-care was an act of love.

The Second Goal of Self-Care that Ms Satir Recommends is to:

2. ***Appreciate the relationship between what we believe, what we know, and what we practice.*** In daily-ness we meet conflict or challenge with one another simply as part of the human experience.

This is where a community of believers comes in. We gather together to grapple with the correlation between our beliefs, what we know to be true about ourselves and our lives, and how we are living.

In "Mondays with the Minister", we are currently engaged in an eight week course called *Spirit in Practice*. (which all of you are still invited to by the way – we have four sessions left.) In this class, we are studying many different forms of spiritual practice. You can see the wheel of possibilities on the back wall.

One of the forms we have looked at is "communal spiritual practice."

In his discussion on communal spiritual practice, the curriculum author -- Erik Walker Wikstrom -- quotes the 1983 UUA's Commission on Common Worship. They wrote:

Worship is a human activity. Though it is often defined as reverence given to a divine being or power, worship need not have supernatural implications. The origin of the word "worship" is in the Old English *weorthscippen*, meaning to ascribe worth to something, to shape things of worth. We worship, then, whenever we ascribe worth to some value, idea, object, person, experience, attitude, or activity—or whenever we give form or shape to that which we have already found to be of worth.

In Unitarian Universalism, we come together on Sundays not in worship of some separate God – but, we come shape our lives into something that is worthy of a life lived.

My friend, Susan shared one last thing with me:

“I began praying about what to do with my mother. How do I handle the pain, and the struggle of it all. What do I do?? And, a voice that was not mine, from some deep psychic space in the center of my being, said: “Become one with self and with God.”

When our “doing” comes out of society’s or our family’s expectations, we might find a way to demonstrate what a good daughter, partner, son, or mother we are but, ultimately, we feel empty and frustrated.

Or, on the flip-side, we might resist what life has handed to us and become inactive, or try to escape our situations only to find ourselves feeling guilty, fearful, and alone.

When we allow ourselves a moment to be more mindful of our current situation -- whatever, it is -- we might find that we have more choices and more support than we think we do. A third way might arrive.

When Susan’s choice emerged from deep inside her being, the estrangement and the differences between she and her mother did not seem so radical.

Susan realized that her mother’s inherent worth was still in tact, even though her personality had drastically changed.

And, Susan’s positive choice to love her mother just as she was, also resulted in Susan having a more positive sense of herself in the end.

When Susan chose to live from inside, she not only could she say:

“I am my mother’s daughter.”

But, she could say: “I am *being* my mother’s daughter.”

Her *doing* came from her *being*. Not the other way around.

If I am not for me, then who is for me?
If I am just for me, than who am I?
And, if not now, when?

Mediation - Make a Commitment:

What situation in your life arises as I am speaking today?

Getting quiet enough to ask a question - Get an answer from the deepest part of yourself – Trust the answer. This answer just may be asking for help when you need it.

Closing Words/Benediction:

Let us not fix our desires on health or sickness,
wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or short one.
For everything has the potential of calling forth in us
a deeper response to our life . . .

Let us fix our desires on a deeper engagement with each other.
Let us risk vulnerability and ask for the help that we need.
Let us reach out to one and other in love,
Creating the Circle of Care and Compassion that is the whole.

-- Adapted excerpt from the First of the Ignation Spiritual Exercises