

The Spiral of Compassion I

What is After Will Be Better

Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg
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In 1893, the United States was introduced to a wide multiplicity of world faiths at the first World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago. Hindus and Buddhists were kind of exotic to Americans who knew only different kinds of Christians and maybe a few Jews. Unitarians, not surprisingly, were at the heart of it. The *second* World Parliament took place in Chicago also, a century later, just before my last year in seminary. I decided to attend, and figured out a way to get academic credit for it. The parliament was a great adventure for me, including glimpses of various religious luminaries – the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hahn, and Hans Kung.

Hans Kung is a Roman Catholic theologian – one who has been disciplined and even silenced by the Vatican for his not entirely orthodox views. I attended his workshop where he was promoting his project on Global Ethics. He wanted to create a document that everyone could sign onto – people of any faith, he said, or of no faith. And many people did, including leaders of Bahai, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Neo Pagan, Unitarian, and Zoroastrian groups, to be alphabetical if not exhaustive about it. What Kung emphasized is that it is easier to get people to agree on ethics than theology, and he was surely right about that. The document had much to recommend it, being based on

an ethic of human dignity: All human beings should be treated humanely. It also recognized the need for peace and planetary responsibility. But it now seems somewhat dated – it was too long to be easily memorized or put on a bumper sticker – clearly pre-Twitter. It is deeply rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It also implies support only for heterosexual marriage, and even in its longer, book form, it fails to be exhaustively convincing in all its details. Nevertheless, it is admirable in many ways, and it points to a deep longing for a universal statement of human value.

More recently, I heard third or fourth hand of a Unitarian Universalist colleague who divided the world's religions into religions of purity and religions of compassion. I don't know who this colleague was or how he or she defined the options, or what he or she said about this dichotomy, but I've been thinking about it ever since. Purity and Compassion. I can see the appealing outlines of these two impulses. Both have value, both could be taken to unhealthy extremes. I don't believe actually that each religion is in one camp or the other. I see it more as it as a polarity – two values, both with good possibilities, held at right angles in tension with one another, making a plus sign, like the quadrants of a graph, each value running the spectrum from the least to the greatest. Each

religion, or each individual, comes to land somewhere between the extremes, gaining some of the benefits of each but always being tugged by the other as well.

Purity is getting it right. At its best it means doing no wrong, being in alignment with the divine or with a more abstract notion of goodness. You might equate purity with integrity or wholeness of spirit.

At its worst, on the other hand, purity might descend into narrow isolation or sectarianism, into rigid rules about who is OK and who is not. Stick to your own kind. Follow the rules, stay clean, don't get seduced by worldly pleasure or by any of those bad people over there. We see it all the time, in all faiths and all parts of the world. Purity can lead to burning people at the stake for having the wrong beliefs. Purity can incite people to honor killings.

Purity can be a code or inspiration for racial hatred – in Fayetteville we attended a musical play called *Sundown Town*. The story begins with a fictionalized version of a real Northwest Arkansas town, about a century ago, where laws and signs on the edge of town made it explicit that African Americans were not welcome, especially after dark. And those signs did not

use the polite term African American either. The fear of the stranger and the desire for racial purity was all mixed up with a cramped and narrow view that saw religion as being only about sin and getting to heaven, where sin means embracing the full spectrum of human life, including sexuality and close relationships with those “other” people. Sorrow and violence ensue. And then in *Sundown Town* comes that moment of at least a partial peace and reconciliation, a sense of the possibilities of goodness and common humanity, compassion infused in the world, and all the cast, good, bad, dead, alive, all together sing Amazing Grace. It was a powerful celebration of love and grace.

And the obverse of purity, compassion. It’s hard to find the downside of compassion – you can see where my religious sympathies lie. But as with purity, compassion can be distorted into dysfunction. Taken to extremes, compassion could lead to a breakdown of all boundaries, of mindlessly going what someone else wants without filtering that demand through reason or principle or values or even a long term view of costs and benefits.

Compassion, is of course, featured prominently in our Unitarian Universalist principles statement, when we speak of Justice, Equity, and Compassion in human

relations – it follows after the first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, as if it is an explanation or embodiment of that dignity.

