



# *Compassion*

## Small Groups: February 2015

Love. Compassion. Empathy. These are central virtues in Unitarian Universalism. Every Sunday, we begin our services with the words *Love is the doctrine of this congregation*. This reminds us that it is not creed or ideology or dogma that provides the foundation for our spiritual practice and tradition. Rather, it is the call to love one another, to show kindness, to empathize and walk with others in joy and struggle that we hold as our highest principle. This reminds us that our theology is not a noun, but a verb, a practice. It matters how we live.

If love is our doctrine, then compassion must be our practice. Among the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism, one I hold closest is the commitment to promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. This moves us from an ideal principle (like our first principle to promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people) to the level of how we actually live its truth in the nitty gritty work of human relationships. Compassion asks us to think about how we treat each person, each living thing. It asks us to reflect on how we speak and think and act toward people whom we do not agree with. It asks us to be kind in how we treat strangers, and how we speak of people we've never met. It also asks us to be able to hold our own ego gently, being able to step aside from the places where we want to hold on tight to what we think we know and take time to walk a mile in another's shoes. This work of compassion is deeply transformative. Perhaps the most spiritually transformative work anyone can do. It hits us at all the common, human, familiar places of anger and fear, of pettiness, of ego, of victimhood, of seeking control. It meets us at all those places, if we let it, and moves us to be gentle with ourselves and others, and to expand our view beyond the littleness of our perceptions to a larger truth of our interdependence, a larger truth of love.

In her book, [Twelve Steps to a More Compassionate Life](#), Karen Armstrong quotes from the Charter of Compassion which reads, "Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity." Compassion is a foundation of all religious teaching, even if it gets covered over by politics, power and greed, which can and does too often distort the spiritual message of many religious traditions. Reclaiming the practice and principle of compassion is key to leading our communities, large and small, from our individual lives and families, to our communities and society.

As Unitarian Universalists, the deep wisdom of our history and tradition is a call to make compassion a basis for our relationships and connections, approaching ourselves and others with an abiding loving kindness. We seek relationships based not on judgment and separation but a desire to understand and even feel, or empathize with another person, so that we might better understand the fullness of the experience of humanity, so that we might better understand suffering and injustice, so we might walk together to build a world of great compassion, kindness and justice.

Yours in love,  
**Rev. Susan**



# *Living the Theme: Compassion*

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience compassion and what you learned from the practice.

## **1. Practice a Loving-Kindness Meditation**

Approaching others and all of creation with compassion is a central tenet in many religious traditions, but it is perhaps most fully developed in Buddhism. Buddhist teachings talk about the "4 limitless ones": Loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. We are taught that our ability to grow these qualities with meditation and practice is limitless.

The basic steps of loving-kindness meditation are to sit quietly and comfortably, and recite this meditation. There are many versions of a loving-kindness meditation. This one comes from a song in our teal *Singing the Journey* hymnal supplement. Feel free to have a card with the meditation written on it to help you recite it. Imagine yourself surrounded by light and these good blessings as you recite:

May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well.  
May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well.  
May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be whole.

The next step involves wishing the same for someone close to you. Think of a family member or friend, picture that person in your mind surrounded by light as you offer the recitation for that person, "May [my friend] be filled with loving kindness....."

Next, picture a neutral person who you see often; someone in the grocery store, dry cleaner, your mail carrier, and offer this recitation for that person.

Next, offer these blessings for someone who you find difficult to be around; not someone who you are deeply angry with, but someone who you find somewhat challenging to be around, or someone with whom you are experiencing a strain in your relationship. Again, picture that person in light and surrounded by these blessings.

Finally, send these blessings to all people, to all living things. Imagine all the people you've thought of, including yourself, and more people if you wish, all held in light, as you recite these blessings for "all." "May all be filled with loving kindness. May all be well..." You might even imagine the earth, inviting this positive intention for all living beings.

## **2. Test your own implicit bias**

A number of studies have shown that people often have an empathy gap. Studies show that people watching others go through a tragedy will feel greater empathy if the people they are watching are of the same racial or ethnic group. Another type of test is the implicit bias test, which reflects biases we may hold around gender, race, or class, even if we do know or want to have such a bias. Harvard University has been gathering research on implicit bias. Implicit bias can shape our unconscious, even unwanted, projections onto others, and can inhibit our ability to show compassion. They can also affect racial disparities in hiring, housing and the criminal justice system.

Find time this month to take one of these implicit bias tests. What did your test show? How is having a more explicit awareness of bias helpful in developing greater compassion for all people?

