

The Obligations of Compassion

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“The Obligations of Compassion” Compassion is really the act of going out of your way to help physical, spiritual, or emotional hurts or pains of another. Join with me this morning and let’s examine together the ways of compassion in our lives.

Every year at the end of June, the General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists happens at a mid-sized city somewhere in the U.S. This year, about 5000 UUs gathered to learn from each other, celebrate shared values and conduct the business of the Association. This year it happened in Portland, Oregon. I believe you heard a little bit about it last month.

On Saturday of the Wednesday through Sunday event, Rev. Clark Olsen was presented with the Distinguished Service Award, the UUA's highest honor. Part of the presentation was an abbreviated account of Olsen's career as a Unitarian Universalist minister. The presenter, moderator Jim Key began by describing Olsen's graduation from Oberlin College and Harvard Divinity School and his first settlement in parish ministry in Berkeley, California. Rev. Olsen wasn't sure he was cut out for parish ministry, but he succeeded there, establishing himself as an innovator, a trait that he would draw on later in his career.

Then, said Key, like a thunderbolt out of the blue, came Selma. Olsen was shocked by the images of Bloody Sunday, and then he was gifted with plane tickets from members of the Berkeley fellowship that made it possible for him to follow his heart there. It was the chance meeting at Brown Chapel with two colleagues whom he had known in his student days—Orloff Miller and James Reeb—that changed his life.

He has told the story of that night—the dinner at Walker's Cafe, the attack by racist hoodlums on the street, the terrifying trip with Jim to a hospital in Birmingham, holding his hand as he drifted into unconsciousness—so many times.

And each time, his eyes have watered and his throat has tightened, making speech difficult, and his listeners' eyes and throats have as well. Tears embarrass him, and yet he is loved, for those tears remind us that our hearts are often broken in this work, not once, but over and over again. And yet, we stay with it. And he did...

Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs continued by saying: "Fifty years after that moment of vivid solidarity... with the clarity of purpose etched deep into our hearts, we returned to Selma to honor those who went before..."

Fifty years into this journey toward wholeness, Unitarian Universalists come together in small, high holy circles to take up again the obligations of compassion."¹

It's really an extraordinary phrase that Rev. Eller-Isaacs used—"the obligations of compassion". You won't find it in the text posted on the UUA website, but if you

¹ <http://www.uua.org/ga/virtual/2015/business/iv> downloaded in July, 2015

watch the video of the actual presentation at GA, he deviates from his text to coin that expression.

Compassion is really the act of going out of your way to help with the physical, spiritual, or emotional hurts or pains of another. It is related to empathy, or the understanding of another's feelings. Empathy is often illustrated as opposed to sympathy, which is pity or feeling sorry for someone. Sympathy is a perfectly fine emotion. It is sometimes disparaged as condescending, but I for one don't see any harm in recognizing that someone is having a hard time and regretting that. It's concern for other people, nothing wrong with it. But sympathy does assume a certain distance between people whereas empathy draws its power from identification with the other person.

I don't mean identification in the undifferentiated and too often, disabling sense of emotional contagion. In emotional contagion, the person feeling empathy can't tell the difference between what they're feeling and what the other person is feeling. The identification I mean refers to the fact that I can recognize that both another person and I are humans with potential and frailties, dreams and emotions, ups and downs. I recognize the other's feelings because I've felt it, or at least, something very close to it. Compassion takes empathy a step further still unto acting upon that sense of identification.

I think when Rev. Eller-Isaacs used the phrase "the obligations of compassion"; he meant to invoke that relationship as well. Being compassionate isn't particularly easy. It usually means being completely present to the grief or other distress of someone else, giving them your human presence so they have some relief from isolation. That requires standing in the face of pain and most of us shy away from pain, both our own and others'.

Some of you have probably heard the following story:

A little girl was late coming home for supper. Her mother made the expected irate parent's demand to know where she had been.

The little girl replied that she had stopped to help her friend, Janie, whose bicycle was broken in a fall.

"But you don't know anything about fixing bicycles," her mother responded.

"I know that," the little girl said. "I just stopped to help her cry."

So, compassion can look lots of different ways. It CAN look like giving someone a ride; it CAN look like helping someone build a house; it CAN look like calling to express condolences after someone has had a death in the family; it CAN even look

like fixing a bicycle; but harder to recognize is that it can also look like helping someone cry.

Unitarian Universalists are fairly notorious among religious denominations for having a poor theology of death. This is a very broad generalization, and I know that it's important to be able to recognize and honor individual differences from that generalization, but there is a certain amount of utility in generalizations when you don't over rely on them, so bear with me. We UUs are right in line with mainstream American culture in the way we often handle troubles in our lives. We tend to tough it out, to think that if we try harder, we can overcome. We resist change, we often regard imperfection as a moral failing, we think that a positive attitude will make all the hurt go away, etc., etc. The tricky part is that sometimes, all of the above are true (*except, maybe not the imperfection as moral failing thing; I can't think of an instance where I'd consider that true.*)

However, in our infrequent moments of quiet reflection, we may have occasion to acknowledge that toughing it out takes a heavy toll, that we can't always overcome, no matter how hard we try, that change is inevitable, and that sometimes, someone's idea of a positive attitude at the wrong time may mask normal emotional reactions and worse, may engender shame.

