

## Compassion Fatigue

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones  
preached February 26, 2023  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #100 Peace Like a River; #131 Love Will Guide Us; I Am Willing (by Holly Near).

On piano: Bagatelle No.1, Op.1 (2005), Valentin Silvestrov, Ukrainian, b.1937; Blackbird, Paul McCartney, arr. Jon Batiste; I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to be Free, Billy Taylor & Dick Dallas, arr. Nina Simone.

Readings: From “The Sound of the Genuine” by Howard Thurman and from Chapter 25 in the Gospel of Matthew, First Nations Version of the New Testament (both printed after sermon).

### Sermon

The religious historian Karen Armstrong asserts that most of the world’s philosophical and faith traditions hold something like the Golden Rule. For example, in China 3,000 years ago, Confucius taught this: “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.”<sup>1</sup> Written almost 1,400 years ago, the Holy Quran urges Muslims to extend care and hospitality beyond one’s tribal group. The Prophet Muhammad is quoted saying: “Not one of you can be a believer, unless he desires for his neighbor what he desires for himself.” As we heard in the reading from the Gospel of Matthew, followers of Jesus are held to a high standard of showing mercy to strangers and care for the most vulnerable members of the human family. Compassion is the common thread of many traditions. For Unitarian Universalists, the spirit of love is the source of the compassion we try to practice. Compassion is our motivation for empathy, respect, service, generosity, and a commitment to equity and justice.

Yet it can be hard to practice compassion. Today’s world is full of suffering, ignorance, pain, and injustice. The destruction of rainforests, west coast wildfires, and climate chaos are threatening species and human communities. The ongoing invasion of Ukraine is cruel and senseless, and it’s now past the one-year mark. Yet it’s not the only military conflict our world has witnessed in recent years. The devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria have caused an ongoing humanitarian disaster, but it’s not the only one. At the borders of many countries, and in refugee holding camps, refugees are seeking asylum and safety from persecution, oppression, and starvation. Some governments respond with hospitality, but many others respond with hostility. In American cities and suburbs, unhoused people look for a safe place—any place—to pitch a tent for protection from the rain and cold. You, no doubt, can supply other examples that burden your spirits.

Given such heartbreaking facts, it’s a challenge to keep our hearts open. We may feel compassion fatigue. Coming from Latin origins, the root of the word *compassion* means to *feel with* another, or to *suffer with* another. No wonder compassion can wear us out. Yet when we think of it as an expression of love and inter-connection, compassion means more than just *suffering with* another person or creature. It means not wanting to cause suffering in the first place. We want to reduce harm to other beings and the natural world. We want all human beings to flourish, to be safe, and to be happy. Compassion is the recognition that we are mutually dependent and inter-connected, and compassion is the act of care based on that reality.

In the founding story of Buddhism, nearly 2,500 years ago it was foretold that a young prince named Siddhartha would be a great leader. As the prince grew up, his parents kept him

comfortable and kept him in the palace all the time. They protected him from the painful realities of the world. But the young man was curious, and he convinced the palace guards to take him for a carriage ride around the region. In the villages, he was astounded to see, for the first time, people who were sick and in pain. So, he learned about human sickness and suffering. When he saw a dead body, he had to ask for an explanation. And he learned about human mortality and loss.

These discoveries compelled him out of his easy life and onto the road. He became a traveling teacher and a poor monk, whom we know as the Buddha. He showed that *we suffer* when we try to avoid the reality of life, rather than bearing witness to life with honesty and mindfulness. He showed that *we cause suffering* when we forget that we are inter-connected with everyone and every being. Buddhism is a rich religious tradition which spans the globe. It started with the Buddha and his disciples, and it blossomed into ever-larger circles of practice and reflection. The Buddha's insights about compassion and mindfulness have changed the world, but they would not have done so if he had not built communities to carry on his teaching. To grow in compassion, and renew our compassion, communities are crucial.

It was in a religious community about 60 years ago that the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman delivered good advice about knowing yourself and knowing your limits. He said:

There is something in you that waits, listens for the genuine in yourself... You are the only you that has ever lived..., and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will, all your life, spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.

Sometimes our desire to see ourselves as a person of compassion can mislead us or overwhelm us or be used against us. For example, I am not the only person I know who has felt the demands of relatives or friends that if I am really a compassionate person then I have to help them. I have to help them even if it causes me harm. We can feel trapped into endless helping, even when another person takes no responsibility for their own actions. We can get hooked by the drive to do for another what only they can do for themselves. Furthermore, we can get a rush from telling them what they should be doing, because we think we know what's right. Compulsions and burdens like these may indeed fatigue us, but they are not expressions of compassion.

