

Minister's Remarks

This morning's focus is compassion. I chose this topic for several reasons. First, this past year our congregation participated in a program entitled *Leap of Faith* sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association. As part of this program a group of our lay leaders and staff traveled to Rochester New York to exchange innovative ideas with the Rochester congregation. One of many ideas explored was theme-based worship and education. The Rochester congregation will choose a theme upon which to focus for an extended period of time and all aspects of the congregation (worship, religious education, social justice) focus on this theme.

This January our Children's Religious Education will have their month-long intersession. The Religious Education focus for January will be Buddhism and one of its main tenets, compassion. So it is a perfect chance for all of us to participate in theme-based worship and education upon the topic of compassion. Today's sermon is a prelude to our congregation's January focus of compassion.

The second reason I chose this topic of compassion is because it was the focus of the Ware Lecture at this year's Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Charlotte, North Carolina, a gathering of thousands of Unitarian Universalists to do the business of our association as well as learn and worship together. The award winning, inspiring comparative religion scholar Karen Armstrong offered the Ware Lecture at this year's General Assembly. Past Ware Lecture speakers have included Kurt Vonnegut, Martin Luther King Jr, Shirley Chisholm, Marion Wright Edelman, Mary Oliver, Van Jones and Winona LaDuke. The Ware Lecture is a highlight of many General Assembly participants' experiences.

Our congregation had several folks attend as delegates: District President Amy Taylor, Congregational President Steve Dillon, Denominational Chair Iris Kiesling, Social Justice Chair Jackie Hall, Special Purposes Fund member, Lloyd Orr, choir member Sandy Dolby, and young adult leaders Kelly Rauch and Rachel Johnson.

Prior to General Assembly, I attended several days of ministers meetings, known as Ministers' Days as well as the first two days of General Assembly. Staff member Carol Marks attended Administrators' Days and Judy Bennett attended Membership Professionals' Days.

A few highlights of this year's annual meeting of our delegates at General Assembly included:

- The adoption of a faith-based institutional commitment to ethical eating. Delegates at GA 2011 approved a [Statement of Conscience on Ethical Eating](#), encouraging Unitarian Universalists (UUs) to "eat ethically" by becoming aware of the ways that food choices affect personal health as well as the planet's health. As congregations we have been studying and learning about this issue for the past three years.
- Planning for General Assembly 2012 in Phoenix, AZ, as a special "Justice GA." which you will hear more about later.
- An interfaith rally against homophobia and transphobia attended by hundreds of Unitarian Universalists (UUs) and other LGBT supporters, covered extensively by the media.
- Celebrations and workshops in honor of the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism 50 years ago.

We hope many of our members will attend next year's Justice General Assembly in Phoenix, AZ...in the June days of summer....remember, it's dry heat!

Lastly, I chose the topic of compassion today because, like Karen Armstrong, I believe we are in a time when the compassionate voice of religion is sorely needed. I look forward to exploring it with you in the months ahead.

The Challenge of Compassion **Reverend Mary Ann Macklin**

Compassion is not easy. Karen Armstrong made this abundantly clear during the Ware Lecture at our 2011 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. She aptly titled her lecture ‘The Challenge of Compassion’, and I will draw upon it as well as her book ‘Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life’ for this sermon.

On June 24th, not long after I left General Assembly, the New York Senate approved the Marriage Equality Act by a vote of 33 to 29 to approve same-sex marriage. The bill included protections for religious groups who object to same-sex weddings. As a Times Magazine summed up:

The New York law went further than merely restating the constitutionally obvious. It also wrote into law the right for all religious institutions — hospitals, adoption services — and so-called benevolent organizations to refuse to not just marry gay couples but the right to refuse accommodating their weddings, too. For gay couples in New York, good luck finding a Knight of Columbus hall to rent, for instance. (1)

Personally, as a gay person myself who found unexpected rich meaning in being legally married in Vermont last year to my same-sex partner of 22 years, this added protection for groups who object to same-sex marriage doesn’t bother me. If certain faiths, based on their religious beliefs, object to same sex marriage then I personally do not want the idea of their being *forced* to accommodate gay marriage as a fear tactic. However, as a minister who has performed over 400 weddings thus far, I want you to know that I feel very restricted in my home state of Indiana when I cannot legally formalize a wedding for same-sex couples... even here in this sanctuary of our Unitarian Universalist Church.

