

Actualizing Justice, Equity and Compassion©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman, November 19, 2017

The second Principle of our Unitarian Universalist Association asserts that member congregations will affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. When I reflect deeply on this Principle I find myself getting lost in the immensity of what it asks of me. I look at my own life and ask myself, does every human encounter or exchange I have fulfill what is proposed here? Do all of my exchanges have at their foundation justice? Do all of my interactions arise from a framework based on equity? Do I always relate to others from a place of compassion? The answer is the same for each of these questions—no, no, no and no. When I think about not being able to answer yes to any one of these I feel both disappointed in myself and overwhelmed by what this Principle asks of me.

Now I don't know about you, but I don't much like to experience either of the emotions I just mentioned, disappointment and overwhelm. Not only do I dislike how both of them feel, I have found that being overwhelmed isn't typically constructive or beneficial. When I am disappointed I try to change my focus to something that seems positive. And when I start to get overwhelmed I do my best to shift to a more enjoyable or more constructive feeling. One way to make such a shift is to look for role models, people who have been able to do something similar to what I want or need to do. In the case of justice, equity and compassion in human relations there are a number of people who quickly come to mind. I think of Mahatma Gandhi and all that he did to change the course of history in his home country of India. I think of people like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. and their work for equal rights in this country. I think of Nelson Mandela and his successful efforts to end apartheid in South Africa. These are some significant role models I can look to. The problem is, when I think of them and their accomplishments my sense of overwhelm doesn't dissipate. Even thinking about little six year old Ruby Bridges in our story doesn't help. At six years old Ruby did something I am not sure I could have done at any point in my life. Not only does my sense of overwhelm continue, as I think of these incredible people I begin to feel rather insignificant as well. I begin to sense that the task of living out this Principle may be beyond my capability. I begin to wonder if I might have been in a state of delusion when I thought I could possibly write a sermon that would address the scope of our Second Principle. So as I sat down to write this sermon then, I found myself struggling.

In sitting with my struggle, and the question of whether or not I might have been delusional, a memory from my past came to mind. A memory of when I first began my career as an idealistic social worker fresh out of college. That was in the mid-70's. At the time I was in my early twenties and I was certain I could change the world. Five months after completing my Bachelors of Social Work degree I accepted a position as a case worker on an adult unit of a state psychiatric hospital. Did I mention that I was idealistic and believed I could change the world? Well, the first few days on the job I couldn't even let myself in or out of the unit because I hadn't yet been given the keys. The unit, you see, was continually locked. It seemed there was always at least one patient, and often several, who were considered to be at high risk of escaping or of doing harm to themselves or another.

It was in this setting that I first had to confront my own delusions of grandeur. It didn't take me long to realize that saving the world would have to be put on hold. I would need to put it on hold at least until I was able to find a way to be of some positive assistance to the patients who were assigned to my care. Within the first month or so on the job I met up with another young, idealistic case worker who had even more radical and grandiose ideas than my own. Soon after we met he introduced me to Unitarian Universalism. That helped me understand where his radical ideas grew from. The two of us then began collaborating with a significantly older blind psychologist. This fellow helped us both learn to open our eyes to what the patients on the unit truly needed. Not long afterwards the three of us began leading a therapy group together and each of us offered our own unique gifts and abilities to the patients who would attend. As the memory of my work at the state hospital and with the group continued, I slowly began to realize I did have the ability to write and deliver a sermon on justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

You see I discovered something very important while working at that hospital. I discovered there was one really significant difference between me and the patients. I had the keys. Now, I could have kept this awareness to myself but I didn't. I shared it with the folks who came to the group I was co-leading. I let them know that in many ways I really was just like them. I had delusions too. And there were times when I felt depressed. I told them there had been occasions when I wondered if life was worth living. And yet I had managed to keep the keys. I shared with the people in the group that I was intent on helping them regain the keys—if not literally then at least figuratively. During the three years I worked there many people were admitted and released from the hospital. My job there ended as I and the other young, idealistic case worker were laid-off because of budget cutbacks by the State. Being unemployed for months helped me to realize how easy it could be for any of us to lose the keys and end up not knowing how to cope. Somehow I found a way to keep the keys during that time. Eventually I moved to another state and went back to school to get my Masters of Social Work degree.

