

# THE UNIVERSAL SPIRIT OF COMPASSION

By Rev. Barbara W. ten Hove — Sunday, November 18, 2012

Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church, Bainbridge Island & N. Kitsap County, WA

**CALL TO WORSHIP:** Today marks for us the beginning of the Holiday Season, so we acknowledge the importance compassion plays during this time of year and in the many religions of the world. Though at times it seems as if religion is used as a club to hurt those who are different, if you dig just a bit, you discover that compassion is at the heart of all major religions. As an example, let me call you into worship with a wonderful story from the Jewish Hasidic tradition. (Scholars have discovered versions of it throughout the religious world.)

*A Rabbi had a conversation with God about Heaven and Hell. “I will show you Hell,” said God and pointed to a table. The people sitting at it were starving and desperate. In the middle of the table there was a large pot of delicious stew. The people round the table were holding spoons with very long handles. They found that it was possible to reach the pot to take a spoonful of the stew, but because the handle of the spoon was too long, they could not get the food back into their mouths. The Rabbi saw that their suffering was terrible.*

*“Now I will show you Heaven,” said God, and they went into another room, exactly the same as the first. There was the same table and the same pot of stew. The people, as before, were equipped with the same long-handled spoons—but here they were well nourished, laughing and talking. At first the Rabbi could not understand. “It is simple,” said God. “You see, they have learned to feed each other.”*

*(From Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching, adapted by Kirin Narayan)*

Let us create a little heaven of our own by feeding people in our community through our annual Thanksgiving food drive. Please join in Hymn #67, *We Sing Now Together*, as our children bring forth our food donations for Helpline.

**FLAMING CHALICE DEDICATION:** Our chalice today will be dedicated by Marilyn Gremse, for 14 years the Manager of Volunteer Services at Helpline House and a member of Cedars with her family for nearly 17 years. When I first arrived on the island four years ago, I asked Marilyn what I might do to help serve the Bainbridge Island community. She suggested I work at the food bank desk (called Fishline) for a few hours once a week, greeting and signing in clients before they shop. It has become a central part of my week. And watching the impact this small agency has on both its clients and volunteers (who are sometimes both) has given me an enormous appreciation for Marilyn and her work. I’ve invited her to dedicate our Flaming Chalice this morning.

[Marilyn speaks, followed by our Affirmation and song, *The Spirit of Cedars.*]

## TWO READINGS ON COMPASSION

This morning, I share two stories with you that speak of the universal spirit of compassion. Both are well known within their faith traditions and even beyond. Because they are so well known, we often forget just how powerful the messages are that come through these simple tales. Try to pay attention to what each tale aims to teach us about caring for others and compassion. The first is from the Gospel of Luke in the Christian scriptures.

*[Narrator:]* On one occasion a young man, expert in the law, stood up to test Jesus.

*[Young Man:]* “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

*[Jesus:]* “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”

*[Young Man:]* “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

*[Jesus:]* “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

*[Narrator:]* But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus,

*[Young Man:]* “And who is my neighbor?”

*[Narrator:]* In reply Jesus said:

*[Jesus:]* “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan—

*[Narrator:]* Remember, a Samaritan was a person no self-respecting Jew from Jerusalem would tolerate. Samaritans were the hated “other” in Jesus’ day.

*[Jesus:]* — a Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. The Samaritan went to the wounded man and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

*[Narrator:]* The parable ended. Then Jesus asked the young man,

*[Jesus:]* “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

*[Young Man:]* “The one who had mercy on him.”

*[Jesus:]* “Go and do likewise.”

### ***The Story of Siddhartha’s Discovery***

We now turn our attention to an even older story. This one comes from the ancient oral tradition of Buddhism. The person we have come to know as the Buddha was born the son of a king in India. His name was Siddhartha, and because his father loved him so much, and wanted him to never experience the hard realities of life, he kept him locked away in the palace. But Siddhartha was curious and longed to find out more about the world.

[Siddhartha:] “Father, please may I leave the gardens and go outside the walls?”

[Father:] “No, son.”

[Siddhartha:] “But father, your servant Channa will make sure I’m safe. I’ll be ok, I promise! Please may I see the city?”

[Father:] “I’m sorry, no.”

[Siddhartha:] “Please, father. I’m a grown man. I have a wife. She is going to have my child. I should take my place as your heir.”

[Father:] “Oh well. I suppose you must. You may go tomorrow, but you must stay with Channa at all times. Promise me.”

[Siddhartha:] “I promise.”

