

Morning Reading

I invite you to hold in your hearts this morning the victims of the massacre in Norway last week who were slain by a right wing Christian extremist bent on stopping the spread of multiculturalism and igniting a Christian war against the Muslims. It is a horrible reminder of how fear can twist the human soul, and how religion can be so terribly contorted.

In memory of the victims, I want to read something called the Charter for Compassion, which is the composite work of religious leaders from all over the world. A copy is in your Order of Service and more information about the charter is available at www.charterforcompassion.org.

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.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

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.

Sermon

So just out of curiosity would anyone here disagree with that? Anybody have a philosophical or moral objection to that statement? . . . I didn't think so.

Well, recall for a moment the Gainesville minister who decided to burn the Quran. Remember how you felt? How about when a moderate Imam wanted to build an Islamic center for interfaith understanding a few blocks from Ground Zero and got publicly smeared for it? How do you feel about the fact that right now our two major political parties are busy vilifying each other while the nation's financial future hangs in the balance? Have you noticed how you and I really want to take sides? I don't know about you, but *compassion* is not the dominant emotion I feel when I think about these things.

There's an *enormous* gulf between what most of us know deep down to be true and necessary for our very survival, and the kind of behavior we see going on all around us every day. . . even in ourselves. The psychologists among you would call that cognitive dissonance, and it's not a good thing because it eventually wears you down. But we've somehow become conditioned to just living with these conflicting realities until every once in a while something really outrageous jars us out of our protective fog.

That happened to me one day recently when I was driving along and suddenly a very large SUV came whizzing by on the left and cut in front of me just in time to stop for the light. I hit the brakes, my adrenaline spiked, and right there in the middle of the rear window was a bumper sticker I could not ignore. It said: "Give me My Guns, My Freedom, and My Money. You can *Keep* the Change."

I cannot tell a lie. The whole scene made my blood boil. The less-than-charitable part of me—that would be the non-minister part—wanted to say "so what's that say about your values, buddy? Do you really want to tell the whole world that violence, selfishness and greed are what matter most to you? And of course, there's the cynical political jibe which pushed all my remaining buttons. I felt the way I do when I'm forced to listen to Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck for any length of time. It's not so much the *politics* I have a problem with—the healthy exchange of ideas is a good thing—it's the bombastic intolerance, the dualism, and the refusal to even consider the possibility that we might need some new ideas for solving problems we've never faced before. I'm never sure whether to run away screaming or just cry in despair. Neither is a very ministerial reaction. And neither is what you would call compassionate.

Those of us who attended the UUA General Assembly last month in Charlotte were treated to the Ware Lecture given by Karen Armstrong, a scholar of religious history. She's written a number of best sellers including one called *A History of God*. Her lecture was entitled "The Challenge of Compassion" and it was based on her

newest book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*¹. The thesis of the book is that we humans have evolved to have two brains, if you will. The old brain is the one we inherited from our reptilian ancestors—it is the brain of our survival instincts or what Armstrong calls “the four F’s”—feeding, fighting, fleeing and... a fourth word having to do with reproduction. This is the brain we share with all other animals.

But in parallel we evolved a second and physically larger brain, so large that to fit through the birth canal, we have to be born prematurely in comparison to other animals. We’re born so prematurely that we come into the world essentially helpless. From the beginning, we can only survive by the nurture and love of a mother and father and a whole community of others-- and that remains true for the rest of our lives. This understanding of our profound interdependence is embedded in this second, more highly evolved part of our brain, the one that guides us when we’re at peace and not feeling threatened. It’s the basis for our universal human instinct toward helping others when push comes to shove. It’s why people jump into rivers to save complete strangers. And it is the basis for the golden rule-- the essential belief that we are called to do unto others as we would have them do unto us-- which underlies all the world’s great religious traditions.

But the challenge of our human existence is to be able to consistently call up this compassionate brain, particularly when we’re feeling threatened and the reptilian brain starts to kick in. The Buddha, the great Hindu sages and prophets of many traditions have learned to do that consistently through meditation and spiritual practice. They’ve learned to draw on their capacity for compassion at all times, but they also know that it’s not our first instinct; it requires consistent practice.

Armstrong says that if we don’t actually *practice* compassion, our reptilian brain causes us to be actually *addicted* to our own egotism; to become dependent on the emotional and physiological rush we get from affirming our own superiority. Hence the title of her book—*Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. Like any addiction, she says, it takes a disciplined twelve-step process to overcome it, and a lifetime of practice to maintain it.

