

COMPASSION By Jean Lumpkin

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*...[W]e stand at a threshold, the new year
something truly new, still unformed, leaving a
stunning power in our hands.*

What shall we do with this great gift of Time, this
year?

We began our service with those words from
Kathleen McTigue. We are beginning a new
year – actually, I think we are beginning a new
decade (since we didn't start numbering with a
year "zero"). And new beginnings are a good
time to reflect a bit on life.



For our first service in this new year, we have chosen to look again at the subject
of Compassion. It's an important concept psychologically, spirituality and
perhaps even physically. With some re-writing, most of what I will talk about
today comes from a sermon I preached a few years ago (03-04-2001). It was
actually the first sermon I ever wrote, and I was pleased to be asked to give it
again.

Our second Principle states that we affirm and promote justice, equality and
compassion in human relations. But what exactly is compassion?

The Webster's dictionary I consulted says that compassion is:

a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for someone struck by
misfortune, accompanied by a desire to alleviate the suffering; mercy.

Well, that's a start – but there's so much more to it. Psychologist Arthur Jersild
gets at some of the deeper aspects of compassion when he says that "Compassion
is the ultimate and most meaningful embodiment of emotional maturity. It is
through compassion that a person achieves the highest peak and deepest reach in
his or her search for self-fulfillment." Now that sounds like something worth
investigating and developing!

In addition, recent studies have suggested that there are physical benefits to
practicing compassion. I've read that people who practice it produce 100 percent

more DHEA, which is a hormone that counteracts the aging process, and 23 percent less cortisol — the “stress hormone.” And somewhere else I read that there may be a connection between intelligence and compassion. I couldn’t find the article again when I looked for it, but if I remember it right the implication was that developing compassion could *increase* intelligence!

[Part 1] Let’s begin to look at some of the qualities involved in compassion.

A few years ago I read in O Magazine an article by Robert Karen, Ph.D., called Power of Apology. Although the article wasn’t about compassion, per se, it told the story of someone who was compassionate.

The article began with a Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of Vietnamese children fleeing a napalm attack in 1972. In the center of the picture is a small girl, running naked down the road with an expression of unimaginable terror. Her clothes had been burned off and her body was scorched by napalm. John Plummer, the man who had ordered that raid on the village where this child lived and had flown the plane that dropped the bombs, saw the photo the next day and was devastated.

Since that attack in 1972, the girl in the photo, (I’ll just call her Kim, as I’m not sure how to pronounce her full name) had 17 operations but she is still scarred and in permanent pain. Eventually she moved to Toronto and became an occasional goodwill ambassador for UNESCO.

In 1996 she was speaking at a Veterans Day observance in Washington, D.C., not far from Plummer’s home. She said in her speech “If I could talk face-to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him we cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present…” Plummer was in the audience and sent a note to her. When he pushed through the crowd after the speech to reach her, she opened her arms to him. He fell into her arms sobbing, and she comforted him and told him “I forgive.” The article included a photo of the two of them together 5 months later, their heads touching, both smiling. {4:49}

I suspect that different people will have different reactions to that story. For some of you it may be inspiring, for some of you it may seem unrealistic. (Isn’t there a limit to what someone can or even should forgive?) The author himself says he would never tell anyone they “should” forgive a particular thing—that life is too complex for that. We could talk more about the complexities of forgiveness, as the

article did, but that would get us off track. The point I want to make is that I think Kim was able to forgive because of an ability to be compassionate.

Dr. Karen went on to say that “our ability to forgive is a measure of our ability to recognize the humanity in someone who has hurt us... It represents the ability to tolerate disappointment in others and accept that they won’t always be what we need them to be.”

These abilities, I believe, are at the heart of developing compassion.

Karen’s article about forgiveness also talks about the importance of our acknowledging at least some of our own liabilities, our human limitations.

