

# All Souls Church, Unitarian

Covenant Theme Guide

February 2017

## “Compassion”

God’s dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.

Desmond Tutu

It isn’t love that makes the world go round but compassion – starting over in gentleness when love hasn’t been enough or other factors have failed: a gentle refusal to blame oneself or others and just begin again.

Nancy Shaffer, UU clergy, *While Still There Is Light: Writings from a Minister Facing Death*

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

Dalai Lama

We are not human because we think. We are human because we care. All true meaning is shared meaning.

Forrest Church, UU clergy, *Love & Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*

What if the task is simply to unfold, to become who you already are in your essential nature—gentle, compassionate, and capable of living fully and passionately present? How would this affect how you feel when you wake up in the morning?

Oriah Mountain Dreamer, *The Dance: Moving to the Deep Rhythms of Your Life*

This kinship with the suffering of others, this inability to continue to regard it from afar, is the discovery of our soft spot, the discovery of *bodhichitta*. *Bodhichitta* is a Sanskrit word that means “noble or awakened heart.” It is said to be present in all beings. Just as butter is inherent in milk and oil is inherent in a sesame seed, this soft spot is inherent in you and me.

Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart*

## COMMITTING TO COMPASSION

As Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen monk, points out, “Compassion is a verb”. It is not a thought or a sentimental feeling, but is rather a movement of the heart. As classically defined in Pali, compassion is “the trembling or the quivering of the heart”. But how do we get our hearts to do that? How do we “do” compassion?

Compassion is born out of lovingkindness. It is born of knowing our oneness, not just thinking about it or wishing it were so. It is born out of the wisdom of seeing things exactly as they are. But compassion also arises from the practice of inclining the mind, of refining our intention. The Dalai Lama once said, “I don’t know why people like me so much. It must be because I try to be compassionate, to have bodhichitta, the aspiration of compassion.” He doesn’t claim success - he claims a commitment to really trying. . . .

The state of compassion is whole and sustaining; the compassionate mind is not broken or shattered by facing states of suffering. It is spacious and resilient. Compassion is nourished by the wisdom of our interconnectedness. This understanding transcends a martyrdom in which we habitually think only of others, never caring about ourselves, and it transcends a self-centered caring in which we have concern only about ourselves and never bother about others. Wisdom of our interconnectedness arises hand in hand with learning to truly love ourselves. The Buddha said that if we truly loved ourselves, we would never harm another. For in harming another, we diminish who we are. When we can love ourselves, we give up the idea that we do not deserve the love and attention we are theoretically willing to give to others.

Sharon Salzberg, *A Heart as Wide as the World*

It is not until you become a mother that your judgment slowly turns to compassion and understanding.

Erma Bombeck

In Asian languages, the word for 'mind' and the word for 'heart' are same. So if you're not hearing mindfulness in some deep way as heartfulness, you're not really understanding it. Compassion and kindness towards oneself are intrinsically woven into it. You could think of mindfulness as wise and affectionate attention.

Jon Kabat-Zin

Compassion is loving others enough to say or do what is appropriate from an empowered heart without attachment to the outcome.

Gary Zukav

Being a good neighbour is about compassion, which is as warm-blooded as justice is cool-headed.

Julian Baggini

Compassion is the radicalism of our time.

Dalai Lama

### **HUMAN-HEARTEDNESS: THE CONFUCIAN IDEA OF "JEN"**

The prime virtue in the Confucian system is *jen*. *Jen* is the combination of 'human being' and 'two.' It is best translated as 'human-heartedness.' In the sociable Confucian ethic, one cannot become a person by oneself. *Jen* simultaneously embraces humanity toward others and respect for yourself. If you are a person of *jen*, you have the capacity to measure the feelings of others by your own. In public and private life, this means you have a largeness of heart that seeks to affirm others as you yourself would wish to be affirmed.

The Confucian ideal is *chun tzu*, translated as 'humanity at its best,' or 'the superior person.' If you have attained *chun tzu*, you are like an ideal host. Your attitude is not 'What can I get from these people?' but 'How can I accommodate them?' Because you have your own standards, you can take a gracious initiative rather than cling to convention. You are the best of convention because you have assimilated *li*, the social grammar of right behavior. The Confucian *li* covers every aspect of human conduct that fosters a sense of community.

It's all there, in the best of the Chinese classics, winnowed and enlivened by Confucius and taught by him to his students: everything from greetings, table manners, gestures of deference, filial behavior, leadership, worship, and leave-taking. Because you have practiced *li* and made it your own, you have a rightness of heart.

Gail Godwin, *A Natural History of the Heart-Filled Life*

Wounding and healing are not opposites. They're part of the same thing. It is our wounds that enable us to be compassionate with the wounds of others. It is our limitations that make us kind to the limitations of other people. It is our loneliness that helps us to find other people or to even know they're alone with an illness. I think I have served people perfectly with parts of myself I used to be ashamed of.

Rachel Naomi Remen

## COMPASSION IN ACTION

Compassion is a practically acquired knowledge, like dancing. You must do it and practice diligently day by day.

Karen Armstrong

Perhaps we are no longer a kind people. More and more, we seem to have become numb to the suffering of others and ashamed of our own suffering. Yet suffering is one of the universal conditions of being alive. We all suffer. We have become terribly vulnerable, not because we suffer but because we have separated ourselves from each other.

Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*

One must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent human being.

May Sarton

If I want to live my ability to be fully present and compassionate, my ability to be with it all—the joy and the sorrow—I must find the ways, the people, the places, the practices that support me in being all I truly am. I must cultivate ways of being that let me feel the warmth of encouragement against my heart when it is weary.

Oriah Mountain Dreamer, *The Dance: Moving to the Deep Rhythms of Your Life*

## COMPASSION AND HEALING

Most commonly we see such compassion in acts of giving to (those who are in need), or doing for (those who are sick or injured). But there is compassion of a third kind that comes even closer to the original Latin root of the word, *compati*: com—together or with, and pati—to feel intensely or to suffer. This third kind of compassion is the art and practice of being with those who suffer. . . the skillful, active use of compassion to transform human suffering. This is the practical alchemy of compassion as the universal solvent to solve, dissolve, and resolve the hard feelings, toxic thoughts, and bitter experiences of sickness and trauma.

This is the only kind of compassion that cannot be done at a distance. Giving to—we can send aid in the mail; doing for—can be done at an emotional distance. But being with takes us being there fully—body, mind, heart and soul.

You can't do this compassion solo. Don't kid yourself. You can tell the exact moment when it becomes effective: it is when the other person realizes that you care. Then, something intangible has been communicated, compassion has traveled from A to B, you have gotten something across . . . This is the skill: the capacity to connect with a fellow human being who is suffering. When you do, you will see the signs: shoulders relaxing, a deeper breath, brightening of the eyes, quickening of interest, a happier complexion, a smile, the gentle tears of joy.

Such caring, utterly human moments are the very essence of the quality of life. They are the result of compassion in action, as a verb.

Simon Fox, "Compassion Is a Verb" for the *Adventures in Caring* website.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to be compassionate? To cultivate compassion in a world that trains us to judge, criticize, compare, and blame?
2. How have you learned compassion? Are there limits to your compassion? Have you observed changes in the way you experience compassion?
3. Do you feel pressure to be more compassionate than you are? Is this pressure a good thing? Have you ever faked compassion? What were the results?
4. How does All Souls relate to your experience of compassion? Is the All Souls community part of a support system that enables you to practice compassion?

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