Karen Armstrong's most recent book is a short course on compassion, what it is, how to work towards living compassionately, and what our lives might look like if we lived more consistently in a compassionate manner. Several years ago, Ms. Armstrong won the TED prize – that's Technology, Entertainment and Design, a private non-profit which hosts twice yearly very expensive and exclusive conferences where great speakers have 18 minutes to talk about their passion, in science or art, or human living – “ideas worth spreading” they call it. They also help ordinary people participate by making available free on line videos of these talks. Or you can take part in on line discussions, or host your own events. And now there's an NPR weekly TED radio show. Armstrong's prize gave her the opportunity to create a foundation devoted to a charter for compassion.

This all comes out of her long career as an independent religious scholar. Armstrong has written extensively on how human beings use ritual and myth to process experience and cope with oppression, how fundamentalism is a response to fear, how people usually

get the God they are looking for. In the course of her life, Armstrong has gone from Roman Catholic nun to atheist to “freelance monotheist.” She has a take on religion you may like: “I say that religion isn’t about believing things. Its ethical alchemy. Its about behaving in a way that changes you, that gives you intimations of holiness and sacredness.”

Scholar that she is, Ms. Armstrong lays out a systematic 12 step program for living a more compassionate life. Aside from being crammed with details of history and science, scholarship and practice, there is nothing dramatically new in this book, but it is a beautiful framework on which to structure your thinking about and practice of compassion. Her comprehensive twelve steps logically lead one to the next, and work cumulatively to shape your movement towards compassion, but like every carefully laid out schema, the steps fit into my life in a confused and fragmented fashion – I’ve had experiences or made efforts in every area she describes, I have moments of living as compassionately as I might hope, and moments of knowing that a fully compassionate life is really better than I want to be.

But let’s begin with her understanding of compassion:

[*But*] “compassion” derives from the Latin *patiri* and the Greek *pathein*, meaning “to suffer, undergo or experience” so “compassion” means to endure [something] *with* another person,” to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes, to feel her pain as though it were our own, and to enter generously into his point of view. That is why compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else. Compassion can be defined, therefore as an attitude of principled, consistent altruism. (Armstrong, p. p)

Not pity, not even sympathy, which is etymologically pretty much the same as compassion, *syn* being the Greek equivalent of the Latin *con*, and not even the related word, empathy, which as we shall see is an element of but not the whole of compassion. The concept of compassion is found all over the world, summed up in the Golden Rule, *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. Armstrong treats us to many versions of the rule, from many cultures, and the nuances are different, but all share that willingness to enter into the experience of another,

and treat them as we would be treated. You could spend hours dissecting this, arguing about the value of the positive or negative formulation of the rule: give them what you would want vs. don't do to them what you wouldn't want. It all requires cultural and personal context. You might well crave a ham sandwich but it wouldn't under most circumstances be compassionate to offer one to your vegan or Muslim or Jewish friend. It might well be compassionate to hug a crying person, but you have to consider their temperament, and whether they might prefer to just be left alone with a subdued expression of support – it is a matter of putting yourself in their shoes, not cramming yours on them. We need to expand our perspective to see things from their point of view.

Armstrong sums up the wisdom of the Chinese sage Zhuangzi on this point:

When we cling to our certainties, likes, and dislikes, deeming them essential to our sense of self, we alienate ourselves from the “great transformation” of the Way, because the reality is that we are all in continual flux, moving from one state to another. An unenlightened person, Zhuangzi explained, is like a frog in a well who

mistakes the tiny patch of sky he can see for the whole; but once he has seen the sky's immensity, his perspective is changed forever. (P. 122)

A frog in a well. . . . But I'm getting ahead of myself. That's from the chapter on the seventh step, **How Little We Know**. We can't recount all of the twelve steps this morning, but let's have closer look at the first steps, the easy ones:

1. **Learn about compassion.** Armstrong takes us through the Golden Rule history from its earliest known formulation, by Confucius in ancient China, to the youngest, Islam. Mohammed is often quoted as saying, "Not one of you can be a believer, unless he desires for his neighbor what he desires for himself." In a culture steeped in the virtues of loyalty to your clan no matter what, a loyalty essential to survival in a hostile environment, the Qu'ran also elevates the traditional Arab virtue of *hilm*, mercy. When insulted, those who practice *hilm*, reply, *Salam*, peace. (P. 59f) The outcomes of the Arab Spring uprisings are not fully clear yet, but even in Syria, which seems to have descended into chaos and civil war, the impulse to peace, to inclusivity and compassion have not died. Here are recent Facebook (2/26/13) posts from my friend Mohja

Kahf, a professor at the University of Arkansas, a poet and a peace activist with the Syrian revolution:

The struggle for freedom, for dignity, for justice in Syria today continues on two fronts - the regime, wreaking massive daily destruction, and the Salafist hijackers of the revolution, disgustingly sectarian and intolerant committing violence against civilians they claim to protect; these do not wait until post-assad to hijack freedom, dignity, and justice--no, they've begun doing it now, even while the people are under attack from the regime. So yes, BRAVO, SUWAYDA, for marching for freedom and inclusive democratic values--for marching in the original spirit of this uprising.