“No one is able to look at themselves whole,” he writes: “No one is so evolved as to deal creatively with every loss and insult. No one is free from illusions about themselves, positive and negative. No one is immune to the joys of victimhood and revenge. We all have this in us. We are all enmeshed to some degree in our inner dramas and the unimaginable passions and loyalties they represent, which hold sway over us in ways not even we can know. If we can see some of this in ourselves, accept it, be concerned about it, it is less likely to control or overwhelm us. We will have a better chance to stay connected, to expand our zone of connection, to dissolve whatever scar tissue we can from a life of hurt and conflict, and move on to the goodness of love.”

And, I would add—compassion for ourselves is part of what enables us to “embrace our limitations and move on to the goodness of love.” {7:07}

[Part 2: Compassion and Interconnectedness]

A few years ago I discovered writings about and images of Kuan Yin, often called the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion. She appears in Chinese scriptures around 400 A.D. Though her name varies a bit from country to country, she has been loved and revered as a goddess throughout Asia for a thousand years or more.

The only gods and goddesses I heard about in school were the Greek and Roman ones. I never found them to be very interesting or inspiring—they seemed like a rather dysfunctional, even pathological bunch—plotting against each other and causing lots of problems to themselves and to humans. But a goddess of compassion—well that sounded rather interesting so I did some reading about her.

Kuan Yin is portrayed in many different ways—I've brought with me today a statue of Kuan Yin in meditation. Sometimes she is shown riding a dragon or standing on a giant lotus, a flower that is associated with embodiments of compassion. Often she is portrayed holding in her hands her principal emblems—a precious vase and a willow spray, symbolizing the nectar of wisdom and compassion and her willingness to sprinkle it upon the head of all who invoke her aid. She has been compared to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and as with Mary, some people call on her for help in times of need.

As I've said, Kuan Yin is sometimes referred to as Goddess of Compassion, but she is also called, perhaps more accurately, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In Buddhism, a bodhisattva (boh-dee-sat-va) is an "enlightened being"—one who followed a spiritual practice with the goal of achieving full enlightenment, but chose to postpone entry into Nirvana in order to first help all souls attain enlightenment. And so it is said that Kuan Yin went back into the world to help everyone become enlightened and to bring comfort to people who are suffering or in pain. Her name means, literally, "she who hears the cries of the world."

In the Orient there are many temples dedicated to Kuan Yin and several celebrations for her every year. There are songs and poetry written about her. People have altars in their homes for her and make pilgrimages to the island where she is thought to have lived. Stories are told about the lives of people who were thought to be manifestations of Kuan Yin.

Kuan Yin has a following in our country as well as in the orient. And I have been particularly fascinated by the ways American women have been connecting with this concept of a being of compassion and are finding that concept useful. {10:32}

Through a book by Sandy Boucher, who writes about Kuan Yin and does Kuan Yin workshops around the country, I read about an artist, Mayumi Oda, who made a silkscreen of Kuan Yin holding a sword. The image is entitled "Goddess, Give Us Strength to Cut Through." Here is what Mayumi Oda has to say about the meaning of this image:

"It's about taking care of yourself! We have so confused compassion with sympathy. **Compassion is really the understanding of the whole world as one,** that there's no separation between me and you. If you just give and give and give because you have sympathy, you're not taking care of yourself, and then you're not

taking care of the whole world either. In the end you become a very angry person and you don't know why you're angry. I realized I would have to be able to say no to certain things, which was very difficult for me.”

“I gave my Kwan Yin the sword of wisdom and ruthless action. So that I can cut through that kind of [false] sympathy and allow my real self to act. And so that I can really take care of myself, too. And taking care of myself is taking care of others.” {12:12}

I like what the artist had to say about compassion. “Compassion is really the understanding of the whole world as one, that there's no separation between me and you.” Sound familiar? Our 7th Principle says that as UUs we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. **Compassion comes from that idea of interdependence—from a sense of connectedness with all life and a deep sense of the sacredness of all life. Such a feeling of connectedness is comforting and healing.**

I also like Mayumi’s message that compassion is about taking care of ourselves as well as others. The well-known “Golden Rule” states that “You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*.” Some form of this idea is found in the scriptures of nearly every religion. And we know from modern psychology that we need to be able to love *ourselves* before we are able to truly love others. So, too, we need to treat *ourselves*, as well as others, with compassion. Sometimes there will be tension in those two focuses—self and other. But both are needed.