Last year when I was working as a chaplain at Tampa General Hospital, I met up with three Tea Party activists who were drawn together by the death of a man in the hospital. This group included his estranged daughter, her boyfriend, and the man’s employer—all middle age, middle class white people. I won’t take time to go into their whole story, but in reminiscing about this man who had been a veteran and a major Tea Party organizer, these three went on a tirade about government conspiracies they said were designed to “separate people from their faith”. They talked about how all of us are being “controlled by science”. They alluded to President Obama being like Willie Horton, which was shocking to me, and then went on to talk about how evolution is obviously a lie since it is so clearly controverted by

¹ Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

what they called “Biblical history”. Now, I don’t think of myself as sheltered, but I’d never heard anyone string all these bizarre ideas together in one conversation before. And what really got me was the assumption that since I was a chaplain—a God-fearing kind of guy-- I was in tacit agreement with all this.

Ironically, none of these people had any church affiliation themselves. None of them had much history of being in committed relationships, so far as I could tell. For most of her life, the daughter didn’t have any relationship with her Dad, who apparently so valued his freedom that he abandoned his family early on for a life on the road. Then, in the ultimate irony, after this man died, these three wanted to know whether the hospital would cover the bill and whether the VA would pay for his funeral. And, yes indeed, the government covered both.

There’s plenty I heard that afternoon that was abhorrent. There was racism tinged with hate. There was self-centeredness masquerading as freedom. There was a stunning fear of science —the kind of denial of truth that opens the door to a cult mentality. And there was blatant hypocrisy. These were just not my kind of people, to put it mildly.

But in my chaplain role, I had no choice but to just sit there and listen for a couple hours, trying to find *some* way I could minister to these people. I’m chagrined to admit that it ended up being a good spiritual practice in compassion. The longer I sat there, the more I came to appreciate the deeper human struggle that these people faced in the midst of enormous change.

For one thing, all three were scared out of their minds—at least their compassionate minds-- and they were acting out of their own very real loneliness and alienation. It was clear they were all struggling to hold it together financially. Each had a sense of being disempowered as they confronted more and more challenges that were seemingly out of their control. On top of that, they were reawakening to an America which no longer looked like them, led most conspicuously by a black President. In their own way, each of them was saying “Hey, look at me! I’m hurting here! How about a little help for me?” And in this particular moment of rapid change and uncertainty they are not alone.

As I sat there listening, trying valiantly to call forth my ministerial self, I began wondering whether there was anything about their worldview that I *could* value. And it occurred to me that, at their Libertarian best, the Tea Partiers are espousing a faith in the potential of individual people and voluntary associations to solve problems, and they’re expressing a healthy skepticism of oppressive power. Of course, in their case the anger is directed at the government rather than at the more insidious forms of power that I worry about—like the unchecked corporate power to manipulate capital, or the alienating power of our consumer society.

But I found we did at least share a deeply rooted faith in human potential and a healthy skepticism of power. Those are values that we share as a nation because

they go back to our founding principles. And they're values that we *especially* cherish as Unitarian Universalists.

So in the course of several hours of forced interaction, I was able to feel some empathy for these folks, and I could at least begin to see some basis for beginning a dialogue. With a lot more time, it's conceivable that I could even come to respect some of their views, and they might even have informed mine.

But the question that haunted me then and haunts me now, is how will they react—how will *I* react—when the going gets *really* tough? If we feel threatened now, how will we feel when we really have to confront the limits of our natural resources—be they fossil fuels or fresh water or the planet's capacity to absorb carbon? How will we react when every day the globe becomes smaller and we come face-to-face with people and cultures and religions very different from ourselves—on our screens and in our neighborhoods? How will we react when we realize that we are already more economically dependent on the Indians and the Chinese than we are the Indianans and the Californians?

So far it appears these emerging realities are triggering a deep reptilian impetus to the four F's. The testosterone flows. We start resource wars on distant shores. We erect all kinds of barriers to the "other"—social, legal and even physical barriers on the border. We oppose anything that might remotely threaten our share of rights and resources—like granting marriage rights to gay and lesbian people. In our fear we cling to the known. We are frightened by the unending march of science which threatens to reshape our understanding of truth; and we're shaken to the bone by the idea that, at their core, all the great religions are lenses on one simple truth-- that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us. The idea that there is no One Way undermines our hope that in the end, when all else fails, God will be on *our* side. There's no doubt about it. Our reptilian impulse is to say "give me *My Guns, My Freedom, My Money, My Religion...*" the list goes on.

And in the extreme, it's a response which feeds the sick minds of terrorists, as we saw in Norway last week.