The Harvard test can be found here: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/research/>



## *Some Questions to Live With*

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. **What is the most powerful experience you have had with receiving compassion?** Who showed you compassion and what impact did it have?
2. **Have you had a profound example of showing compassion toward someone?**
3. Is it possible to be too compassionate? **What does compassion fatigue feel like and why might we experience it?** Are there advantages and disadvantages to being a caring and compassionate person?
4. **Have you ever had to draw boundaries, say no, or separate yourself from someone out of compassion, either for yourself or that person?** Are there boundaries or limits to compassion?
5. **Has being compassionate ever required courage? When and how did you find the courage?**
6. In our highly mediated world we are easily connected to tragedy and suffering experienced around the world. How does this connectivity affect you emotionally? **Do you think it increases compassion and connection or is it too overwhelming?**
7. In our city it is a common site to see people soliciting financial donations on street corners. What are your thoughts when you see these people? **How does compassion shape your response?**
8. What does compassion sound like? **What are the words you use to express compassion for others?**
9. **What does a compassionate organization (company, school, place of worship, community) look or sound like?**
10. **Who is one of the most compassionate people you know and why do you think so?**
11. **What tools or practices have you found that help you grow compassion in your own life and perspective?**
12. **How have your views or experience of caring and compassion changed over your lifetime?**
13. **What serendipitous acts of kindness do you recall?**
14. **Is it important to show compassion to people we dislike?**
15. **Are there ways that you could be more caring and compassionate?**
16. **Is it possible to be caring and compassionate toward some people and not toward others?**
17. **How do we teach compassion? How do we teach it to our children?**



## Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

### *First Thoughts and Wise Words*

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**Compassion:** empathy or deep sympathy for another's suffering or misfortune, accompanied by a desire to alleviate that adversity as if it were one's own

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*As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate.*

E.B. White

*If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.*

Dalai Lama

*Anxiety is love's greatest killer.*

Anais Nin

*We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries.*

Karen Armstrong, Charter of Compassion

*Compassion is not just feeling with someone, but seeking to change the situation. Frequently people think compassion and love are merely sentimental. No! If you are going to be compassionate, be prepared for action!*

Desmond Tutu

*Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*Compassion is not religious business, it is human business, it is not luxury, it is essential for our own peace and mental stability, it is essential for human survival.*

Dalai Lama

*An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

*The most beautiful people are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern.*

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

*My father lives in a local assisted living facility, and he is able to be in his own apartment despite increasing disability because of the compassionate care he receives there. His needs vary depending on how long it has been since his last fall, and the caregivers do whatever is needed, allowing him to be as independent as he can be. I am grateful for their attentive compassion, and humbled by it.*

Worship Associate

*The dew of compassion is a tear.*

Lord Byron

*Compassion will cure more sins than condemnation.*

Henry Ward Beecher

*Have compassion for all beings, rich and poor alike. Each has their sufferings.*

Buddha

*Compassion is the basis of the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. One is not able to feel compassion for another unless one feels compassion for oneself. If one's prevalent self-judgment is a negative one, this lack of self-compassion influences your attitude towards others.*

Small Group Facilitator



*I would rather feel compassion than know the meaning of it.*

Thomas Aquinas

*The more you are motivated by love, the more fearless and free your actions will be.*

Dalai Lama

*Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)  
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace  
And saw, within the moonlight of his room,  
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,  
An angel writing in a book of gold:-  
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,  
And to the presence in the room he said,  
"What writest thou?"--The vision raised its  
head, And with a look made of all sweet accord,  
Answered, "the names of those who love the  
Lord." "And is mine one?" said Abou,  
"Nay, not so," Replied the angel. Abou spoke  
more low, But cheerily still; and said, "I pray  
thee then, Write me as one that loves his fellow-  
men."*

*The Angel wrote, and vanished. The next night  
It came again with a great wakening light,  
And showed the names whom love of God had  
blessed, and Lo!*

*Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.*

James Leigh Hunt, writing about Arab Muslim  
saint Abou Ben Adhem

*I remember talking with a friend who has  
worked for many years at the Catholic Worker, a  
ministry to the poor in New York City. Daily she  
tries to respond to waves of human misery that  
are as ceaseless as a surf in that  
community. Out of my deep not-knowing I  
asked her how she could keep doing a work that  
never showed any results, a work in which the  
problems keep getting worse instead of better. I  
will never forget her enigmatic answer "The  
thing you don't understand, Parker, is that just  
because something is impossible doesn't mean  
you shouldn't do it!"*

Parker Palmer, The Active Life

*My wish, indeed my continuing passion, would  
be not to point the finger in judgment but to part  
a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls  
between people, the veil of indifference to each  
other's presence, and each other's wonder, each  
other's human plight.*

Eudora Welty

*Compassion: cum patior—to undergo with, to  
share solidarity with suffering which is quite  
different from pity. 'Pity' shares its root with  
'piety,' connoting condescension and  
condescension implies separateness from  
someone else's weakness or misfortune. But  
compassion derives from awareness of our  
shared vulnerability.*

Hannah Dresner

*Ego boundaries must be hardened before they  
can be softened. An identity must be established  
before it can be transcended. One must find  
one's self before one can lose it. The temporary  
release from ego boundaries associated with  
falling in love, sexual intercourse or the use of  
certain psychoactive drugs may provide us with  
a glimpse of Nirvana, but not with Nirvana  
itself...Nirvana or lasting enlightenment or true  
spiritual growth can be achieved only through  
the persistent exercise of real love.*

