

FORMS OF COMPASSION

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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The statue that graces our altar table (courtesy of Ann Thompson) is the figure of **Kwan Yin**, who is revered in Asian wisdom traditions as the embodiment of **compassion**. Kwan Yin is the protector of those who are vulnerable— especially babies and children, but also those who are sick, lost, or frightened. Images of Kwan Yin can be seen in many places: homes, schools, restaurants, temples and grottoes—but also in harbors and even on the dashboards of taxis. In many ways Kwan Yin parallels the figure of the Virgin Mary in western societies as a semi-divine being who offers unconditional love and mercy to anyone facing difficult circumstances. The qualities she embodies are anchored in the Buddhist ideal of the **Bodhisattva**—a person who has deliberately chosen to forgo the bliss of enlightenment in order to relieve the suffering of those who have not. Even though Kwan Yin is adored and appealed to as though she were an individual, she represents a universal energy or principle: **compassion for others**.

In a time of widespread discord and selfishness, we could benefit from the wisdom that Kwan Yin represents. Fortunately, there is a contemporary incarnation of Kwan Yin in the form of **Karen Armstrong**. A former nun, Armstrong has become a leading figure in communicating insights from the world's great religious traditions to a wide public audience. In 2008 she was awarded the prestigious TED [Technology Entertainment & Design] award, which includes a \$100,000 prize to help the award winner realize a chosen wish to change the world. Karen Armstrong used this award to initiate the Charter for Compassion, a global network for promoting the application of shared religious values to global problems. The Charter is essentially an organized effort to apply the Golden Rule to a world deeply divided by religious conflict.

As the Charter states, "We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships

and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community." [*Charter for Compassion*] The Charter has been endorsed by more than 1,000 of the world's religious and political leaders. Karen Armstrong has also written a book intended to serve as a guide for the rest of us: *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. We have just begun an adult religious education class—led by Mary Stern, Angie Hankinson, and me—to discuss this book and apply its insights in our personal lives. Let me invite you to join our group, which meets twice a month on Tuesday evenings.

Drawing from many different wisdom traditions, Armstrong challenges her readers to practice compassion. The central virtue in Confucianism is called *ren*, which “involves simultaneously a feeling of humanity toward others and respect for oneself.” [Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, p. 172. Some 600 years before Jesus taught his disciples the Golden Rule (“Do unto others . . .”), Confucius articulated what is sometimes called the Silver Rule: “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.” [quoted by Armstrong, p. 43]. The virtue of *ren* is first learned and practiced within the family in the relationships between parents and children and among siblings. “Confucius saw each person at the center of a constantly expanding series of concentric circles. The lessons a [person] had learned from taking care of his parents, his wife, and his siblings would educate and enlarge his heart so that he felt empathy with more and more people: first with his city or village, then with his state, and finally with the entire world. It was difficult because it required the abandonment of the vanity, resentment, and desire to dominate to which we are addicted.” [pp. 43-44]

Compassion for others begins with compassion for oneself. Our culture teaches us to focus on our failures and shortcomings, and these feelings of self-rejection are often projected outward in the form of finding fault with others. As I suggested in one of my Sunday talks last spring, we often attack other people for the very same flaws that we most dislike—and try to deny—in ourselves. When are you least compassionate toward yourself? What traits do you most criticize yourself for? As Karen Armstrong says, “Suffering is a law of life, and it is essential . . . to acknowledge our own pain or we shall find it impossible to have compassion for the distress of others. In Buddhism, compassion (*karuna*) is defined as a determination to

liberate others from their grief, something that is impossible if we do not admit to our own unhappiness and misery.

“When we contemplate the suffering we see on a global scale, we may be embarrassed by the triviality of our own. But it is real nevertheless. During this step [in the journey toward a compassionate life], make a conscious effort to look back on the events that have caused you distress in the past: the death of a beloved person; moments of loneliness and abject fear; rejections, betrayals, failures; the unkind remark that hurt you. Make a deliberate effort to inhabit those moments fully and **send a message of encouragement to your former self**. The object of this exercise is not to leave you wallowing in self-pity. The vivid memory of painful times past is a **reservoir** on which you can draw when you try to live according to the Golden Rule. By remembering your own sorrow vividly, you will make it possible for yourself to feel empathy for others.” [pp. 81-82]

In our journey toward a more compassionate life, it is important to understand what compassion is **not**. **Compassion is more than just a feeling**. It **begins** in the capacity to experience the suffering of others, but it must not **end** with just a feeling. **Compassion leads to action**. In his book titled *A Spirituality Named Compassion*, Matthew Fox cautions against confusing compassion with **pity**. “What is the difference between pity and compassion? Pity connotes condescension and this condescension, in turn, implies separateness. ‘I feel sorry for you because you are different from me.’ . . . Compassion works from a strength born of awareness of shared weakness, and not from someone else’s weakness. And from the awareness of the mutuality of us all. Thus to put down another as in pity is to put down oneself.” [p. 2] Equating compassion with pity or sympathy denies the common humanity of both parties.

Rachel Naomi Remen, a physician who is best known as the author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, makes a similar point in distinguishing between **helping and serving**. “Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals. When you help, you use your own strength to help those of lesser strength.” She says, “If I’m attentive to what’s going on inside of me when I’m helping, I find that I’m always helping someone who’s not as strong as I am, who is needier than I am. People feel this inequality. When we help we may inadvertently take away

from people more than we could ever give them; we diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity and wholeness. When I help I am very aware of my own strength. But we don't serve with our strength, **we serve with ourselves**. We draw from all our experiences. Our limitations serve, our wounds serve, even our darkness can serve. The wholeness in us serves the wholeness in others and the wholeness in life. **The wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me**. Service is a relationship between equals. . . .

“Serving is also different from **fixing**. When I fix a person I perceive them as broken, and their brokenness requires me to act. When I fix I do not see the wholeness in the other person or trust the integrity of the life in them. When I serve I see and trust that wholeness. It is what I am responding to and collaborating with. There is distance between ourselves and whatever or whomever we are fixing. Fixing is a form of judgment. All judgment creates distance, a disconnection, an experience of difference. . . . We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch. . . . Our service serves us as well as others. That which uses us strengthens us. Over time, fixing and helping are draining, depleting. Over time we burn out. Service is renewing. When we serve, our work itself sustains us.

“Service rests on the basic premise that the nature of life is sacred, that life is a holy mystery which has an unknown purpose. When we serve, we know that we belong to life and to that purpose. Fundamentally, helping, fixing and service are ways of seeing life. When you help you see life as weak, when you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole. From the perspective of service, we are all connected: All suffering is like my suffering and all joy is like my joy.” [Rachel Naomi Remen, “In the Service of Life,” *Noetic Sciences Review*, Spring 1996]

The journey to a compassionate life is not easy. It challenges us to change some of our habitual ways of thinking and acting. We are fortunate to have trustworthy guides like Karen Armstrong to help us along the path. It is also helpful to have trustworthy companions who are sharing the journey with us. I invite you to join us on Tuesday evening to begin your own journey to a compassionate life. Let me conclude with a passage from Kahlil Gibran's reflection “On Religion”:

Your daily life is your temple and your religion.
Whenever you enter into it take with you your all.
Take the plough and the forge and the mallet and the lute,
The things you have fashioned in necessity or for delight.
For in reverie you cannot rise above your achievements nor fall lower than your failures.
And take with you all [people]:
For in adoration you cannot fly higher than their hopes
Nor humble yourself lower than their despair. [from Gibran, *The Prophet*]