

“On Three Facets of Compassion: #1 Giving”  
an online talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
Sunday, June 7, 2020

Blurb: “On Three Facets of Compassion: #1 Giving”

#Compassion and the imperative for action it generates is for #Humanists the key to #meaning and #purpose.

## **READING**

From Dr. Jill Lepore’s book *These Truths: A History of the United States*

... the United States is founded on a set of ideas, but Americans have become so divided that they no longer agree, if they ever did, about what those ideas are, or were.

...

In 1787, then, when Alexander Hamilton asked “whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force,” that was the kind of question a scientist asks before beginning an experiment.

Time alone would tell. But time has passed. The beginning has come to an end.

...

Can a political society really be governed by reflection and election, by reason and truth, rather than by accident and violence, by prejudice and deceit? Is there any arrangement of government—any constitution—by which it’s possible for a people to rule themselves, justly and fairly, and as equals, through the exercise of judgment and care?

## **INTRODUCTION: Accident or Intellect?**

The reading this morning is from the Harvard professor of history Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States*. It's the first attempt to write a serious comprehensive history of the US for a long time. Exactly because, as she writes:

. . . the United States is founded on a set of ideas, but Americans have become so divided that they no longer agree, if they ever did, about what those ideas are, or were.

We often hear a verse from Proverbs:

Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he. (*Proverbs 29:18 KJV*)

Which is where we find ourselves today, nationally and locally: out in the desert, wandering, with no vision. So divided we're not sure there ever was a common vision.

Dr. Lepore writes,

In 1787, then, when Alexander Hamilton asked "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force," that was the kind of question a scientist asks before beginning an experiment.

Time alone would tell. But time has passed. The beginning has come to an end.

That's where we are—stuck in the question rather than working in the solution.

"Reflection and choice" or "accident and force."

Why has it all come crashing down so suddenly?

The answer is simple: it *hasn't been* sudden except for those privileged enough to ignore the terrible reality so many Americans have lived in for a long time.

My diagnosis for this failure of vision is that it has been and is a failure of compassion.

### **ONE: Can I See Another's Woe?**

Which is our theme for the month of June—Compassion.

In his poem titled "On Another's Sorrow," the British poet William Blake writes:

Can I see another's woe,  
And not be in sorrow too?  
Can I see another's grief,  
And not seek for kind relief?

Let's think a bit about what compassion *is*. For many of us anyway, when we think "compassion," we think Buddhism. In Buddhist thought, wisdom and compassion are the twin goals.

But wait: isn't wisdom something you have to *work* for, and isn't compassion an emotion that just happens?

Well, no. That's why Buddhism is often identified with the concept of compassion: in Buddhist thought, "compassion" means coming face-to-face with the suffering of *all sentient beings*. It's not fun.

Gorampa Sonam Senge (1429-1489) was a Tibetan Buddhist monk and philosopher who spent a lot of time on the subject of compassion. He wrote:

The extensive and vast mind possessed of compassion for all living beings, like love starting from the present mother and extending to the limits of space, must be cultivated to such a degree that it compares to that of a tearful person who sees or remembers that his or her only child has fallen into a pit of fire.  
(*The General Meaning of Middle Way*)

Tearful, feeling like your “only child has fallen into a pit of fire.”

Ummm. Thanks but no thanks! I’m gonna sit around my *tuchus* for hours on end meditating only to feel *totally bereft*?

Who wants that?

Well, this is why Buddhism is so often misconstrued and mis-labeled for seminars and popular consumption in the West:

“Compassion good.” Sure, I’ll take some of that . . . half a pound of compassion.

No. The goal is to sit around feeling like your “only child has fallen into a pit of fire.”

Why?

The word for compassion in the earliest language of Buddhism, Pali, is *karuna*. It means “sharing in suffering.”

Gorampa Sonam Senge recommends a technique invented independently by the Stoics in the Western World: first, love your loved ones, then love your extended family, then friends, then strangers, then enemies, and finally . . . all sentient beings.

One of our challenges is that in the Western World the term “compassion” has had a confusing trip through time. The Greek word for compassion, *spagchnizomai*, never translated into European languages.

