

No Mud, No Lotus
Rev. Tracy Sprowls
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This summer we have experienced one of the hottest summers on record. In addition to the heat taking its toll on us physically and mentally, the violence of this summer- the tragic shooting in Orlando, police officers being shot while protecting protestors, and the eruptions of violence in cities across our country and the around the world has taken its toll as well.

There is a question lingering in our souls that asks, “what is going on?” even as we must navigate the ups and downs of our own lives. These kinds of things, these disasters, these crises, linger in our psyche, they are wounds on our very souls. There is much work to be done to find our way back to the way we were or more likely, to find our way to a new normal.

What I have noticed when disaster strikes or a crisis occurs or tragedy enters our lives is that one of the earliest reactions most people have is that of kindness. Have you ever noticed this? When mourners in Orlando began attending the funerals of those murdered at the Pulse nightclub, a group of angels with massive wings shielded those grieving people from the hateful signs of the Westboro Baptist Church. When gun violence shocked our nation once again, a thousand origami peace cranes, originally from Sandy Hook elementary school, moved from the last shooting site to the new one. Over and over again, acts of love and kindness from strangers attempting to ease the grief and loss. Neighbors help neighbors, people give money, volunteers gather to clean up debris and organizations collect food and water and sundries to help the victims that have been left with disheveled and displaced lives.

In a crisis, kindness is an early reaction. People donate food; they bring in their cans of soup or their green beans, their diapers and blankets. They offer their homes. They feed their friends. They share their stories. Sometimes the kindness remains. Too often it isn't long before people get back to normal and pay less attention to being kind, offering assistance, or being compassionate. We are so rushed to get back to “normal” that we forget maybe “normal” isn't really all that it is cracked up to be.

I remember this clearly after hurricane Sandy hit our area. After the storm, my family was without power for 4 days. My congregation in Plainfield was without power for two weeks! I recall during that time that what I wanted was for things to get back to normal and I found doing my work as a minister brought some of that normality back into my life. So I made phone calls once the phones were up. I visited as many of the older people in the congregation as I could, sometimes taking over an hour to get somewhere that would normally take ten minutes. I even did a small wedding in someone's home. On the Sunday evening after the storm, I went to the UU congregation in Brooklyn to celebrate the installation of their first female minister in their 180-year history, some of you may remember her, Ana Levy-Lyons.

The Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper, minister of Judson Memorial Church, the historic social justice church in lower Manhattan, gave an excellent sermon. In it she talked about this reaction of kindness, how it was a normal and necessary reaction to a disaster such as Hurricane Sandy. She said yes, bring the green beans, bring the soup, but it cannot stop there.

She said that the world needs kindness, we must start with the green beans but we must move to a place of justice. We must always have a forward vision of justice; we cannot stop at kindness. We cannot stop at green beans.

I was inspired by her words and took them to heart. Yes we need kindness, we will always need kindness, but it cannot stop there. Our eyes, our hearts must be looking towards justice: from green beans to the grand scheme of peace on earth and justice for all. As Unitarian Universalists this might resonate with us. According to the words of our second principle we covenant to affirm and promote “equity, justice and compassion in human relations.” Justice is the work we do. It is a kin-dom of justice we aspire to create here on earth. For many Unitarian Universalists it is the work of justice that brings us through the doors of UU congregations everywhere and it is the continued promise of peace, justice and universal Love that takes us to the courts, on the streets, to the polling places and lunch counters and the protests and on and on and on.

But I have been thinking on her words recently and I have realized that maybe I don't quite agree with Rev. Dr. Schaper. Of course, justice is always a goal, a vision that we must always strive for and work towards. It is a destination towards which we must constantly be headed. But let me explain a bit about how I think differently today on what she had to say about kindness and justice back then.

When we look at the second principle, our focus often falls to that of justice. I would like to suggest that perhaps the focus of the principle should be on compassion. I believe everything starts from a place of compassion. Kindness is not synonymous with compassion. Kindness can be friendliness and helpfulness. But compassion, compassion comes from the heart. Compassion is putting oneself in another's shoes. It is staying open to another even when it is difficult, even when we are angry or hurt. Compassion is about connection, it seeks wholeness.