Before the Buddha went out on the road as a teacher, he sat under a tree in contemplation. He meditated alone, for 49 days. This reminds me of the words of Howard Thurman. He said: "Sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your mind, so many different kinds of signals." Yet "there is something in you that waits, listens for the genuine in yourself. Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through you?"

Before Jesus of Nazareth began his own ministry of teaching and healing, he went into the wilderness alone, for 40 days. The Christian season of Lent began this past Wednesday, and it lasts 40 days. This period of time recalls his time spent in the wilderness. On his long wait, Jesus thought about how he felt he was called to live. He doubted whether he was up to it.

"Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through you?" He prayed and waited for the sound of the genuine to flow. Only then did he begin his traveling ministry, gathering disciples as he went. He built a community of people who taught and lived by compassion and human inter-connectedness. After he was gone, his followers carried that ministry forward.

In its various religious expressions, the Golden Rule says: Do not do *to others* what you would not want for *yourself*. Treat others as you would like to be treated. To treat our compassion fatigue, or to prevent it, we need to treat ourselves as kindly as we would like to treat others.

Dr. Andrew Bein is a Sacramento therapist and mindfulness teacher. He wrote a book entitled *The Zen of Helping*. Speaking to other helping professionals, he writes that compassion fatigue results in a loss of the energy and clarity we need in order to be present for those we seek to support. It's hard to pay attention to another person if we are worn, tired, resentful, anxious or otherwise distracted. For this reason, caring for own wellbeing is important. Self-care is a form of compassion too. Self-care doesn't erode generosity, patience, and kindness; it restores them.

We can practice compassion to ourselves with enough rest, nutritious food, and activities that give us joy. When we judge or belittle ourselves, we can give ourselves a break. We can take time with people who care about us. We can connect with people who inspire us.

One of the ways I restore myself is by reaching out for mutual support. Five years ago, I became friends with a minister who serves a UU church on the East Coast. We check in by text and by telephone conversation every now and then. We share ideas and listen to stories of our ministries. He's about 17 years younger and has been in the ministry for less time than I have. When we talk, I am amazed at how committed and compassionate he is. I am amazed, and a little embarrassed. He gets energized about an injustice taking place in his community or the country, and he speaks out. In addition, he can recount a touching exchange he's had with a church member. He speaks with such *care* about them. Sometimes when I compare myself to him, I feel compassion-deficient! Imagine my surprise when I found out he sees me in the same way that I see him. He said that I demonstrated compassion, I practiced being present with other people, and I cared about them. Well, I didn't want to talk him out of that impression.

Our conversation made me appreciate that we shore up each other's compassion. You could call our friendship a mutual inspiration society. When one of us doesn't have quite as much compassion as he thinks he should, the other seems to provide a little extra. We balance each other. The point of my story is that to practice compassion in a sustainable way, being connected in a community is crucial. It's essential aspect of balance and self-care.

Of course, to experience compassion fatigue, we first gotta practice compassion. Otherwise, we're just feeling cynicism or greed and ignoring our common humanity. It can be so easy to be caught up in the vicious intolerance fueled by disinformation on social media and by some noisy and cruel news commentators. The enemy of compassion is not our weariness or heartbreak. Compassion's enemies are fear, resentment, and separation from our sense of belonging to one another. To me, it is a blessing to spend most of my week with people who earn their compassion fatigue honestly.

A few years ago, I was waiting at a red light behind a few cars at the end of an exit ramp. It was a clear Sunday morning, and I was heading to church. Standing by the light pole was a person holding a cardboard sign asking for money. "Anything helps," it read. I was used to seeing this worn-out looking person at that stoplight on many Sunday mornings. As the light changed to green, the car in front hesitated. The window came down. An arm reached out, and the hand held out a couple of green bills of money. In the privacy of my car, I voiced exasperation at this brief delay, and felt my judgment rise at the gesture of giving money to someone begging at a

highway exit ramp. How will *that* help? How do we know they're truly homeless? Maybe they'll use money for drugs or alcohol! What a foolish thing!

