

We return this morning to a series of sermons based on Karen Armstrong's book, *Twelve Steps to a More Compassionate Life*. Last month, I had a chance to talk about the prize money that enabled Armstrong to write the book and set up a web site for the Charter for Compassion, a statement of intent that you and everyone else are invited to read and sign and live by. I was able to talk in some detail about the first steps of becoming more compassionate – **learning about compassion** and **looking at our own world**. And then came an important and often overlooked element of compassion, **Compassion for yourself**. We heard that 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. And Fourth, we talked about **Empathy**, that element of imagination which enables us to open ourselves to the grief and pain of others.

5. The fifth step in living a more compassionate life is **mindfulness**. Mindfulness is a kind of ordinary routine daily meditation – a practice, a habit, a way of living – a tool for living the other steps and becoming more compassionate day by day. In mindfulness, we step back and observe our mental processes so as to better cultivate those that are positive. No blame, no shame, plenty of self compassion. This mindfulness embodies a sign I once saw on a colleague's office wall: “Discipline is remembering what I want.” Karen Armstrong writes:

This is what the Buddha did when he deliberately directed unhelpful emotions (such as greed, lust, or envy) into more positive channels. Just as musicians have to learn how to manipulate their instruments , we have to learn to use our mental energies more kindly and productively. In mindfulness we mentally stand back and observe our behavior while we are engaged in the normal process of living in order to discover more about the way we interact with people, what makes us angry and unhappy, how to analyze our experiences, and how to pay attention to the present moment. Mindfulness is not meant to make us morbidly self-conscious , scrupulous, or guilty; we are not supposed to pounce aggressively on the negative feelings that course through our minds. Its purpose is simply to help us channel them more creatively. (P. 206)

Mindfulness helps us to calm down, to allow our deepest principles come to the fore. Oh, I am feeling angry at that person. What do I *want* to do? What is my immediate impulse? Is that the best thing? How do I *want* to respond in light of all my hopes and values? What is best for me? What is best for the world? What kind of person do I want to be? Mindfulness makes room for these questions and room for our response.

I think this moment of mindfulness can be especially valuable in all those pastoral moments of our lives, when we are called upon to hear someone else's distress. Yes, sometimes people need immediate practical help. Sometimes they are actually asking for advice or information. But often, they just need your caring, mindful presence. It is so tempting, when someone is in pain, to do whatever you can to get them to stop broadcasting that pain all over the

place. But often, just listening is the best thing, just hearing them out, just tolerating the noise and chaos, and letting them know they are not alone.

A hymn from my childhood comes back to me, theistic and sexist language and all:

When thy heart, with joy o' rflowing,
Sings a thankful prayer,
In thy joy, O let thy brother, with thee share.

Share with him thy bread of blessing,
Sorrow's burden share;
When thy heart enfolds a brother,
God is there. (*Beacon Song and Service Book*, #141)

Fortifying our understanding and learning, our self-compassion and our empathy with mindfulness, we can move on to the sixth step: **action**.

6. Sometimes compassion requires nothing more than holding someone's hand in silence. Sometimes a more proactive response is needed. Early in her career, Karen Armstrong was a Roman Catholic nun, not a very successful one, unhappy, in poor health, oppressed in many respects. But she writes of her good fortune in her superior, a nun she describes as fierce, unsentimental, eccentric, and one of the kindest people she had ever met. She reminds me a bit of Miss Lang, though their lives and values were utterly different. When the old nun was dying, the young nuns were allowed in to say good-bye.

As she bade us farewell, she spoke of her imminent death with her usual pragmatism. "They've appointed a new superior for you, but she won't arrive until August!" she exclaimed, managing to laugh despite her obvious weakness and pain. "I'll be dead by then!" As we trooped out, she called me back and I went to kneel beside her bed. "Sister," she said, "when you came, I was told that you might be a problem. But I want you to know that you have never been a trouble to me. *You're a good girl, Sister*. Remember I told you so." I have never forgotten it. She was not saying anything cheesy, such as "I see future greatness in you": what she must have seen was a confused, immature, and rather tiresome young woman. It would have been so easy for her to close her eyes with relief as we left the room, take her pain medication, and sink back onto her pillow, but she made a valiant effort to reassure me because she could see that I was struggling.