Rachel Remen, a writer and teacher writes, “Service is not the same as helping. Helping is based on inequality, it's not a relationship between equals. When you help, you use your own strength to help someone with less strength. It's a one up, one down relationship, and people feel this inequality. When we help, we may inadvertently take away more than we give, diminishing the person's sense of self-worth and self-esteem...Serving is also different to fixing. We fix broken pipes; we don't fix people. When I set about fixing another person, it's because I see them as broken. Fixing is a form of judgment that separates us from one another; it creates a distance. So fundamentally, helping, fixing and serving are ways of seeing life. When you help, you see life as weak; when you fix, you see life as broken; and when you serve, you see life as whole. When we serve in this way, we understand that this person's suffering is also my suffering, that their joy is also my joy...We may help or fix many things in our lives, but when we serve, we are always in the service of wholeness.”

I would say that to serve is to be a person who is compassionate. Compassion is to understand that the suffering of another is also your own suffering; that their joy is your joy. Compassion is meeting each person from the heart, whether you know them or not, whether you like them or not, whether you notice them or not. If each and every person made a commitment to live a life of compassion towards every living thing, including themselves, imagine what the world would look like?

One of the most powerful teachings in human history began with a broken heart, a heart torn open by compassion for the suffering of others. It is an unlikely story because it is about a prince who lived in luxury, never wanting nor needing anything, for he was protected all his life.

When Siddhartha was born, a holy man predicted that when he grew up Siddhartha would be a great king or a great holy man. The King, Siddhartha's father, wanted what he thought was best for the boy for he knew the life of a holy man was a difficult one. So he kept Siddhartha in the confines of the palace. Everything was beautiful and plentiful, everyone was young and healthy. Siddhartha saw no suffering, no illness, no fear or war. In short, he was protected from the world so that he could grow up to be a great king. But, the father could not control all things. He could not control the path Siddhartha would ultimately take. One day, the young Siddhartha left the walls of the palace on a journey and saw the great suffering in the world- First, he saw an old man leaning on a cane. From this he learned that people grow old. Second, he saw a very ill woman on the side of the road. From this he learned that illness and disease were a part of life. Finally, although his attendants tried to hide it from him, he saw a corpse in the middle of the road. With this, he knew that life was not endless but at some point all life comes to an end.

Instead of despair, Siddhartha felt compassion. He wanted to know how to end the suffering that these things brought. So, one night he left the comfort and security of the palace. He left the love of his family behind too, and he set out into the world to seek the answer to the end of suffering. For years he lived in the world, studying, searching, and observing. Finally, after some considerable time had passed, he removed himself to the forest where he sat under the Bodhi tree, declaring that he would remain there until he had achieved enlightenment.

“And then, suddenly, he was no longer Siddhartha. He was Buddha, the one who is awake. In a flash of unitive awareness he saw through the veil of seeming reality to the deeper reality of which we are a minute part. He saw all of existence in one glimpse. He saw everything *as it is*. In this flash of insight, called “satori,” he transcended his separate self and realized that all of the universe was one, and that he, too, was that one.”ⁱ

Out of this awareness of oneness grew two ideas: first, that human existence was all about suffering because we separated ourselves from this understanding of oneness and then focused on the wrong things. Second, that compassion was a genuine path to ending suffering.

Compassion, the Buddha says, must begin with ourselves. We need to love ourselves before we can extend this love to the rest of humanity and all of creation. It makes sense. If we are not forgiving of ourselves, how can we forgive another? If we cannot let go of anger towards ourselves, then how can we let go of it towards another? If we are disappointed or fearful about our own situation, do we not transfer that to the life of another? Peace in the world begins with peace in your own heart. Having peace in your heart, loving yourself and accepting who you are then affects your attitude towards the world.

Compassion is not something that is childish or sentimental but something worthwhile and with deep value.ⁱⁱ When you approach everyone with compassion, your attitude changes automatically.

The Dalai Lama writes, “I believe compassion provides the basis of human survival, the real value of human life, and without that there is a basic piece missing.”ⁱⁱⁱ He goes on to say that compassion creates further conditions in the human heart. With compassion comes sensitivity to the feelings of others. There is an enhancement of empathy. The generosity of spirit and means increases. The desire to help others becomes a factor.