I felt righteous--and right. Then I realized that the person in the car was a member of this congregation. They were also headed to church. I was embarrassed for myself. That other driver may not have been analyzing the usefulness of their gift. They may not have thought they were solving a social problem. They simply may have been making a gesture of kindness--reaching out and making eye contact with a person in a vulnerable situation. So I ask you: Which one of us do you think would be arriving at church with a better attitude on that Sunday morning?

For me the lesson of this has little to do with the question of whether it's helpful or pointless to give to a person begging for money. Nor does the lesson have to do with rushing to judgment, but that would be a good one. The lesson is that, even with our good intentions, it's easy to run low on compassion. This can be a result of exhaustion, perfectionism, impatience, negative self-judgment, or all kinds of stressful situations we encounter. We can fall short of how we want to live, act, and speak to others. For me, this makes it so important to be in a caring and healthy community like this one.

This community is where we can feel accepted and loved as the ordinary human beings that we are. This is where we can find forgiveness for being impatient, distracted, fatigued, and not perfect. This is where we can find inspiration from other people. In community we can renew our values and restore our strength to live by them.

When our own compassion runs down, we can be assured that this community has a vast supply of it. We can find energy and momentum from our shared goodwill, generosity, patience, empathy, and courage. This momentum carries us when our compassion gets thin. And when our compassion gets revived and strong again, we can give some back to the momentum of our community.

It seems to me that compassion isn't meant to wear us down, though sometimes we do get weary. Nor are deeds of compassion meant to make us feel good about ourselves, though sometimes they might have that effect. I think that the practice of compassion is nothing more than an outward expression of our basic humanity. It is a recognition that we are inter-connected. We are connected with other people, with other creatures, and with all of nature.

We express care and we practice compassion because we are connected. What a blessing it is. So may it always be. Amen.

## Reading: Matthew 25, First Nations Version of the New Testament<sup>2</sup>

This is a well-known passage from Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. It reflects the call to compassionate care and service. This comes from the First Nations Version of the New Testament. This new translation uses the storytelling style of Indigenous North Americans. Among other religious terms, it refers to God as *Creator* and Jesus Christ as *the True Human Being*, and as *the Chief*. Matthew 25 speaks of the day of judgment.

When the True Human Being comes in all of his power and shining-greatness, along with all of his spirit-messengers, he will sit down in his seat of honor.

All nations will be gathered and come before him. He will choose between them like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats to his left.

Then the Chief will say to the sheep on his right: “The blessing of my father rests upon you. Come into the land of Creator’s good road that has been prepared for you from the beginning of the world.

“For I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was hungry and you fed me. I was a stranger, and you gave me lodging. When I needed clothes, you gave me something to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in prison, you visited me.

“When did we do all these things for you?” the good-hearted ones asked him.

“I speak from my heart,” he answered them, “whatever you did for the least important of my fellow human beings who needed help, you did for me.”

Then the Chief will say to the goats on his left, “Go away from you me you who have bad hearts, into the fire that burns everything up, made for the evil trickster-snake and his messengers.

“For when I was hungry, you gave me nothing to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me no drink, and when I was a stranger, you turned me away. When I needed clothing, you gave me nothing to wear, and when I was sick and in prison, you failed to visit me.”

“Honored One, they questioned, “when was it that we saw you like this and did nothing?”

“I speak from my heart,” he answered back. “when you did not help the ones who needed it the most, you failed to help me.”

## Reading: “The Sound of the Genuine,” by Howard Thurman<sup>3</sup>

This is entitled “The Sound of the Genuine” by the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman (1899-1981). In 1953, he became the dean of the Chapel and campus chaplain at Boston University, a Methodist institution. He was the first African American minister to be appointed to such a role in a dominant-white university. While at Boston University, he was a mentor to Martin Luther King Junior, a young doctoral student. Thurman taught King and other students about Mohandas Gandhi’s theories of nonviolence as a way of life and as a political strategy. Later, in San Francisco, he co-founded the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples.

There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the genuine in yourself—and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born.

You are the only *you* that has ever lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all the existences, and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will/ all of your life/ spend your days on the ends of strings/ that somebody else pulls.

There is in you something that waits/ and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. [Yet] sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds of signals, so many vast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations long before you were

even a thought in the mind of creation, and you are buffeted by these. And in the midst of all of this, you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through to you? . . . .

The sound of the genuine is flowing through you.

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York, 2011: Anchor Books).

<sup>2</sup> *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL, 2021: InterVarsity Press).

<sup>3</sup> Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston, 1981: Beacon Press).