[Part 3:]

Well, those are some of the foundations of compassion, as I see it—the view of our connectedness, the abilities to accept ourselves and others as less than perfect. I’d also like to say a bit about some misconceptions about compassion.

Sharon Salzberg, is an American Buddhist teacher who has been practicing Buddhist meditation for more than 25 years. In her book “Loving-Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness” she tells the story of a short trip she took to Calcutta with a friend while she was living in India.

When it was time to leave, we found we were running late to catch our train back. The only way we could get to the train station on

time was to take a rickshaw. In many other places in India, rickshaws are pulled by people on bicycles or motorbikes, but in Calcutta they are actually pulled by people running on foot. So, even though we hated the thought of being carried by another human being in this way, we caught a rickshaw to the station.

The rickshaw man took us by shortcuts, through dark streets and down back alleys. At one point, suddenly out of nowhere, an extremely big man approached the rickshaw driver and stopped him. Then he looked at me, grabbed me, and tried to pull me off the rickshaw. I looked around the streets for help. There were a lot of people everywhere, as there often are in India, but I did not see a single friendly face.

I thought, "Oh my God, this guy is going to drag me off and rape me. Then he's going to kill me, and nobody is going to help me!" My friend who was sitting with me in the rickshaw managed to push the drunken man away and urged the rickshaw driver to go on. So we escaped and got to the station.

I was very shaken and upset when we arrived in Bodh Gaya. I told Munindra, one of my meditation teachers, what had happened. He looked at me and said, "Oh, Sharon, with all the lovingkindness in your heart, you should have taken your umbrella and hit that man over the head with it!"

Salzberg continues by saying that "Sometimes we think that to develop an open heart, to be truly loving and compassionate, means that we need to be passive, to allow others to abuse us, to smile and let anyone do what they want with us. Yet this is not what is meant by compassion." "Compassion is not at all weak. It is the strength that arises out of seeing the true nature of suffering in the world. Compassion allows us to bear witness to that suffering, whether it is in ourselves or others, without fear; it allows us to name injustice without hesitation, and to act strongly, with all the skill at our disposal. [8:40]

Part 4: Compassion is something we can develop.

Many of us are brought up feeling that suffering is wrong or even shameful—something we shouldn't even pay attention to. But Buddha said that we must accept the fact that suffering is part of life, something we all experience. Salzberg

writes that: “The first step in developing true compassion is being able to recognize, to open to, and to acknowledge that pain and sorrow exist”... We must face pain and sorrow, yet not be overwhelmed by it.

“To view life compassionately, we [also] have to look at [not only] what is happening [but also] the conditions that gave rise to it.” All things that arise in life are due to a cause. Buddha said that “it is important to consider the human condition on **every** level: personal, social, and political” in order to understand why things are the way they are.

Salzberg gives an example of *how* looking at the cause of something can help us. She writes:

Once I knew two people who had both suffered from abuse in childhood. One, a woman, grew up to be quite fearful, while the other, a man, grew up to be quite angry. The woman found herself in a work situation with the man, disliked him intensely, and was trying to have him fired from his job. At one point in the process, she got a glimpse into his background and recognized how they both had suffered in the same way. “He’s a brother!” she exclaimed.

This kind of understanding does not mean that we dismiss or condone a person’s negative behavior. But looking at all of the elements that go into making up that person’s life, all the forces that shaped them, can provide an opening for forgiveness and compassion.

She adds “Compassion enjoins us to respond to pain, and wisdom guides the skillfulness of the response, telling us when and how to respond. Through compassion our lives become an expression of all that we understand and care about and value.”

And so it is my wish for all of us, as a community and as individuals, that we may nourish and grow our abilities to be compassionate -- towards ourselves and others. And may we become more and more aware in our everyday lives of **a sense of connectedness with all life and a deep sense of the sacredness of all life.**
{19:12}