

Going to the Wound: Compassion in Unitarian Universalism

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Story *Nanette's Baguette* by Mo Willems

First Reading from Resmaa Menakem¹

... compassion is not a milquetoast principle. When you say the word compassion in the larger world, there almost this softened quality to it... I look at the word compassion and actually it's a very hard, robust principal ... Part of the word compassion is passion, and passion has this kind of verve... this kind of energy... There's a quality of conviction with compassion ... that there is something to be done. ... And so when I think about compassion, I think about doing. I think about purpose. I think about practice. I think about moving. It is not just this soft, 'Oh I really care for you, and we're gonna hold hands and do Kumbaya, and look deep into each other's eyes ...

Second Reading by Henri Nouwen²

"Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

Sermon

So far today we have compassion as a listening presence in pastoral care, as active doing, and as going where it hurts.

I think compassion might be all of those things. And however we frame it, compassion takes courage.

When Gautam Narula was 15 years old, he was (he says) a socially awkward top student and a skilled chess player. Justice issues were not on his radar.

¹ Resmaa Menakem 2019 Interview with the Compassion Center at Arizona State University, previously available at <https://compassioncenter.arizona.edu/sites/compassioncenter.arizona.edu/files/A%20Conversation%20on%20Compassion%20with%20Resmaa%20Menakem%20-%20Transcript.pdf>; condensed for clarity

² Henri Nouwen in *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Image Doubleday, 1983) 6-7.

But one day, he heard about Troy Davis, who had been convicted of murdering a police officer. If the name Troy Davis is familiar – later on, he became a public face of death row injustice. But this was before he was well known – and Gautam had just learned that after 17 years on death row, the state of Georgia was planning to execute Mr Davis one week before the Supreme Court would hear his case. He also learned that the conviction was almost entirely based on witness testimony, most of which had been recanted.

And yet, the state of Georgia seemingly couldn't wait one more week to execute Mr Davis. Gautam was horrified. So he did the only thing he could think of – and it was a pretty radical idea for a 21st century teenager. (I know – I had two of them.) He wrote an actual physical letter – on paper - to Troy Davis to let him know someone outside cared. (He says he had to have someone show him what to do with the stamp.)

It seemed ... small, useless, but to his surprise, Mr Davis wrote back and asked him to visit. Gautam says he didn't want to go to death row, and spend time with a convicted murderer. This was way out of his comfort zone. He was afraid.

But, he went. And he discovered that Mr Davis was warm, fun, loving. Over time, as the execution was in fact postponed, there were more visits, letters, and phone calls. Davis started calling Gautam his nephew; and Gautam called him "Uncle Troy." Davis taught Gautam dance moves and celebrated his SAT scores, he listened to what was hard in Gautam's life; he shared advice and his plans for what he would do when he got out, because he was sure he would get out.

Gautam spent a large part of three teenage years with Uncle Troy on death row. And working to free him.

There was a series of execution dates with last-minute stays, and Gautam was outside the prison with a crowd of protestors each time. Except the last time. That was the evening when the group was told there was a stay of execution, so Gautam and the others left. There was no one outside the prison when Troy Davis was executed that night.

Gautam shares this story – in greater detail – on the Moth Radio hour³ and in his book "Remain Free."

It's a story of compassion. A teenager, drawn toward suffering by a sense of connection to another human being, who did something – who reached out even though it was scary, even though he didn't know how, even though he didn't really want to. And who was present and listened. And a man on death row who practiced compassion toward an unknown kid, listening and giving of himself to accompany Gautam through the trials of teenage life. The story centers Gautam because he's the one who is still alive to tell it, but I don't want us imagining this as one-sided. "Compassion," says Buddhist nun Pema Chodron, "is not a relationship between the

³ <https://www.themoth.org/stories/coming-of-age-on-death-row>

healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals."⁴ This was two people who chose to care, and to love – and to be present to, and suffer with, each other through a very difficult time.

Compassion, from its Latin roots, means to suffer with. Not to feel bad for, not to take care of, not to fix or save, not to hold hands and sing Kumbaya with, but to suffer with. Even across differences, even when we are afraid.

It's not "a milquetoast principle." Compassion calls us to go where it hurts, to fully immerse ourselves in the condition of being human.

That doesn't make it joyless. Even on death row, Gautam and his Uncle Troy found joy together – over and over.

And it doesn't make compassion passive. Staying in a relationship of "suffering with" takes intention and effort.

I think most of us are born with a capacity to be actively compassionate. But living into that potential in our society is not easy. Perhaps it never has been; maybe that's why most religions emphasize compassion. Henri Nouwen, author of one of the readings, put it this way:

When we are honest with ourselves, compassion is neither our central concern nor our primary stance in life. What we really desire is to ... maintain a safe distance from others. We do not aspire to suffer with others.