[Narrator:] The king relents because he has a plan. He quickly sends his men to the city with orders for the people to keep the old and sick people indoors. He orders all the streets cleaned, gives the people new clothes, and new plants for their gardens. No funerals are allowed. Everybody must smile and look happy for the prince.

Siddhartha and Channa go out into the city. At first, the young prince is delighted by all the happy people he sees. But despite the King’s efforts, not everyone can pretend to be young, and healthy and happy.

First, Siddhartha sees an old woman and he is shocked at her frailty. Next he sees a sick man and is moved by his pain and anguish. Then he sees a family mourning a dead man all wrapped in sheets and his heart breaks for their sorrow. Finally, he sees a holy man and wonders at his calm and peaceful demeanor. He returns to his father a changed man.

[Siddhartha:] “Father, I must leave my home. I must find the answer to all this suffering.”

[Narrator:] And that is exactly what Siddhartha does. This is the beginning of his journey on a new path, a path that ultimately gives birth to the religion we know as Buddhism.

Let’s sing a song with words from that tradition: #1031, *May I Be Filled with Loving Kindness*

**Sermon: *The Universal Spirit of Compassion***

Rev. Barbara W. ten Hove

May I, may you, may we—may all of us be filled with loving-kindness. What a wonderful wish, what a powerful prayer! Wouldn’t it be marvelous if around the world religious people of all kinds sang this song and meant it? How different things would be if humans blessed the world with love and compassion instead of teaching hatred as a religious value!

Sadly, this has never been the case. But perhaps because people have used religion as a battering ram for generations, we have come to believe that religion itself is the cause, not the people who spout the hate and kill the heretics.

I remember having an argument years ago with one of my best childhood friends. She, much to my regret, had left our UU faith to convert to a very traditional form of Christianity. One day she took me to a party with her fundamentalist friends. Though I tried not to engage, very quickly it became clear that these folks were trying to convert me. I felt hurt, and angry, and I remember saying back to them that Christianity was a bad religion because it had caused so much bloodshed and damage to our world. Of course, my friend's feelings were hurt, even though she did feel guilty that her friends had treated me unpleasantly. But, I recognize that I, too, jumped to conclusions about her faith. We both acted badly and it hurt our relationship.

These kinds of encounters, sadly, happen a lot in our world. Though thankfully no one died because of our differing beliefs at that long ago party, people do fight and sometimes die, pretty much every day, because somehow they've gotten it into their heads that God approves of their religion only. Or that God hates people who are different than them. Or that if they kill in the name of their God, they'll somehow be rewarded in heaven.

It's a vicious circle and we all know that it must stop. But how?

Karen Armstrong, one of the greatest living historians of religion thinks she knows how. And, because she knows more about most religions than I'll ever know about even my own, I'm inclined to listen to her.

I did listen to her when she spoke at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in June, 2011. At that gathering, she shared with us what she has been promoting across the world. It's called the *Charter for Compassion* and it's one heck of a radical document.

It's such a great document, that we've replaced, just for today, the usual printing of our UU Principles and Sources on the back of your Order of Service with the Charter. I hope you'll read the whole thing later and share it with your friends. For now, I invite us to read just the first paragraph together.

## ***THE CHARTER FOR COMPASSION***



**The principle of compassion** lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. 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 honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

**It is also necessary** in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others — even our enemies — is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

*CONTINUED...*

**We therefore call upon all men and women** ~ to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings, even those regarded as enemies.

**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. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

[\(The Charter for Compassion\)](#)

This is pretty powerful stuff. And it's all about a powerful concept called compassion, the root of which is co-suffering. As one definition puts it, *More virtuous than simple empathy, compassion commonly gives rise to an active desire to alleviate another's suffering.* [Wikipedia, 11/16/12].

This desire to alleviate suffering lies at the heart of many religions. Just think of the story of Siddhartha, who, when he sees suffering, realizes he can't just look at it, he has to do something, he has to change himself and become a co-sufferer—*have compassion*.

And the famous story of the Good Samaritan celebrates compassion, and in doing so also acknowledges its lack. The two who first pass the wounded traveler are the good and fine people of Jesus' day. They are the well-born, religious people who talk about others as if they care but walk past suffering when it inconveniences them.

Only the one who should, by all the standards of the day, despise the wounded man, helps him. This stranger who helped his enemy has become the watchword of compassion for the Christian world. Call someone a Good Samaritan and everyone knows what you mean.

