

## “The Compassion Capacity Challenge”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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In the reading Sandy just shared with us, Karen Armstrong asserts that “it is hard to think of a time when the compassionate voice of religion has been so sorely needed.” Those words were certainly true when they were published in 2010. It seems to me that her words were and are also prophetic. I would assert that her words are even more true today than when she first wrote them. The issues she cites, including polarization, the imbalance of power and wealth, terrorism, and the potential for an environmental catastrophe, are even more pronounced today than they were ten years ago. Today two more major issues can be added to this list. Those issues are a global pandemic and major civil unrest related to the century’s old patterns and practices of discrimination—discrimination that is based on the color of a person’s skin.

Armstrong was also prophetic in the final line of our reading. “If our religious and ethical traditions fail to address this challenge, they will fail the test of our time.” As I contemplate what she asserts here I feel deep concern. As a Unitarian Universalist Minister, I feel deep concern because our Second Principle calls us to affirm and promote “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” So in this incredibly challenging time we are living in, I want to invite all of us to contemplate a question. How do I, and how can I, generate and emanate what is at the heart of the “golden rule,” namely compassion? I focus my attention on compassion here because I believe that the fruits of equity and justice for each and every person are made possible by the seed of compassion that is within each one of us.

In my time as your minister, I have had the opportunity to witness and experience the high degree of compassion that members and friends of this Fellowship demonstrate to one another as well as to people beyond our religious community. The members and friends of this Fellowship demonstrate compassion in so many different ways that I wouldn’t have enough time to identify them all in multiple sermons. In recent days, however, I have been concerned that some of us may be reaching a point of what is called “compassion fatigue.” Compassion fatigue is a broadly defined concept that can include emotional, physical and spiritual distress in those who care for others. I have both heard from others, and felt myself, a sense that the level of compassion that is required during these very challenging times may be approaching or even beyond the current compassion capacity for some of us.

The incredible numbers of people who have been significantly affected as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, even to the point of death, quite probably has put many of us at, near or even over the edge of our compassion capacity. And then came the explosion of outrage triggered by the death of George Floyd. This explosion of outrage was not and is not about one man’s death at the hands of police. It is about the deaths of unknowable numbers of people of color over decades and centuries—deaths that are the direct result of embedded and entrenched racism and oppression in this country. It is long past time for this country to acknowledge the inequity in our systems, to rectify those inequities, and to realize what is written in this country’s Declaration of Independence, that all men, and I would assert all people, are created equal.

And yet, as a white male, I have privileges that many people of color don’t have, and that should not be. Because of my privileges I am able to take steps that reduce my likelihood of contracting COVID-19, steps such as working at home and restricting my contacts with others. These privileges are beyond the reach of many people of color. I did not earn the privileges I just mentioned. Nor did I earn many other privileges that, for much of my early life, I took for granted. And the more I recognize the privileges I have, the more compassion and the more responsibility I feel for those who have been denied the opportunity to enjoy even some of the most basic rights put forth in our country’s founding documents. The compassion I feel compels me to do all that is within my power to address the inequity and the injustice that is so prevalent in this county.

But I am only one person, with limited time, energy, resources and influence. At times I feel inadequate to the task. At other times I judge myself harshly for not doing enough. Over the years I have learned that

mentally or emotionally beating myself up for my limitations or failures isn't beneficial. What is beneficial is when I can recognize my shortcomings and be compassionate with myself. When I am able to do this, my energy and determination are revitalized. And with renewed energy and determination I can face another day and continue the work of changing myself and changing the systems that deny people of color, as well as other marginalized groups of people, the rights and privileges they deserve. I have come to accept that I can't do all that is needed to change the system that has been in place for longer than I have been alive. I can't do it all, but I can, and I must, do my part.