So, what does all this have to do with our shallow Unitarian Universalist theology of death? **It's this: a person has to acknowledge the shadow side of life to fully appreciate the sunny side.** And when I say shadow side, I don't mean wallowing in sorrow. That's a very common misunderstanding. I'm sure it's very well-intentioned to say "chin up, look on the bright side", but it can be construed as non-acceptance; it can cause isolation and pain.

Good intentions are not necessarily related to good outcomes.

People just beginning to study Buddhism often regard it as a very negative religion because there's so much talk about suffering and death. Buddhists focus on the inevitability of suffering and death as a way of emphasizing one of their core beliefs-that is, the impermanence of EVERYTHING. Nothing lasts, everything changes-and that's tragic if you expect things to last. But impermanence is simply the way life is. Everything that is alive at one point will die at some other point. All good times, all relationships, all bad times, all civilizations, all lives-will come to an end. And it isn't some method for telling good people from bad ones-good and bad things happen to just about everybody.

And by accepting this very simple fact rather than resisting it, we increase our ability to choose how to live our lives. Acknowledging death, strange as it may seem, actually enhances the quality of our lives.

Joan Halifax, a PhD in medical anthropology and a Zen Buddhist priest, has worked with dying people for 40 years. These experiences, coupled with her Buddhist perspective on living and dying has given her extraordinary insight into the nature of the process of death and into compassionate interactions with the dying. She has worked with hospital and hospice personnel to help them develop their ability to express compassion and has written a Being with Dying curriculum for use in their training – they learn how to interact with both the dying patients and their grieving loved ones that does not deny the reality of grief and loss. Especially in a culture that too often DOES deny the inevitability of pain and loss and death, such teaching is necessary.

I'd like to share that method with you now. Halifax used the mnemonic device of G.R.A.C.E. to describe the process of expressing compassion she recommends. G is for gathering attention. R is for recalling intention. A is for attuning both to self and to the other person. C is for considering what is actually going on and what interventions might serve the purpose. Lastly, E has 2 parts-engaging and ending.² Remember, although Halifax's curriculum is directed towards people who provide care for the dying, the development of compassionate behavior need not be limited to that population.

The story I shared with you earlier today about the little girl who helped her friend cry will do well as an illustration of the process of compassionate intervention.

Halifax describes the first step, the G, as a time to pause and focus our attention in preparation for expressing compassion. As she describes it, there is no particular action to be taken. What's needed is just a moment to be fully present and not be distracted by other needs. It may be quite brief. In the story, the indication that the little girl focused her attention on her friend is only that she stopped at all when she must have known her mother was waiting for her and would be upset that she would be late.

The second step, R, is simply stated by the little girl. She says she stopped to help. She didn't know anything about repairing bicycles, but she also knew that her friend needed more than that concrete action. She saw that her friend was crying and was suffering emotionally. That need could be addressed, even by a little girl without bicycle repair skills. Recalling your intentions can also be done in an instant.

The next step, A, or attuning to self and other, is more complicated and may well take some practice to get good at. It is important to check in with yourself first, in much the same way that parents on an airplane are encouraged to put on their own

² Halifax, Roshi Joan, PhD. G.R.A.C.E. © "Process of Compassion-based Interactions in the Clinical Encounter", 2012.

oxygen mask before assisting their children with theirs. The idea behind this is that you can't help others if your own unmet needs, whether those be physical, mental or emotional, get in the way. Only when you've checked in with yourself do you begin, indeed CAN you begin, to observe the experience of another without judgment. Halifax describes this process as opening a space within **you** where a mutual encounter between you and the person you are trying to express compassion for may unfold. Part of the process of expressing compassion is allowing for this unfolding.

As for our story, I think we may have to infer that this step occurred. There is no indication that the little girl said anything to her friend Janie about "bucking up" or "stop crying over a bicycle", so it seems reasonable to imagine that the necessary emotional space for compassion to be expressed had been created.

The little girl shows us quite plainly that she considered what was going on with Janie and what interventions might be both possible for her and helpful. She saw that Janie had a broken bicycle and hurt feelings. She couldn't do anything about the broken bicycle, but she could do something about the hurt feelings, so she addressed those. The intervention she chose after considering was appropriate to the situation.

The last letter, E, is perhaps the most difficult. It is important to note that it comes LAST in the process. The little girl Engaged with Janie by helping her cry. The concrete action or intervention she chose AFTER considering her options was to help her cry. She was ethical in that she did not offer help that she could not deliver and also in that she was addressing Janie's need and not her own. There is nothing in the story that suggests to me that the little girl helped Janie because she needed to think of herself as a helpful person. In itself, that is not unethical, but a need to be seen as helpful can lead to unhelpful behavior, which can include being unethical.