After completing my degree, I returned to live again in the city where the State hospital was. One day, as I was walking along a bike path in the city, I noticed a man sitting on a bench next to the path not far ahead of me. As I came closer the man looked up at me and said, "Hello." I responded with a smile and a pleasant greeting in return. I expected that would be the end of our exchange. The man, however, had more he wanted to say. He proceeded to ask a question that took me by surprise. "Do you remember me?" he asked. With a bit of embarrassment I apologized and admitted that, no, I didn't remember him. He told me his name and even with that I wasn't able to recall having met him. By this point my embarrassment was growing. He then went on to tell me that he had been a patient in the state hospital I had worked in. I learned that during a period of suicidal depression he had been committed to the hospital against his will. During the course of his stay he had attended a few of the groups I led. He stated that he remembered me because what I shared had been meaningful and beneficial for him. He said, "You helped me realize that I needed to find the keys. You let me know we all have struggles and we all need help as we deal with those struggles." We talked for only a brief time that afternoon. His sharing, however, has remained with me for these many years. It has remained with me in a manner similar to how my sharing stayed with

him. I am grateful to this man for helping me find the keys to share these thoughts with you regarding our Second Principle.

So how does my story relate to justice, equity and compassion in human relations? I believe it holds a message quite similar to the one in our Story for All Ages. Let's revisit that story and focus this time on Mrs. Henry. She didn't have to be respectful and caring toward Ruby. She could have responded like so many others did. She could have shown anger and disdain toward this young black child attending a white school. She could have, but she didn't. Instead she related to Ruby in a manner that affirmed and promoted the concepts in our Second Principle, the concepts of justice, equity and compassion. Mrs. Henry isn't a larger than life person and she didn't become famous for what she did. You might think the story of Ruby and Mrs. Henry was of an exceptional situation and it was. The situation in my story on the other hand wasn't exceptional. I would propose that my story and the story of Ruby and Mrs. Henry each offer an example of how actualizing justice, equity and compassion in human relations can be done by anyone on any given day. While both of these stories involve a work setting, the lesson they hold is applicable in all aspects of life. The work of actualizing justice, equity and compassion in human relations can be done in all types of settings. We can strive to actualize justice, equity and compassion with the people we work with, with the cashier as we pay for our groceries, with the person who waits on us in a restaurant, or with other drivers or pedestrians on the street. I know one UU minister who always leaves a generous cash tip lying on the bed when she checks out of a motel. Her reason for doing so is that cleaning staff are often very poorly paid and are seldom recognized for the important work they do. The list of places and ways we can actualize justice, equity and compassion is unlimited. It is as expansive as our imaginations can make it.

And just as actualizing justice, equity and compassion isn't limited to a particular place, it isn't time limited either. Our Second Principle invites us to be mindful and to attend to the here and now. Our task then isn't to create a just, equitable and compassionate world once and for all. That may be a grandiose delusion. Instead, our task is to seek ways to create justice, equity and compassion in each moment and in whatever situation we may find ourselves. We will all surely miss some and probably many opportunities to further each or all of the three. Our Second Principle doesn't ask us to get it right every time, it invites and encourages us to do the best we can. It calls us to share the keys with those who may have lost their own or who may not have been given keys at all.

It seems to me that now would be a fitting time for us to hear again the words of our reading by Rev. Charlotte Cowtan-Holm.

By covenanting to live together according to human principles of justice, equity, and compassion, we are daring with a new kind of audacity. We are declaring our freedom *and* responsibility to create our human relationships according to our belief of what they *should be*, rather than in reflection of what appears to be a current or past perception of universal law. We are covenanting not only to recognize but also to accept the area of human relationships as the appropriate arena for human creation.

May we all look for the opportunities in our daily lives to create a more just, equitable and compassionate world with each person and situation we encounter.

May it be so.