On June 28th I received a call to action e-mail from Joe Solomonese, President of the Human Rights Campaign, which is the largest national lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender civil rights organization. The e-mail message was entitled ‘Riled Up and Lashing Out’ and it addressed the backlash from the religious right in response to the New York Marriage Equality vote. Joe wrote,

It's getting ugly. Just days after the New York State Senate approved marriage equality, Pat Robertson declared that America may not survive since it has now "embraced homosexuality."

***That's not all.** Leaders of the right-wing Tea Party Nation warned about the "queering of America," and compared gays to drug addicts. One right-wing Christian publisher even wrote that politicians who voted for marriage equality should be "subject to indictment, trial, and punishment" because the vote violates "God's law"!*

***Our victory in New York has the right-wing riled up** because they never thought that a GOP-led state legislature would approve a marriage equality bill. But there's a fundamental shift underway that you and I have seen coming. We're at a tipping point in our culture and the right knows they're losing – **so they're lashing out.** **We need leaders like you, Mary Ann.** To seize the momentum of this victory and confront hate wherever it appears, ... (then they asked me to increase my level of giving.) (2)*

I agree with Joe from the Human Rights Campaign. As a liberal religious minister I do want to confront hate wherever it appears. And I readily admit that such anti-gay rhetoric as cited in his message can still bother me. If I’m perfectly honest, it can still scare me on occasion.

When I in my late teens and struggling with the possibility that I was gay, one of our neighbors in my small town in Indiana had already decided that I was gay. He threatened that if I ever came into his house again he would shoot me. This was horrific message for any young adult to receive in a critical time of development; it made my whole coming out process harder. On some level, I finally decided that my integrity was more important than safety. I suppose that’s a decision that many of us face in our lifetimes. Still it was a lot for me as a young kid and it is something that I sometimes still struggle with as an adult. So yes, I agree with Joe. I want to, and will, confront hateful messages (whatever the source of their prejudice) as part of my ministry.

However, I also agree with Karen Armstrong who stated in her compassion lecture that we are becoming dangerously polarized as a nation and as a world. That all of us are somewhat addicted to our dislikes, our prejudices, our positions and there is a little glow or buzz that we get when we define ourselves against other human beings. When we get that little buzz of being better than another human being (that I admittedly often feel when it comes to the Pat Robertson of the world) what does that say about spiritual

journey? If someone wants leaders like me, what kind of leader do I want to be? Where does compassion fit into all of this? On a pastoral note, I invite you not to languish in guilt when you feel that little buzz of being better than another person. Rather, observe it. Note it. Awareness is the first step. Guilt is a useless energy.

My question today: If we as Unitarian Universalists are to embody our social justice message of ‘Standing on the Side of Love’ how do we do that and still walk the path of one of the greatest religious task of our times, the path of compassion?

It’s a huge question. If you think you have the answer already (ie confront the behavior of the message instead of condemning the person or the group), I am going to ask you to take three deep breaths and arrive to this moment and allow yourself to be in the unknown when it comes to understanding compassion. I am going to invite you to live the question with me today, over the next months, into January and beyond. *Compassion is not easy*. If it was, we’d all be on the compassion bandwagon traveling along with abundant love for the world and all its inhabitants as we end suffering with each step. I can only speak for myself and simply say that the compassion bandwagon is one that I hop onto and fall off of on a daily basis. *Compassion is not easy*. The more I study it, the less I know about it.

The ethic of compassion is at the core of all the major religions, Karen Armstrong posits, and at the heart of this ethic is the Golden Rule. Armstrong explores the origins of the word Compassion. It derives from the Latin *patri* and the Greek *pantheon* meaning to endure something with another person, “to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes, to feel her pain as though it were my own, and to enter generously in his point of view.” (3, pg 9) *The Golden Rule* Armstrong offers *is the test of our spirituality*, and it invites us to enter into the sacred. *It asks us to treat all people, all nations, as we would want to be treated*. It asks us to create a *global community of respect*.