We must cultivate compassion in ourselves and then we are capable of extending compassion to others. This compassion is not a feeling of closeness we have for those we know or a sense of pity when looking at others in need. This compassion is not sentimental or sweet. Genuine compassion is based on respect for the other and on the idea that others have the right to be happy and free of suffering just like you do. This compassion even extends to those we may not know or trust. Victor Parachin, a minister and a writer for a journal called *Growing Parent*, and a member of the All Souls Church in Tulsa, OK suggests that one should extend compassion even to our enemies. He tells this story in way of an example:

“In September, 1965, Bill Schiebler was a 24 year-old officer in the Army and on his way to Vietnam. Before leaving the country he visited his grandfather in Appleton, Wisconsin, to say goodbye. It was an emotional farewell because both knew they might not see each other again. As Schiebler left, his grandfather offered these parting words: ‘Now, you remember Bill, be kind to your enemies.’

Later that year, the grandfather’s admonition came back to Schiebler during a tense trek back behind enemy lines. Schiebler and his unit had captured two North Vietnamese prisoners and were trying to make their way back to the safety of their camp. It was an exhausting hike in the darkness, particularly for one prisoner who was barefoot. ‘In the glow of our flashlight, I looked at his feet; both were a bloody pulp. Even though he was grimly stoic, it was clear he would have great difficulty making it back.’

‘For a moment I hesitated,’ Schiebler recalled. ‘Already I had seen too many good friends die at the hands of the North Vietnamese.’ However, he remembered his grandfather’s words: ‘Be kind to your enemies.’ Impulsively, Schiebler picked the man up, flipped his body over his back and carried him through the thick jungle. ‘As I trudged along, a faint weeping sounded from the man on my back,’ Schiebler said. ‘I pretended not to hear it until he began to sob. Without thinking, I gave his body a slight squeeze of reassurance.’

When they finally reached the camp, word of Schiebler’s act of kindness to an enemy spread, prompting others to respond compassionately to their prisoner. ‘Our medic went out of his way to give him some antibiotic salve to ward off infection,’ Schiebler said. The single act of compassion from one person spread throughout the camp, creating opportunities of compassion in the midst of war.^{iv}

I wonder if simple acts of compassion might have prevented this war? Or might prevent the next one?

Justice is an important goal. World peace another worthy goal. Justice making is important work.

We need people who do the work of justice like the UU-UNO or UUSC or the volunteers of this congregation who work hard to make a difference in the world. We need people who are working for peace or working for common sense gun laws or criminal justice reform or Black Lives Matter and on and on and on. There are so many ills in this world, so many people crying for mercy, there is so much work to do. We need visionaries and prophets who will call us to challenge the status quo or to stand up for equality for all or to end oppression no matter what shape it takes. The rally call for justice goes out every day from many voices, many places, many desperate situations and the call must be answered.

The world does change with these visionaries, thankfully, with these people who dedicate their lives to justice. There is no doubt about it. This religion, Unitarian Universalism, has been dedicated to justice making throughout our history and, yes, now in contemporary times. The UUs have continuously and repeatedly arrived with their picket signs and banners wherever they have been needed when it comes to creating justice. We need people doing the work of justice. Always.

Compassion is a bit different in that each one of us can do it without picket signs or banners. Each of us can practice compassion- towards ourselves and towards others. We cannot say “we need kindness” or that” we need compassion” but that “we need justice more.” We need compassion in order for justice to actually happen. Without the ability to see through our hearts to the other, without the ability to hear through our hearts for the voices that cry out for mercy, justice cannot happen. *Compassion is the mother to justice.*

All of us have suffered hurts and pains in our lives. In our human experience we face grief and loss and suffering. We face difficult and sometimes gut-wrenching challenges in our lives. It is the human condition. We do have choices. We can let this harden us or we can cultivate peace and compassion in our hearts out of the depths of this suffering. We cannot get to the jewel that is ourselves, that is peace on earth with justice and equity and compassion for all without spending sometime in the mud of this suffering. No mud, no lotus the Buddhists say.

Compassion inside leads to compassion towards others and in this way justice is created, and the world is changed one heart at a time.

Amen.

ⁱ John Mabry, *Noticing the Divine* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 48.

ⁱⁱ His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, *The Art of Happiness* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} *Growing Parent*, December 1998, “Happiness is a Choice” by Victor Parachin