M. Scott Peck

*And in this ever-evolving world, on ever-  
evolving Earth, amid these ever-evolving bodies,  
perhaps there is a Love that remains a constant  
and mysterious presence; a Love within which  
every breath is held and released; a Love where  
we live and breathe and have our being, in every  
moment, in every dimension; a Love from which  
we each have emerged in birth; a Love into  
which we will return in death.*

Rev. Susan Maginn, UU Minister

*True compassion is not just an emotional  
response, but a firm commitment founded on  
reason. Therefore, a truly compassionate  
attitude toward others does not change, even if  
they behave negatively. Through universal  
altruism, you develop a feeling of responsibility  
for others: the wish to help them actively  
overcome their problems.*

Dalai Lama

*Don't speak to me about your religion; first  
show me how you treat your people. Don't tell  
me how much you love your God; show me how  
much you love all God's children. Don't preach  
to me your passion for your faith; teach me  
through your compassion for your neighbors. In  
the end, I'm not as interested in what you have to  
tell me or sell as I am in how you choose to live  
and give.*

Cory Booker





*Why practice compassion? Our common human goal is to experience physical well-being and emotional contentment. We are all seeking happiness. I benefit from helping another, therefore experiencing feelings of gratification. His or her suffering is alleviated and feels relief.*

*What are some ways we can develop compassion? We can: develop feelings of empathy for our fellow creatures (both human and animal), i.e., imagine what he or she may be experiencing or suffering; recognize that we all have things in common (and not focus on differences). We need food, shelter, affirmation and love; acknowledge our common humanity. Open your heart and feel what the other may be experiencing even when this other person may be an aggressor, a stranger or one who mistreats you. Practice doing something to help make another's day happier; it may be a smile, a kind word, a greeting, a conversation or an errand.*

Small Group Facilitator

*Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship

*Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.*

Karen Armstrong, Charter of Compassion

### Many, Many Loves

*So many things we can love  
a man, a woman, a friend, a cat.  
We can love a sugar maple  
turning orange from the bottom up;  
we can love a weeping beech  
with its twisting arms, the lush tent  
branches make sweeping the ground.  
We can love a pond, a shore, a boat.*

*We can love a painting, a flag,  
abstractions like honor and country.  
We can love icons and temples.  
A house, a yard, a woods, a path  
that leads us wandering toward  
the place we'd most like to be.*

*Some can love a car - I never could -  
a book, a doll, a necklace or ring.  
Some can love family and some can't.  
Some - the luckiest - can love  
themselves without narcissism,  
just saying, Well, I am this. I could do  
better now and probably I will. - Marge Piercy*

*Humans—who enslave, castrate, experiment on,  
and fillet other animals—have had an  
understandable penchant for pretending animals  
do not feel pain. A sharp distinction between  
humans and “animals” is essential if we are to  
bend them to our will, make them work for us,  
wear them, eat them—without any disquieting  
tinges of guilt or regret. It is unseemly of us,  
who often behave so unfeelingly toward other  
animals, to contend that only humans can suffer.  
The behavior of other animals renders such  
pretensions specious. They are too much like us.*

Dr. Carl Sagan & Dr. Ann Druyan

*When we encounter a truly compassionate man  
or woman we feel enhanced. The names of the  
Quaker prison reformer Elizabeth Fry (1780–  
1845), Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), the  
hospital reformer, and Dorothy Day (1897–  
1980), founder of the Catholic Worker  
movement, have all become bywords for heroic  
philanthropy. Despite the fact that they were  
women in an aggressively male society, all three  
succeeded in making the compassionate ideal a  
practical, effective, and enduring force in a  
world that was in danger of forgetting it. The  
immense public veneration of Mahatma Gandhi  
(1869–1948), Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–  
1968), Nelson Mandela, and the Dalai Lama  
shows that people are hungry for a more  
compassionate and principled form of  
leadership... But in many ways compassion is  
alien to our modern way of life. The capitalist  
economy is intensely competitive and  
individualistic, and goes out of its way to  
encourage us to put ourselves first.*

Karen Armstrong



*There are times when compassion is effortless. Other days, burnout. With one person, I'm totally present. With the next, I might as well be on*

*Mars. Sometimes the chance to care for another human being feels like such grace. But later on, I'll hear myself thinking, "Hey, what about me?"*

Ram Dass

## **Additional Resources**

### **Articles:**

Guided Self-Compassion Meditations (audio):  
<http://www.self-compassion.org/guided-self-compassion-meditations-mp3.html>

Read and sign the Charter for Compassion:  
<http://charterforcompassion.org/the-charter>

### **Videos and Films:**

David DeSteno on the Science of Compassion:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWrKKUq71CQ>

Song: "Compassion" by Lucinda Williams  
*"Have compassion for everyone you meet... you do not know what wars are going on down there, where the spirit meets the bone."*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zep7oVm3Tw>

(Trailer) Documentary "Serving Life" about maximum security prisoners caring for other prisoners in hospice:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzPzmeieXPE>

### **Books:**

Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life by Karen Armstrong

How Can I Help? By Ram Dass and Paul Gorman