"SALUTE ASHRAFIYA! Women and men, Kurds and Arabs, people bearing crosses with crescents together, gathered in Ashrafiya, Aleppo, Syria, to affirm the inclusive, tolerant, broad base of Syria's grassroots uprising. Against the regime, against the insidious salafist counter-revolution, FOR the fall of the assad regime, FOR the rise of a free, democratic Syria respecting equal human rights of all."

Learning about compassion – its meaning, its components, its practice under difficult circumstances – is a first step for us. A second step:

2. Look at your own world. Armstrong advises us to look at our own lives, our families, our work places, our communities and nations. How do we practice compassion? Where do we fail? What happens when we allow ourselves to be held hostage by fear or greed, going along with dictators who appear to be pro-American? How has our addiction to cheap oil encouraged complicity with autocratic rulers of Middle Eastern states? How much do we promote the welfare of us and ours, at the expense of those others? This step asks us to begin a process of introspection and accounting.

What does compassion mean within our own community, this congregation committed to the principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person? How do we practice putting ourselves in the shoes of the other person? Who is *other* to us? Who might we see differently if we refrained from “othering” them? Who really belongs here? How do we practice compassion with those who are unable to act from compassion themselves? How do we find a balance between protecting ourselves from chaos and reaching out to

another? Where is the right place between purity and compassion? What about all those people who are not like me, who have more of the world's goods, or less, whose families are in chaos, or those who seem to be put together perfectly? What about all those people with those weird beliefs, or those who maintain a literalism that keeps them from professing any beliefs? What about those who make me ashamed by giving too much or who intimidate me by giving what I cannot give? Those who give the wrong thing, or those who don't seem as committed as I think they should be? Who is other to me? How will I relate to those people? Thou shalt not other, said Miriam's pebble.

3. Compassion for yourself. Rabbi Albert Friedlander points out that the Biblical commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" not only tells you to love your neighbor, but also means that you do and ought to love yourself. You cannot love the world unless you have a healthy care of self. Karen Armstrong reminds us here that our evolutionary history includes an ancient reptilian brain, one that is devoted entirely to survival at any cost, which produces low and mean spirited emotions and motivations – greed, jealousy, lust, anger, contempt, fear and all that fear produces. (P. 78ff) Simply denying or trying to repress these feelings may lead to a harsh and

absolute views of ourselves or others. Is it our own desires for domination and vengeance that make our culture so ready to see all Muslims as terrorists? In *Sundown Town*, the mother attributes her own unacceptable lustful motives to the daughter who seems to be entering a romance with a man Mom sees as unsuitable – with tragic and violent results. Better to acknowledge that we are imperfect beings, subject to those less than lofty feelings. Compassion for others requires compassion for self. Compassionate behavior requires self restraint, not self disgust or self hatred. The Buddha offers another way of looking at ourselves, to see that “this is not what I really am, this is not my self.” (P. 88) We have that reptilian brain, yes, but we also have a neo- cortex, after all, that permits us to reflect and commit ourselves to loftier motives. (P. 13) Our failings and frailties are real, we must acknowledge and work on them – but our failings are not our real selves, we should no more wallow in self loathing than drown in self indulgence.