Our word for it originates in Latin, the word *compati*—“to suffer with.” Hmm. “To suffer with” sounds a lot like the definition of *karuna*, “sharing in suffering.”

So, what’s up?

If you think about it, there are a couple of different ways we can “suffer with” or “share” in suffering.

And we can easily get those confused.

Professor of Psychology Tara Wells has done a good bit of thinking and researching in this area, and one place you can find a summary of her work is in a *Psychology Today* article she wrote titled "Compassion Is Better than Empathy: Neuroscience explains why."

Dr. Wells is a practicing Buddhist, so she's thought a lot about this radically painful sort of compassion that Buddhists strive for. In her academic work, Dr. Wells explores the difference between "compassion" and "empathy." Wells is a neuroscientist and she's discovered that compassion and empathy activate different parts of the brain.

She writes, "Empathic people feel the pain of others acutely." As a matter of fact, "too much empathy can be debilitating." In the depths of empathy we can become paralyzed.

Compassion, however, is "feeling for and not feeling with the other."

In other words, we are confused when we talk about "compassion fatigue." Actually, we suffer "empathy fatigue." Which isn't of any value to anybody.

We need compassion: we need to "feel for" but then get off our *tuchus* and do something about it.

William Blake was onto something in his poem:

Can I see another's woe,  
And not be in sorrow too?  
Can I see another's grief,  
And not seek for kind relief?

Yes, sorrow is well and good. But the key is seeking "kind relief."

## **TWO: Still Not Even Close to Sharing Things**

We who see the universe naturalistically, *not* something that functions on a human scale, are at the moment a minority of the human population. Perhaps we will always be. Which only makes the good we attempt to create that much more important.

We've all be asked how there can be meaning without a deity of some sort. As Humanism sees it, far from being a place of empty absurdity, the universe is a place where human compassion and human action *matter* in an ultimate sense. Because what we *feel* and what we *do* create the only meaning and purpose that exists.

Which puts a little pressure on what we feel and do.

Humanism is about how the self encounters the other. Because, with the Buddhists, we realize there is no "other." Only us, one and the same.

For Humanists, the *encounter with the other* is the baseline for our ethics. And, ideally,

In the monotheisms, compassion is "out there." In Judaism and Islam, god is referred to as "the compassionate one." In Christianity, Jesus is "lord of compassion." But we scientific types look around and we don't see any universal compassion going on.

Nature is "red in tooth and claw" as Tennyson said. Human suffering and violence and oppression are everywhere about us. The animals and the planet itself suffer.

Then here we are, wishing that there were a universal compassion. But we don't see it. We can't offload that duty onto one deity or another.

This realization is exactly why the Buddha talked so much about compassion. He realized that life is suffering. And he set about trying to fix that as best he could.

Realizing that everything changes all the time is a step.

Realizing that the fact of irreversible change is the root of suffering is a step.

Realizing that all is one is a step.

We are the struggling immigrant. We are the fire that consumes their dreams.

We are the African American brought in chains to a foreign country, then always treated as foreign and a problem to be fixed.

We are the natives and the impoverished Euro-Americans and African Americans who cry out—we've been in this nation since before it was a nation. Why are we still dirt poor? Who is it that took my share?

We are the police officers enmeshed in a system that creates an "us" and a "them" that manifests in violence.

We are the rich who grow richer and more remote from the American streets.

We are the gasoline and the fire.

We are the problem.

And we are the only possibility of a solution.

But we know that only human beings can solve human-created problems.

## **CONCLUSION**

Compassion hurts. Because it is an accusation: "What are you doing?"

Compassion feels like your "only child has fallen into a pit of fire."

How would that make me feel? Hopeless? Paralyzed? Enraged?

OK. All valid emotions in the situation.

Now, what am I going to do about it?

Empathy paralyzes. Compassion energizes.

The choices before us are clear: reflection and choice or accident and force.

The experiment that Hamilton and others started is still going on. For the time being. They didn't know how it would turn out. And we don't either.

It's an open question.

Let's choose compassion.

## SOURCES

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