We learn from Armstrong that in the case of recorded religious traditions the first person to codify the Golden Rule was Confucius. This Chinese sage, who lived 500 years before Jesus of Nazareth, was asked by one of his disciples which teaching could be practiced ‘all day and every day’. He replied:

Perhaps the saying about shu (consideration). Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you. (3, pg 9)

Confucius said that this is the thread that runs through the spiritual system known as the Way (the Tao) and pulls all of its teachings together. He went on to define the word *shu* with the phrase, ‘likening to one’s self.’ He taught that, “people should not put themselves in a special category but relate their own experience to that of others ‘all day and every day.’” (3, pg 9) This concept of *shu* falls within an ideal called *ren*, and *ren* cannot be understood intellectually but can only be fully understood by persons who practiced it on a daily basis ‘all day and every day’. “A person who behaved with *ren*,” Armstrong writes, “would become a *junzi*, ‘a mature human being.’” (3, pg 10)

In her Ware Lecture, Armstrong speaks about Hillel, the older contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth who was challenged by a seeker to recite the whole Jewish teachings while standing on one leg. He stood on one leg and stated, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow human. The rest is commentary.” He replied and returned to his two footed stance. The 7th century Prophet Mohammed, founder of the Islamic religion, stated, ‘No one can be a believer unless you desire for your neighbor what you desire for yourself.’

And the Buddha (470-390 BCE) saw that compassion takes us beyond our small ego self into a transcendent dimension. In her book, Armstrong points out that one of the central disciplines to this transcendent way of living was meditation upon four elements of immeasurable love that ‘exist in everyone and everything’. These four consist of:

**Maitri (loving kindness), the desire to bring happiness to all sentient beings.*

**Karuna (compassion) the resolve to liberate all creatures from their pain;*

**Mudita (sympathetic joy) which takes delight in the happiness of others*

**Upeksha (even mindedness) an equanimity that enables us to love all beings equally and impartially. (3, pg 10)*

Angeles Arrien, one of my cherished elder teachers, models the element of Upeksha in a most remarkable way. When she is teaching, one recognizes in her presence an equitable, unconditional love for each person in the room, even when she is demonstrating tough love, which she does quite often to challenge our small ego addictions. Tough love is a component of compassion. It reminds us that compassion is not about being nice. Nice is often about avoiding conflict or truth telling. In her leadership Angeles Arrien models an even mindedness that demonstrates tough love as well as an unselfish concern for others, what one might call *altruism*.

Yet such characteristics as *altruism* and the path of compassion are often suspect and certainly not a major emphasis in modern society. We live in a competitive environment which often encourages us to put ourselves first. Many evolutionary theorists balk at the idea of true altruism. And y'all know that I love evolutionary theorists. However, some of them view *altruism* as a symptom of natural selection; Armstrong explains that *altruism* is described as a useful survival mechanism for *Homo Sapiens* "because those groups that learn to cooperate forge ahead in the desperate competition for resources, and the *altruist* expects reciprocity for him or herself and their closest relatives." (3) Armstrong goes on to acknowledge:

There is no doubt that in the deepest recess of their minds, men and women are indeed ruthlessly selfish. This egotism is rooted in the 'old brain' which was bequeathed to us by reptiles that struggles out of the primal slime some 500 million years ago. Wholly intent on personal survival, these creatures were motivated by mechanisms that neuroscientists call the Four F's: feeding, fighting, fleeing, ...and...ahem, well as Armstrong points out, for want of a better word, 'reproduction'. The emotions the Four F's engender are strong, automatic and 'all about me.' Over the millennia, Armstrong writes, human beings also evolved a new brain, the neocortex, home of the reasoning powers that enable us to reflect on the world and on ourselves, and to stand back from these Four Fs, these instinctive, primitive passions (when their instinctual drives and reactions are not necessary.) (3)

Certainly the neocortex can be used to serve our primitive passions. When we become calculating, deceitful, greedy, cruelly competitive and hypocritical to serve only our own best interests then we have not arrived to the heart of compassion.

How do we find the heart of compassion? Where do we start?

My first response is breathe...breathe...breathe. Allowing for deep, relaxing breathing can bring us into a state of calm, which allows for the reasoning aspect of our brain to draw us toward that which has heart and meaning in our lives.

How do we find the heart of compassion? Where do we start?

Karen Armstrong responds that we must first admit that we are addicted to our egotism. “

We cannot think how we would manage without our pet hatreds and prejudices that give us such a buzz of righteousness, like addicts, we have come to depend on the instant rush of energy and delight we feel when we display our cleverness by making an unkind remark and the spurt of triumph when we vanquish an annoying colleague.” (3, pg 23)

I attended my first General Assembly in 1989 on the campus of Yale University in New Haven Connecticut. Starhawk, one of the most respected voices in modern earth-day spirituality and author of *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, was there.