Just as there are stories from these two very different religions that demonstrate compassion, other religions of the world tell similar tales. In Islam, Allah is called the Compassionate One and the Qur'an speaks often of Mohammed's compassion for others. Stories about the Prophet include such tales as this one:

A dying dog approached a follower of Mohammed. The man had no means with which to procure water for the dog, for wells in the desert dry up quickly. He noticed a small pool of muddy water in the vicinity. He tore his shirt, soaked it in the water, placed the dog in his lap and moistened its mouth with the wet cloth. Another Arab who saw this went to the Prophet and said, "One of your followers has touched a filthy animal, a dog, and should therefore not be allowed back here again."

Mohammed questioned, "What was he doing to the dog?"

“I do not know, but I saw him moistening its mouth with a torn piece of cloth dipped in muddy water,” replied the man.

“He is a better Muslim than you are, because he is kind to animals,” said the Prophet.

<http://end-to-suffering.blogspot.com/2007/07/prophet-muhammad-compassion-love-non.html>

In Judaism, God is also often called Compassionate, and the ability to feel compassion for another is considered a must for Jews. One of the greatest teachers of Judaism, Rabbi Hillel the Elder, who lived around the same time as Jesus, once gave an example of what we now call the Golden Rule.

When challenged to state the whole of Jewish law while standing on one foot, he did as asked and said these words: *That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.*

Hillel also taught his followers: *Whosoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whosoever that saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.*

[from Wikipedia, 11/16/12]

Karen Armstrong—and the good folks with her who are trying to reclaim compassion as the most important quality in all religions—look to stories such as these to remind us that religion is not and must not be about hardened positions and hate-filled actions. Of course, we know this, don't we? We're compassionate people, right?

Well, yes. But we all still have a lot to learn about compassion, and during the past year a small but stalwart Cedars group have been using Karen Armstrong's book, [\*Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life\*](#), as a guide to deepen their understanding of compassion and how to live it in their lives.

The book is extremely helpful in doing this and I urge more of us to read it and live its precepts. When I asked the class members what stood out for them, I heard one main thing. Like so many spiritual practices, compassion isn't just something you are—it's something you do. And like so many things we do, we need to hone our skills. We need to not only *be* compassionate; we need to *practice* compassion as well.

One class member told me of an experience she had after she'd been in the class for a few months. Driving in town, she saw a woman she knew – a difficult, hard-to-love kind of person. This woman had just suffered a painful loss. As tempting as it was for our class member to just drive away, she practiced compassion instead. Rolling down her window, she asked the difficult person if she was OK.

Then (and these are her words, changed slightly to protect both parties privacy), “*She (the difficult person) cried as she talked and then we parted. But she started to walk down into the park. So I called out to her to ask her if she was going for a walk and would she care for*

*company. We went for a short walk and while walking and talking we made arrangements to go the following week to see an exhibit together, which we did and had lunch at the museum too.”*

Though our class member says she didn't become great friends with the difficult person, her willingness to practice compassion made what was once a prickly relationship into one that has meaning and depth. I would be surprised if there weren't many stories like that in this room. It's where compassion starts, with people reaching out to care for others.

And yet, caring for others and feeling their pain as our own can take its toll. Compassion is not for the faint-hearted. As did the prince who became the Buddha, in order to cultivate compassion we have to be willing to look the hard realities of life in the face.

This is one reason I volunteer at Helpline every week. I need to be reminded regularly that even here on our small and seemingly idyllic island, people suffer. Each week I meet people who are homeless, who are hungry, who are unemployed, who are mentally ill. These are not some abstract “Other.” These are my neighbors, and just like the Good Samaritan I feel a responsibility to do what I can to help them.

Such responsibility can weigh heavy, I know. There is so much suffering all around us, here and far away, that at times it can feel overwhelming. I know I can get so burdened by all there is to do to make the world a better place that I can literally shut down. Going to Helpline each week opens my heart. But so, too, does being a part of this religious community.

For, as Karen Armstrong reminds us, religion at its best brings people together to act compassionately. And that compassion is shown here in some very fine ways, including all this food that is here before us today.

But one of the most compassionate things that Cedars does for our community is the annual Alternative Gift Project. It was started a decade ago by a group of Cedars members who longed for a way to honor their friends and family during the holiday season without buying more stuff for folks who didn't need it. Knowing about organizations around the country that help people give to charity as holiday gifts inspired them to imagine such a program at work here. And so, for ten years now, our Social Action Committee has done amazing work to create a catalog (now [online](#)) and make it easy for Cedars, plus our friends and our neighbors, to give gifts that enhance the world's compassion in extraordinary ways. Each year since Jaco and I arrived at Cedars, we've utilized this resource, sending the gift of compassion to friends and family.