On the contrary we develop methods and techniques that allow us to stay away from pain. Hospitals and funeral homes often become places to hide the sick and dead. Suffering is unattractive, if not repelling and disgusting. The less we are confronted with it, the better.⁵

I might add prisons to Nouwen's list of places where we hide suffering. And ICE detention centers. Our society is set up so that the more privilege one has the less suffering we have to encounter. And most of the time, when we have the option to maintain a safe distance from suffering, most of us feel an inclination to do so. We don't generally aspire to suffer with.

And compassion can be even harder across differences of identity or culture.

Most of us learn, from an early age, to view such differences with fear and even disgust. This is not an accident. It may be rooted, in part, in ancient practices to promote tribal cohesion; it is definitely rooted in modern practices to promote systems of dominance. Womanist theologian Keri Day says that:

Hierarchal domination and injustice are built upon the disgust of neighbor due to that neighbor's differences. Disgust as a political emotion is ... essential to understanding how

⁴ Pema Chodron, from *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Shambhala Publications) and quoted all over the internet.

⁵ Henri Nouwen in *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Image Doubleday, 1983) 6-7.

hierarchy and power gain their legitimacy within cultures. A key tool of subordination and oppression is projective disgust of those who are viewed as different and therefore inferior.⁶

The practice of compassion across those differences is difficult ... and it is essential if we are to build a more just world. Day says that a practice of compassion, that, in her words “demands an encounter with the strangeness of the neighbor” is, what will “make a different future sustainable and possible.”

The practice of Compassion – this non-miquetoasty kind of “suffering with” that’s active and across differences – is how we find our way to justice and a better world.

Where do we begin?

One of my favorite seminary professors, Eboni Marshall Turman, said simply “Go to the Wound.” The wounds in ourselves, in each other, in the world. Practicing orienting toward where it hurts – and finding a way past the barriers and the opportunities to turn away.

Gautam Narula, turning toward the suffering that was hidden away on death row, in spite of the barriers of inertia, helplessness, fear, difference and privilege.

Each of us, when we respond to our own woundedness with kindness and caring, when we respond to the wounds of another with a loving presence, and when we respond to the wounds of the world with the work of justice.

There are a lot of wounds – so many and so painful that they can become overwhelming. Practicing compassion doesn’t mean engaging deeply with all of them. But it does invite us to notice the wounds, and the barriers, and – just a little more often – to choose to go there, and suffer with.

This is a theological call of Unitarian Universalism. We often think of theology as a pre-set system of beliefs into which we fit our lives and our understanding of the world. But this practice flips that around. Theologian Willis Jenkins speaks of “locat[ing] theological meaning within practices of response to the world’s wounds.”⁷ He argues that theology is not some predetermined understanding that is simply applied to new problems as they crop up, but is instead a practice of finding meaning in our responses to the wounds of the world.

If that’s so, then we don’t practice Unitarian Universalism by defining our values and then using those definitions to interpret our lives and the world. It’s not calling for an intellectual application of ideas. It’s calling for a shift in orientation, a bodily turning toward places that hurt. We live this faith when we go toward the wound, respond to it, and make meaning of those responses together. And as we do, we both discern who we are theologically and practice the compassion that begins to build a society that reflects our values.

⁶ Keri Day’s chapter entitled “Love as a Concrete Revolutionary Practice,” from her 2015 book *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives*.

⁷ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice and Religious Creativity* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/27834. See, especially page 73 and 98-99.

We can do this as individuals – like Gautam and his Uncle Troy. But we come together, because we know, deep down, that together is how we live best. And I wonder what a theological call to go – together - to the places that hurt might mean for this congregation.

The first thing I think it means is that we are together, and we don't all have to do everything. Sometimes the places that hurt within us are already quite enough, thank you. When something (a worship service or small group experience or meditation practice or music or a conversation or an experience of beauty or awe) ... when something - invites a tender orientation toward our own wounds, we begin to practice compassion.

And together ... when a pastoral encounter invites us toward someone else's pain – or when we allow someone else to move toward our pain – and just be present there; when we serve others at the Community Breakfast or Sheriden Prep, or ease someone's pain with the perfect baguette; when we protest or call our legislators or attend a meeting (maybe right here! Tomorrow!) about a potential data center ... all of that moves us toward a wound and a response.

And as Unitarian Universalists, all of that is where we create meaning, together.

The meaning that connects us. That offers joy and purpose. That keeps us going. There is theology in our responses to the wounds of the world.

An act of compassion is an act of courage – it draws us closer to suffering in another, the world or perhaps ourselves. It calls us to respond – even if that response is hard. And it opens us up to wrestling with what it all means.

May we – ever more – find the courage to practice a compassion that calls us to go to the places that hurt in spite of all the barriers; and to do something there, however small it may seem. And as we do, may we find meaning together, with hope and joy in one another, and care and justice for all. Because that is what it's all about. And it is good to do it together.

May it be so.

Amen