4. **Empathy.** “Imagination is crucial to the compassionate life, says Armstrong.” (P. 98) We are invited to open our hearts to the grief and pain of ourselves and others, not to harden ourselves and become numb to our own suffering and so ignore the pain of

others. The Greek playwright Aeschylus knew this:

We cannot sleep, and drop by drop at the heart
the pain of pain remembered comes again,
and we resist, but ripeness comes as well. (P. 94)

With these words from the *Agamemnon*, on that awful day in 1968 when Martin Luther King was assassinated, Bobby Kennedy, on the campaign trail, found himself having to inform a crowd of African Americans that Dr. King had been killed. I saw a film clip of this event several years ago, the gasp of shock and grief in that crowd was palpable. These days, by the time Kennedy arrived, they would already have heard, and be reacting without the sense of connection and expression of empathy that Kennedy offered. And of course, from our vantage point, we knew that two months later, it would be the same sound, that same gasp of horror for Bobby himself. Kennedy knew sorrow – he had already lost two brothers to violence, and when he spoke to that group of people he was sharing in their pain in a powerful and comforting way.

[I was mesmerized during the early weeks of the Libyan uprising, listening to the nightly phone calls from Tripoli, a young woman calling CNN's Anderson Cooper,

telling us of the desperation, the fear, the longing for freedom as Ghadafi threatened a house to house search for dissidents. Why did she take the risk of calling, a risk that was real, though her name and location were undisclosed? She was bearing witness to the humanity of all who struggle for freedom and democracy. A man called in, because, he said, “We want freedom, but we want to earn it.” Here’s a case where modern communications enabled us to know at a profound and critical moment that we are connected to people whose lives are different from ours, but whose humanity is the same. I’ve wondered what became of her, how the fall of Ghadafi affected her life, how oppressed peoples can take charge of their own lives and their own nations in the face of countless challenges.]

Empathy is an essential component of compassion, on a small scale as well as the great stage of human history. I was so moved yesterday hearing the stories of Dick Anliot’s life, and especially the story that I heard directly from him. One of the things Dick did to express his compassion was to read for the blind. And even as his health was failing, he found a way to continue. His hospital room was too noisy to record, but he had his book and his equipment and his tray table. So he pushed them all into the bathroom and closed the door. There

was his studio, and Dick Anliot lived compassion on a small and human scale as long as he was able.

That's four of the twelve steps to living a more compassionate life. The next eight are more challenging: mindfulness, action, how little we know, how should we speak to one another (ah civility, worthy of whole sermons by itself, well they all are), concern for everybody, knowledge, recognition – recognition that we are those brave Syrian demonstrators, the blind person waiting for Dick's next installment, the troubled mother in *Sundown Town* – and finally Love Your Enemies – both the person who irritates us daily and the person who seems hell bent on destroying all that is good. Love your enemies.

To live this book is the work of a lifetime, a constant discipline and a covenant with the best that is in us. We are called to widen our perspective so that we are not just a frog in a well. We are called to decide whether we would rather be right or compassionate. And we are called to love ourselves as well as our enemies. We will never fully succeed. We are not perfect. But we are not wretches. We can move with the grace, the amazing grace inherent in the universe, and move the moral arc of our lives, bending always towards compassion. And then

it will be better than it was before. So may it be. Amen, shalom, salaam and blessed be.

A Time for All Ages Miriam's Pebble Based on a midrash by Rev. Barbara Hebner

1. Midrash

Bible

Has a lot of good things

Doesn't have everything

Leaves out some things, like women

Sometimes you have to add your own thoughts

2. This is a story about Miriam, the sister of Moses.

He was the official leader, and the Bible doesn't tell us a lot about Miriam.

But here's a midrash written by a colleague – and my midrash on hers.

3. Her people were on a long journey, 40 years.

They were tired of traveling, bored and hungry and whiny, and not treating each other very well.

Can you imagine the complaining?

Manna again for dinner?

Are we there yet?

He put his tent on my spot!

4. She decided they needed some rules of good behavior, so they'd be nice to each other.

So she climbed the mountain to talk to God.

God, we need some rules.

Here' said God, I'll write all the rules you need on this pebble, and you can keep it in your pocket.

“Thou Shalt Not Other.”

What kind of rule is that? What does other mean?

It's a person, not a rule.

God said, “It means treat people the way you would like to be treated, not as if they were some OTHER person who doesn't count. It fits nicely on this pebble.

5. So Miriam put the pebble in her pocket and went to tell the people.

But they weren't happy.

That pebble doesn't look very important.

That takes too much thinking, too much figuring out.

That might make us be better than we want to be.

Give us some real rules. So we always know exactly what to do.

So they sent Moses up the mountain to talk to God.

6. And Moses brought back a bunch of rules written on big stone tablets, but that's a story for another time.

7. Miriam's rule is a good and simple one, and one we can follow every day.

Thou shalt not other.