It's so easy and yet makes such a difference. Think about who you want to honor with an alternative gift. Go on-line to the [AGP website](#) and check out the 14 programs our team has vetted for you. Some are international groups like **FINCA**, a micro-lending program helping some of the poorest folks around the world create jobs, and through work dignity. Some are national organizations like **Guide Dogs for the Blind**, which pairs carefully trained dogs with people who are visually impaired. Some are statewide, like **Food Lifeline**, whose mission is to end hunger in Western Washington.

And some are local, like the **Kathleen Sutton Inspirational Fund**, which assists women, residing in Kitsap, Jefferson, Clallam and North Mason counties, who are undergoing treatment for female related cancers and who are experiencing a financial hardship due to the expenses related to transportation costs.

Each of these groups is working to bring more compassion to a world powerfully in need of it. And we have an opportunity to bring that compassion to life through our gifts. Last year we raised over \$7000. Can we imagine doing even better this year? I challenge us to, but it means not only must *we* share our gifts in this way but we must ask our friends and families to help as well. Think of it as sharing the love. Think of it as spreading compassion.

For that's what it's really about, isn't it? Compassion requires of us a willingness to reach out beyond self to another. It challenges us to see the suffering of another as our own. It pushes us to live the Golden Rule, and truly treat others, as we would wish to be treated. I've always thought the Golden Rule was so easy. But the longer I live the harder I have to work at it. People are complicated. It isn't easy to feel compassion for everyone. In fact, it's damn hard.

But, as Karen Armstrong suggests, compassion is a practice worth learning because, though it may be hard, it really is the best game in town. Imagine if this morning Jews and Palestinians, instead of fighting, had compassion for each other and worked together to bring about peace. Imagine if Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in Pakistan could call upon all their many names for God and recognize that by whatever name God is known, the adjective all religions use to name Spirit is Compassion.

Imagine if Christians and atheists in our nation stopped calling each other names and instead worked together to end homelessness and hunger. It could all change for the better if we could, as the family of humanity, recognize that we are far more alike than we are different and learn to not only recite the Golden Rule but also live it.

It won't happen tomorrow. I know that. As I've learned, compassion doesn't just happen. It's a skill that needs to be cultivated. So, in closing, let me offer you just a few of the suggestions Karen Armstrong gives to help us develop this peacemaking practice. She has twelve steps. I've conflated them a bit in the interest of time.

- After you learn about compassion in your own religion and beyond, start by having compassion on yourself. No one is perfect, not even you. When you make a mistake, forgive yourself for being human and move on.
- Cultivate empathy for others, using your imagination to engender a sense of loving-kindness toward all.
- Take action when you can. Do something to bring more love and compassion into the world. What you do will be your gift to our planet—make it count!

- Recognize that you are still a learner, and grow, as they say in Buddhism, a “beginners mind.” In other words, approach the world with awe and wonder and recognize that in your one lifetime you will only know a piece of the story, not all of it.
- Aim to engage in real dialogue with others; listen and don’t talk *at* those you disagree with.
- Broaden your view to have compassion for people you may never meet, such as those we aim to help through our Alternative Gift Project.
- Even as you recognize you can’t know everything, learn what you can about what’s really going on in the world (and not just from your favorite source that speaks in the same voice you do).
- Work to see yourself or those you love in the faces of others. Make connections between your experiences and those of people who are suffering.

If we can do all this, we may get to Armstrong’s final and most challenging step: Love your enemies. This is Jesus’ most important message, also shared by many great sages, including one of the greatest icons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mahatma Gandhi. Here are his words, spoken toward the end of his life:

*Mine is not an exclusive love. I cannot love Moslems or Hindus and hate Englishmen. For if I love merely Hindus and Moslems because their ways are on the whole pleasing to me, I shall soon begin to hate them when their ways displease me, as they may do at any moment. A love that is based on the goodness of those whom you love is a mercenary affair.*

[From *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life* by K. Armstrong, pp.181-182]

Or, as Martin Luther King Jr., America’s greatest proponent of this, said, “Only goodness can drive out evil and only love can overcome hate.”

[From *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life* by K. Armstrong, p.182]

As religious people, we are called to a life of compassion. We are challenged to not use our beliefs (or lack of them) as a hammer against others but rather find, in our spirit, a loving-kindness that reaches out even to those we despise or who despise us. Recognizing that we have much to learn, we can still strive to grow a compassionate heart, develop an open mind, and offer our helping hands to our neighbors and even to those we might call enemies.

As we move into the holiday season, may we find it in our hearts, minds, hands and spirits to grow compassion and spread compassion wherever we can. Let us work to bring loving-kindness into our hearts, and may the Universal Spirit of Compassion touch us, and through us the ones we meet.