The little girl's choice of behavior was, in Halifax's own words, "principled compassion: mutual, respectful of all persons involved, and as well, it was practical and actionable".

Remember that I said the last step, E, was 2-part? The second part is ending. When the encounter or intervention is over, the person expressing compassion needs to be able to move to the next person or task without hesitation and without lingering, inappropriate attachment. Halifax says that it's important to acknowledge our own acts of compassion. Otherwise, it will be difficult to end one encounter cleanly and continue helping. Even if you don't work with dying people, there will always be a need for compassion. Not being able to end well makes resilience more difficult. Eventually, it can lead to burn-out. The little girl DID get home after all. She was able to end the encounter, acknowledge herself for her act, and move on.

The story as it's usually given does not describe her as resentful, burned out or martyred, so it seems reasonable to suppose that she will show compassion again.

I suspect that we all have our stories of when compassion was absent. Shockingly, we all sometimes avoid other people who are in pain. Michael S. Hogue, associate professor of theology at the Unitarian Universalist theological school, Meadville Lombard, writes about social worker Jane Addams' observations that poor people often go way out of their way to help other people in their neighborhoods. She attributed this to what she called their "recognition of their common material precariousness". She said that experiences of shared vulnerability are fundamental to the expression of compassion. Maybe we avoid that feeling of vulnerability, indeed, even unto blocking our own ability to be compassionate. Hogue goes on to say that finding ways to share experiences of vulnerability has the effect of bolstering expression of compassion. His work goes on to point to social justice applications, but it is easy to see how this relates to our interpersonal relationships as well.³

Noted social work researcher, Brené Brown also notes the link between vulnerability and compassion, but she comes at the phenomena from the opposite side of the equation. Her years of research into the experience of shame, with its capacity to shut down our natural compassion can be combated most effectively by consciously taking risks, by intentionally allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. This is very difficult work, as most of us avoid letting our defenses down and exposing ourselves to being perceived as weak or soft or able to being hurt.

It's tough to learn to express compassion when doing so exposes that tender, vulnerable side. More often, we substitute being "nice", but as UU minister Rev. Dr. LoraKim Joyner pointed out in her workshop about growing compassionate consciousness last November, compassion isn't about being nice.⁴ We all tend to protect ourselves from things that might harm us, including negative emotional experiences. The late Marshall Rosenberg, author of Non-Violent Communication, now more commonly known as Compassionate Communication, pointed out that a need (like protection) not met, can lead to feelings of shame, which frequently cuts off expression of compassion.

According to Dr. Brown's work, there is no such thing as positive shame.

Shame is the feeling that one's inherent self is tainted and bad. It is sometimes confused with guilt, but they may be distinguished. With experiences of guilt, a particular behavior is considered bad. Guilt may be useful in the overall process of learning, but shame teaches nothing of value in anyone's life. People experiencing

³ Hogue, Michael S. PhD. "Vulnerability and Compassion", 2014.

⁴ Joyner, Rev. Dr. LoraKim. Compassion: It's Not About Being Nice (workshop), 2014.

shame are in the grips of a very powerful emotion, and usually try to hide their feelings of worthlessness. They try desperately to cover up their perceived vulnerability. Surely, this cuts them off from expressing their natural compassion. Brown, in her book, The Gifts of Imperfection, writes, “We cannot selectively numb emotions, when we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.”⁵

Rev. Renée Ruchotzke, leadership development consultant for the Ohio-Meadville District of the UUA, considers offering compassion to others to be the essence of pastoral ministry. She writes, “Often, ordained ministry is held up as ‘real ministry,’ relegating other forms of ministry to lesser status. I think all forms of ministry are important and complementary.”⁶

May we all learn to offer compassion to each other. It is part of anyone’s journey towards wholeness and offers the possibility for richness of community beyond our wildest dreams.

Every religion speaks with great yearning about acts of compassion. Indeed, so important is it to Buddhism that the spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama is considered to be in the successor in the line of incarnations of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara. In Judaism and Christianity, God is called the Father of Compassion, in Islam, compassion is one of the chief attributes of Allah. Compassion is central to both Hinduism and Jainism.

But performing acts of compassion takes more than just nice thoughts; it takes courage and learning. It requires that we have the strength to be vulnerable. Rev. Eller-Isaacs, one of the presenters at GA just this past June, said in his sermon “A Tolling of Bells” from a couple of years ago, “the circle of compassion must grow until we are no longer able to be numb to the pain. We can no longer suffer in silence. We have to learn to cry”.⁷

May we be likewise.

⁵ Brown, Brené, PhD. I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't), 2007 and The Gifts of Imperfection, 2010.

⁶ Ruchotzke, Rev. Renée. 5 Shades of Ministry, 2014.

⁷ <http://www.unityunitarian.org/uploads/6/1/0/3/6103699/010613.pdf>, downloaded on August 19, 2015