

MERCY

1 If there is a single definition of healing it is to enter with mercy and awareness those pains, mental and physical, from which we have withdrawn in judgment and dismay. —**Stephen Levine**, *A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as If It Were Your Last*

2 The Mercy of Allah is an Ocean, Our sins are a lump of clay clenched between the beak of a pigeon. The pigeon is perched on the branch of a tree at the edge of that ocean. It only has to open its beak. **Leila Aboulela**, *Minaret*

3 People who injure us are doing us a great favor because they are providing us with the opportunity of passing on the mercy that we have received. By showing mercy, we increase the mercy we receive. **Thomas Keating** in his book, *Active Meditations for Contemplative Prayer*

4 Ten percent of any population is cruel, no matter what, and ten percent is merciful, no matter what, and the remaining 80 percent can be moved in either direction. **Susan Sontag** [when asked what she learned from the Holocaust]

5 The Call of Universalism

...it is not enough simply to speak up about Universalism with our lips...we must further speak it with our lives...with the deeds and doings of our hands and hearts. We must, as the African American saying goes, "talk the talk and walk the talk." And let there be no illusions about it, dear friends, Universalism is a tough and radical doctrine...it is a hard and demanding gospel...for it insists that we each be constantly about the business of growing bigger, more inclusive and caring hearts...setting aside our little fears and prejudices...as we strive to care evermore widely for our brothers and sisters in the world. Universalism says (against all self-protecting common sense):

If there is a neighbor that needs a hand,
you lend one...

If there is a mouth that needs fed,
you share some of what you have to eat...

If there is a family that needs a home,
you build one...

If there is a captive who needs release,
you remove the bars...

If there is a mourner who needs comfort,
offer your embrace...

If there is a charity that needs support,
write that check...

If there is a stranger who needs welcome,
open your home...

If there is someone crying,
use your finger to gently wipe away their tears

If there is a man or woman or child anywhere in the world who needs your understanding, your compassion, your mercy, your support, your love, YOU GIVE IT...GIVE IT unstintingly and selflessly.

This is the demanding call of Universalism. . .this is not a casual Sunday walk in the park, it's a tough and foolish doctrine of inclusion and care that constantly challenges us beyond the narrow confines of our natural selfishness and fear...to ever wider circles of caring and compassion.

--**Scott Alexander**, from his sermon, Answering the Religious Right with the Big Heart of Universalism

6 From Thrift Store Saints: Meeting Jesus 25 cents at a Time, Jane Knuth

I am perfectly willing to put a check in the mail to whatever group is responding, perfectly content to let them handle it. I prefer to help people when they are calm, courteous, and grateful. I say to myself, "After they get things cleaned up, after the chaos is under control, if they need to learn a little about the Pythagorean theorem then I'm on it."

Within a week, four women come through the door of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Each of them is facing homelessness, and their stories are the messy kind that do not respond well to geometric logic. I am in high-avoidance mode. . . .

The fourth lady, the one who wants a blanket, is past crying. She doesn't appear to care at all what happens to her next. I ask what other assistance we can offer her. "Nothing," she says. She takes the clothing and the blanket, politely thanks me, and leaves the store with the same blank expression she came in with.

It is not a good thing when someone is so easily helped. It is not good when the poor are silent. It is her face that haunts me at night, hers that I remember.

Slowly, I am beginning to realize that I prefer tears to resignation. I prefer shouting, anger, and bitterness to a courteous hopelessness. I would rather deal with someone's mess than with their silence, because there is no way to clean up silence.

It must be I was never meant to discuss theology.

I prefer to talk about God when God is in the room.

7 From Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, Bryan Stevenson

--I told myself that evening what I had been telling my clients for years. I am more than broken. In fact, there is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.

--. . .if someone tells a lie, that person is not *just* a liar. If you take something that does not belong to you, you're not *just* a thief. Even if you kill someone, you're not *just* a killer.

--We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others. The closer we get to mass incarceration and extreme levels of punishment, the more I believe it's necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and-perhaps-we all need some measure of unmerited grace.

--The power of just mercy is that it belongs to the undeserving. It's when mercy is least expected that it's most potent—strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering. It has the power to heal the psychic harm and injuries that lead to aggression and violence, abuse of power, mass incarceration.

8 The Newer Colossus, a poem by Karen Finneyfrock

My feet have been wilting in this salt-crusted cement
since the French sent me over on a steamer in pieces.
I am the new Colossus, wonder of the modern world,
a woman standing watch at the gate of power.

The first night I stood here, looking out over the Atlantic
like a marooned sailor, plaster fell from my lips parting
and I said, "Give me your tired, your poor," like a woman
would say it, full of trembling mercy, while the rats ran
over my sandals and up my stairwell. I was young then

and hopeful.

I didn't know how Europe and Asia, eventually the Middle East, would keep pushing their wretched through the bay like a high tide. I am choking on the words I said about the huddled masses. They huddle on rafts leaving Cuba and we turn them back. They huddle in sweltering truck backs crossing the desert and we arrest them. I heard about a container ship where three Chinese hopefuls died from lack of oxygen pretending to be dishrags for our dollar stores. How can we not have room for them? We still have room for golf courses.

I am America's first liar, forget about George Washington. My hypocrisy makes me want to plant my dead face in the waves. The ocean reeks of fish and tourism, my optimist heart corrodes in the salt wind.

"Give me your merchandise," I should say.

"Give me your coffee beans. Give me your bananas and avocados, give me your rice. We turn our farmland into strip malls, give me things to sell at our strip malls. Give me your ethnic cuisine, your cheaply made plastics, give me, by trembling boatload, your Japanese cars. Give me your oil. Not so I can light my lamp with it, but to drool it from the thirsty lips of my lawn mowers. Give me your jealousy, your yearning to crawl inside my hollow bones and sleep in my skin made of copper." Look,

over there is New York. Doesn't it glow like the cherry end of a cigarette? Like a nebula from the blackness of space out here in the harbor? Wait with me. Watch it pulse like a hungry lion until morning. I should tell you to enjoy it from here. You will never be allowed to come in.

From the anthology, *We Will Be Shelter: Poems for Survival*, ed. Andrea Gibson (Write Bloody Press, 2014)

For Reflection and Discussion

A How would you define mercy?

B What has been the most merciful thing you have experienced?

C What is the most merciful thing you have done? What were the circumstances and what was your motivation?

D Has your understanding of mercy changed through the years? How do you account for these changes?

E How has your experience at All Souls affected your understanding of mercy or your ability to show mercy?

--by Mary Beth Hatem for covenant groups at All Souls Church, Unitarian