I remember being in a nighttime courtyard doing a spiral dance led by Starhawk under the stars and moon shining above the Yale campus. Later, during one of her talks, someone asked her about her thoughts on *the purported rapture* within some Christian traditions. She responded that she welcomed the rapture because all those believers could go to their heaven and the world could be ours again. The next speaker walked to the mic and challenged Starhawk with unkind remarks regarding those Christians who believe in the rapture. Starhawk paused... thought about it... and offered an apology.

I don't know. I still struggle with her apology. There was some truthfulness in her response. And maybe, maybe if we were in a room of Unitarian Universalists and Christians who believed in the rapture, some of them would think it was funny too. Then again, others might find it hurtful. Then again, we can't lose our sense of humor.

The Christians who do believe in the rapture do intend to go elsewhere and leave others--dare I say "us"--behind. And here I want to point out that two of the main archetypal fears within our human species are: fear of loss (left behind, abandoned, betrayed, not wanted, not being chosen) and fear of entrapment (constrained, tricked, cheated). So the whole rapture thing, admittedly, irks me and engages a fear response. It fires up my Four F brain and little ego-self, and I feel myself posture, and say, "yeah, go ahead and leave us and the earth behind, see what I care, we'll finally have the earth for ourselves." And... I... get a rush of energy and delight. There's a part of me that doesn't want to give that up. That's why satire is so tricky and one reason that I tend to shy away from it. Now, don't get me wrong, I think satire is a wonderful form of social criticism. I just think it is a tricky balance to discern whether one's motivations are pure ego-satisfaction, satire motivated by true social criticism. For me, the true satirist is rare, and my guess is the true satirist does not often get that rush of energy and delight.

While driving home from General Assembly, I thought about Karen Armstrong's inspiring project called the Charter for Compassion. The Charter for Compassion (www.charterforcompassion.org) has its own interactive web-site and it states in part:

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.

The one piece I want to be careful with here is the concept of dethroning ourselves from the center of our world. I understand its point. But particularly as a woman, or any of us who have found ourselves outside the social norms, I want to be clear about what this means.

Being in this world requires a healthy ego. In some manner of speaking, it requires us to be at the center of our world. For those of us who struggle with co-dependence what does it mean to dethrone ourselves? I believe it means to dethrone those aspects of ourselves that diminish our potential to be the amazing, loving, compassionate, creative, powerful beings we are.

My friend Patrick O'Neill, a corporate leader and also a student of Angeles Arrien, talks about the five demons of the imagination. If these demons of the imagination sit in our throne of compassion, it is our duty to dethrone them. What are the five demons? See if you recognize any of these:

- 1) I can't make a difference. Where and when do you tell yourself or others this? It is a lie.
- 2) Other people will never change so what's the use. Where and when do you tell yourself or others this? It is a lie.
- 3) Circumstances are too powerful.
- 4) There's too much to do.
- 5) I'll never have enough to be safe.

Each of these demons of our imagination affects our mind and disengages us from what has heart and meaning in our lives. These ego-driven imaginations require dethroning just as much as our greed, our petty jealousies, and our triumphant anger.

Compassion is not easy. I invite those of you who choose to join me for a book discussion based on Karen Armstrong's book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* on the fourth Sunday of September, October and November at 2:30pm to explore this thing called compassion. To explore the question, "If we as Unitarian Universalists are to boldly embody our social justice message of 'Standing on the Side of Love' how do we do that and still walk the path of one of the greatest religious tasks of our times, the path of compassion?" I don't know, but I look forward to learning with you and somehow living the question into answers. Amen.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds.

Let us return wholly to ourselves and become our selves.

Let us be aware of the source of being common to us all and all living things.

Let us fill our hearts with compassion for ourselves and all living things.

(1) <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2080804,00.html#ixzz1QyEJCAj1>, June 2011.

(2) Solomnese, Joel, (President: The Human Rights Campaign) <http://www.hrc.org/>
1640 Rhode Island Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20086, June, 2011.

(3) Armstrong, Karen *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, (Alfred Knopf, Random House of Canada) 2010.