

Living With a Heart of Compassion
Palomar Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
November 7, 2004 ~ Rev. Beth A. Johnson

When I was a child growing up I shared an upstairs bedroom in our brick bungalow with my sister. Mary Ellen is six years older than I am, and while that doesn't seem like very much now (and especially when people ask if she's younger than me!), she seemed way wiser and stronger than I when I was 9 or 10 years old. She went to high school, and wore make-up, and dated boys. She even worked as a candy striper and then as a nurse's aid at a hospital because she was going to go to college to be a nurse. She was, well, big and older.

One night as we were in our beds, after we had said good night and turned out the lights, I heard my sister crying softly across the room. It was kind of scary to hear her cry like that, in the dark. It's not like she'd never cried before, but this was different. I asked her why she was crying, and she told me that a woman that she had been taking care of in the hospital had died that day – it was the first patient that she would lose. Mary Ellen talked about the woman, how kind she had been.

My sister said, "I just feel so sad." And she cried harder, well maybe not harder, not big sobs... she cried in a way that I had never heard her cry before – not like when she got into trouble (which was hardly ever), but from a deeper place... like her heart had just opened up somehow, and somehow she was different and it's like she seemed even more grownup then, and at 16 years old then really wiser. That was not last patient that she lost because she did go on to be a nurse. And what strikes me, is that despite the pain at other's suffering that is the realm of nurses (and doctors and social workers and so many others) she didn't resist or reject her calling, but chose to enter into the suffering of others, to be present to it, to witness and share it.

I'm sure each of you can call to mind persons who have inspired you to live with a heart of compassion - those folks who first taught you what it means to feel deeply with the other - for whom the suffering of others evokes the response of "suffering with," which is the meaning of compassion. And so today I turn to compassion today as the "C" in the ABCs of spirituality literacy that we are exploring.

All of the world's religions include the notion of compassion both as an attitude and a practice. To do unto others as you would have others do unto you; caring for the sick and the oppressed, caring for all beings, giving freely and with love, are all values that express compassion, and to which we must turn if we are to live freely ourselves. As UUs we look to our second principle that states we "affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations." We respond to the world with a heart open to suffering, and hence open to love – a heart of compassion.

And compassion, it seems, is first evoked through empathy and cultivated through practice. Empathy is the ability to enter into the experience of another – to be able to put ourselves in their shoes. The feeling of compassion arises out of our empathic response of sorrow at the suffering of others.

We can feel compassion more easily towards those closest to us – our family, dear friends when they are suffering from illness or tragedy, and in the case of those like my sister in the helping professions, our patients, much of the time.

The challenge is to develop compassion for those who hurt us, make us angry, those who are not like us, who don't agree with us, those whom we do not know and do not see – the enemy or the stranger.

Biologist Ursula Goodenough names the competing, natural urges of the "feeling with" and the antagonism of threat. She writes: "It is as we can imagine being the least of these that we can begin to experience the anguish of deep poverty or deprivation. It is as we are able to

identify with the oil-soaked shore bird and the bewildered moose that they come symbolize our environmental concerns. And emergent from our sense of compassion, in mortal conflict with our insistent sense that we should win, is our haunting sense that things should be fair.”

And so it is in light of these competing claims that living with a heart of compassion most requires cultivation – and I believe it is more than just a good idea, but in all likelihood may be the only thing that will insure the evolving of human life and the life of the planet.

The Dalai Lama tells us “love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive. With them we can make a joint effort to solve the problems of the whole of humanity.”

Recognizing the nature of suffering in our own lives leads to compassion. Buddhism names three types of suffering that all people experience. As we suffer from illness and tragedy, as we suffer from attachment to the impermanent, as we suffer from negative emotions – so then do others.

Personally, I find this enormously difficult to do – when I *know* I’m right, when I feel threatened, when I see injustice.

This came home to me a few years back when I went to a talk by spiritual teacher Ram Dass. I asked him with my voice trembling with emotion how are we to make karmic sense out of the suffering of the oppressed. While I struggle with the answer he gave about the karma of those involved, I was touched when he called me on the anger that he felt from me and his challenge for me as an activist to live with compassion towards all – the oppressor (and for me that means the oppressor in me) as well as the oppressed.

In this time of disappointment for some and division for us all in our nation – we are called to practice compassion...and it is a challenge, at least it is for me.

For me, now, at those times when I am able to live in compassion, I find myself living not with sacrifice, but in the joy that comes from knowing my connection with all beings and the love that pulses through us all.

Our own practice of compassion need not, indeed, cannot be based on whether or not friends and neighbors, strangers and enemies practice it– It is not something that we *ought* to do it is the passionate response to love. Developing a heart of compassion does not lead to codependency or complacency for it always leads us to a place of love without attachment, it leads us equanimity, and hence, a heart for justice and the naming of the suffering of the world.

Instead of just talking about compassion as a spiritual practice – this morning I would like to invite you into a meditation on loving-kindness, called metta meditation. This version of the metta meditation is by Buddhist scholar and activist, Joanna Macy. I offer it as one way to cultivate a heart of compassion.

*****Loving-kindness Meditation*****

You may have other ways to reach that place in you where live from compassion. We’ve seen it in the work of the shelter-helpers, Jean’s work against the death penalty, the humane trapping of mouse – all are the practices of compassion. Whatever it is, may you be both sure of your ability to do so and gentle with yourself in your practice.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama reminds us that, “If we are able to diminish our selfish instincts and develop a little more concern for others before our death, we have made good use of this life.”