Over the course of my life I have also discovered that my capacity for feeling and demonstrating compassion is greater for some people than it is for others. For example, my ability to feel compassion for another is affected by my ability to identify with or understand another person's situation. So if I become aware that someone is sick, hungry, unemployed or has lost someone they love, it is easy for me to feel compassion because I have had personal experience with each of these issues. I find it more difficult to feel compassion for a person whose beliefs, experiences and behaviors are unfamiliar to me. My difficulty in feeling compassion tends to increase the more another's beliefs, experiences and behaviors are outside of my cultural comfort zone or my values. I suspect this is common for most if not all of us. As the little boy in our story stated, "practicing the golden rule...can be hard."

With that truth in mind, I want to share with you a situation from my own life when practicing the golden rule and having compassion was hard for me. Just three months before the members of this Fellowship called me as your minister, I found myself struggling to feel compassion for a person who had done something terrible.

One Sunday morning my wife, Sandy, woke me at about 5:00 am. She informed me that while we were sleeping a local Uber driver had shot eight people. Six of the victims died of their wounds. The shootings had occurred just a few miles from our apartment in Portage, Michigan. She wanted me to know as soon as possible because she was very distressed about what had occurred. She also wanted me to know because later that morning I was going to be leading worship at the UU congregation I was serving in Portage. As soon as she told me there had been a mass murder in the community I knew I needed to change what I had planned to speak about that morning. The sermon I had written and planned to deliver was no longer relevant.

For the next three hours I did my best to identify and cope with my feelings about the murder. I also sought out all of the information I could get about the shootings. When the service started at 10:00 am that morning I had a general sense of what I needed to focus on. I knew I needed to talk about shock, and grief, and compassion. And I knew I needed to talk from the heart, not from a written script, because no script could possibly hold all that I needed to share.

When it came time for me to deliver the sermon, I began by talking about the shock and the grief that I and everyone else in the room was feeling. And then I spoke about the compassion I felt for those who had died, those who had been wounded, and the families and friends of each of the victims. Then came the hard part, the part I knew I needed to share but felt unsure about. I was unsure about whether I had the ability to express what I was feeling adequately. And I was unsure because I was concerned that what I wanted to share might be misunderstood or misconstrued. You see, I felt compelled to talk about the compassion I felt for the Uber driver, the man who had pulled the trigger. I had to talk about my compassion for the man—a man whose behavior every person present that morning, including myself, abhorred. A person whose behavior was antithetical to my value system. Yet in spite of his horrific behavior, I felt compassion for him as a person. My ability to have compassion for him came from prior experiences in my life, experiences that made it possible for me to comprehend how he came to do such a terrible thing.

The news reports that morning indicated that when the man was finally apprehended he readily admitted to the shootings. And in his admission, he told the police that he had been hearing voices that commanded him to kill people. Knowing that information made it possible for me to change my feelings about him. My revulsion for the acts he committed remained. My initial feelings of revulsion toward him, however, dissipated as I began to feel compassion for him. What made this shift possible were memories of experiences I had earlier in my life.

My first professional job after graduating from college with a degree in social work was as a case worker in a state psychiatric hospital. In that position I had the chance to work with several people who were tormented by auditory hallucinations. Knowing them made me aware of how difficult and painful life can be when something you can't control rules your life.

I tell you about these situations from my life because today there are people I am having difficulty feeling compassion for. Some of the people I am having difficulty feeling compassion for are or have been in positions of power. It may be that some of you, like me, are having difficulty feeling compassion for someone. It is important for us to recognize there are times when we reach our capacity for compassion. It is also important for us to realize that our capacity is not a constant, unchangeable limit. We can, with awareness, commitment and concerted effort, expand our compassion capacity. Karen Armstrong's book, *The Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, offers one path for doing so. The path she sets out, however, is by no means the only approach. I encourage you to seek out an approach that works for you. I encourage all of us to find an approach that works for us because there is a desperate need for more compassion in the world today. And I believe if we could all feel and show more compassion in the world what the little boy in the story said would be true—"there wouldn't be so many problems." So in this troubled and tumultuous time, it is my hope that we, as people of faith, do all that we can to increase our compassion capacity. And as we strive to expand our compassion capacity let us remember the words of the grandfather in the story when he spoke about the golden rule. "I said it was simple. I didn't say it would always be easy."

So it is and so shall it be.