I tell this story to show that one small act of kindness can turn a life around. (P. 111f)

This was an iconic moment in Armstrong's life, just a few words, they looked like nothing from the outside, and yet it meant so much for Armstrong. She quotes a poem in which

such a moment is described by William Wordsworth:

There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue. (P. 112)

We never know what spot of time, what tiny action may prove to be a renovating virtue in the life of another person. Compassionate action may be grand, on the great stage of human history. Viola Liuzzo was “just a housewife” a woman in Detroit who was moved by the plight of African Americans in the civil rights era. She believed in equality, and when Jimmie Lee Jackson was killed, she drove to Selma to help. I recommend her short biography on the UUA website. While driving another worker back from Selma to Montgomery, her car was boxed in by segregationist thugs and she was shot. Her husband received a phone call from President Johnson, who spoke of her death as part of an all out battle. The husband told the President, "My wife died for a sacred battle, the rights of humanity. She had one concern and only one in mind. She took a quote from Abraham Lincoln that all men are created equal and that's the way she believed." Sometimes the actions of compassion call us to risk our lives. Sometimes we only need stand on the side of love. I followed the posts of a the Rev. James Ford this week. A Unitarian Universalist minister and an ordained Buddhist priest, he put on his clerical shirt and lobbied the Rhode Island legislature as they voted on same sex marriage – when the Governor signs the bill, Rhode Island will be the 10th state to recognize the equality of our GLBT citizens. Not very risky, perhaps for a Unitarian Universalist minister in New England, but a moment of renovating virtue.

Or our movement towards a more compassionate life may consist of decades of tiny spots of time, so that a person comes to radiate compassion. You may find yourself giving your annotated copy of a favorite book to someone heading into danger, or you may simply remember at the post office which culture you are in, and what the other person hopes for from you. Or you may indeed share your wealth in a big way or take on a task that needs doing, even at some cost to yourself, because it is the compassionate thing to do.

Consider both the positive and the negative versions of the Golden Rule: to treat others as you would wish to be treated, in the appropriate cultural context, and then to refrain from doing what you would not wish done to you.

If every time we are tempted to say something vile about an annoying sibling, a colleague, and ex-husband, or a country with whom we are at war, we reflexively ask ourselves “How would I like this said about me and mine?” and refrain, we will achieve *exstasis*, a momentary “stepping outside” the egotistically confined self. (P. 113)

The goal with all these steps is to become a different sort of person, to “change our lives by a direct encounter with the transforming power of love.” (Rev. Aaron White) Armstrong does not insist that we do this all at once. Begin with one good deed a day, until that is

automatic. Look for an opportunity to create a “spot of time” in someone’s life. Do one of each, and then two, and then three. . . .until you wake up one day and find that you are a sage. Karen Armstrong speaks of “disciplined, repetitive action” as we move towards the ideal Confucius offers, of living with compassion “all day and every day.” She uses the Greek word, *ekstasis*, a stepping outside, ecstasy. The first steps in the process – learning about compassion, looking at our world, compassion for ourselves, empathy, and mindfulness – will support us as we move towards consistent, intentional action.

In the trauma and turmoil in our nation in the last weeks we have seen many examples of the ways in which these habits of mind and heart move us towards compassion. Think of the countless stories of first responders who ran **into** the danger and heat and noise and chaos to help others, in the Boston Marathon bombings, and the dreadful fertilizer plant explosion in Texas. People who pulled off their belts to make tourniquets, or ripped the shirts off their backs to warm the injured, depleted marathoners at the end of their race, running on to give blood, or help in the triage tent. Imagine the system already in place which made it possible that some of that donated blood might well have ended up saving the life of the alleged bomber – because, as the President said, that’s the kind of people we are. No, we are not perfect. Yes, there have been examples of self centered carelessness, calls for denial of rights and even torture.

I’ve also seen facebook posts of sympathy from the people of Syria, who live with more deadly bombings every day. And someone made one of those currently popular British style WWII posters: Keep Calm and Resist Islamophobia. We we are drawn to compassion. At the interfaith service in Boston, the president spoke eloquently: “ You’ve shown us, Boston, that in the face of evil, Americans will lift up what’s good. In the face of cruelty, we will choose compassion. In the face of those who would visit death upon innocents, we will choose to save and to comfort and to heal. Well choose friendship. We’ll choose love.”

We’ve discussed half the twelve steps towards a more compassionate life. The next ones are more challenging: 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 in need of compassion that we are called on to reach out to others– 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 . We are called to decide whether we would rather be comfortable or compassionate, whether bound up in ourselves or compassionate, whether self righteous 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 take those first steps. We can hear the call, and respond to it. So may it be. Amen, shalom, salaam and blessed be.