But whether the question is how we're going to deal with the limits of the Earth's resources, or foster sustainable economic prosperity, or overcome the religious intolerance that leads to terrorism, we are slowly awakening to the truth that, we are all-- every one of us-- in this together.

And in the face of this reality our reptilian brains no longer assure our survival. In fact, they might actually bring about our demise. None of these threats can be addressed by fleeing from them, or hunkering down, or protecting our own, because those reactions will only provoke similar, escalating responses from everyone else, and *that* has the potential to destroy us. For the first time in human history, surviving and thriving as a species *requires* us to call forth our compassionate brains.

Moreover, the greatest natural resource we have now-- and have ever had—is our *collected* human potential. Not just our potential to fully develop as individuals, but our potential to bring out the best of *each* of us only in the company of *all* of us. Our ability to solve our toughest problems grows exponentially in proportion to the diversity of talents and perspectives that are brought to bear. And it's only by mining our enormous, untapped reserves of human creative potential, that we will find the ideas and the means for building a sustainable future together. Contrary to what Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck would have us believe, the real antidote to oppressive power is neither our guns nor our money: it's our fresh ideas for developing our collected human potential. And that requires, at a minimum, doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.

I must admit that embracing difference and developing our full human potential feel like a pretty tall orders in this era of divide and conquer politics. But I think that's because it's not really *political* work. It's *spiritual* work. Chuck Colson, the Watergate political conspirator who later founded a prison ministry, wrote a blog piece recently about how we as a nation are becoming politically "deranged". He said: "We are succumbing to what French philosopher Jacques Ellul prophesied in the 1960's—the politicization of all aspects of life. Ellul foresaw the Information Age and the media's need for a steady flow of information to feed the populace. Media therefore would gravitate to covering centers of power. Politicians would be willing accomplices, because they'd gain fame and clout." Colson says: "We've succumbed to what Ellul predicted—the idea that every problem has a political solution. ... We'd better recognize that politics is not the be-all and end-all. Politics is merely the expression of culture. Clean up the culture—that's our job-- and politics will follow."²

I have to believe that at this particular moment in history, that's *our* job as Unitarian Universalists. It falls to us-- and all the religious allies we can muster-- because embracing difference and change is our heritage. As Paul Rasor said, "Universalism's core theological claim is that *all* humanity—indeed all of creation—is ultimately united in a common destiny."³ And when it comes to change, our Unitarian and Universalist predecessors have consistently been willing to stand at the bleeding edge of change --often literally bleeding— to shine a beacon forward toward that common destiny. Lewis Fischer, a Universalist theologian was once asked where *his* religion stood on the changing issues of the day, and he replied: "We don't stand at all; we move."⁴

² Chuck Colson, "National Derangement", *BreakPoint*, Prison Fellowship Ministries. May 6, 2010.

³ Paul R. Rasor, "Can Unitarian Universalism Change?" *UU World*, February 15, 2010. <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/158175.shtml>

⁴ Ibid.

But for us to help “clean up the culture”, we have to be willing to not just *stand*, but to *move* ourselves. That means we have to cultivate a genuinely compassionate response in ourselves—not just toward our like-minded UU friends, although that’s a good place to start, but *especially* toward those who we might consider our enemies. As I learned in the hospital, that’s *not* easy. It requires a big dose of patience and humility and, for me at least, it will take a lifetime of practice.

But like countless other prophets, sages and ordinary people who have brought light into the darkness, we *can learn* to call forth our compassionate brains, even in the face of fear. We can begin by developing a spiritual practice like Karen Armstrong’s “twelve steps to a compassionate life,” or as a church we could affirm the Charter for Compassion. I commend both to you.

But most importantly we can encourage each other to get *outside* of ourselves-- physically and politically and spiritually-- to directly encounter people very different from ourselves, to search for what we share in common, and to explore how we can support and empower one another in solving our common problems. That’s why the work we do in this church and around the denomination for social justice and the work we do building interfaith alliances is so important—it not only serves *others*, but it forces *us* to confront difference, to face down our own reptilian instincts, and to develop ways to harness the immense creative power of our human diversity.

If we can cultivate that kind of authentic compassion as a whole religious community, we *can* become what Peter Morales calls the “religion of our time.” That doesn’t imply that we become the religion for everyone, only that we do what we’ve always done in our best moments: that we stand on the edge of change, boldly casting our lot with the future; that we live out the promise of radical inclusiveness in our own communities; and that we confidently demonstrate to all the world how to transcend the boundaries of difference and unleash the human potential that will ultimately save us. Then, once again, we will be on the vanguard of keeping the change, progressing from egotism toward wholeness, and realizing our universal human destiny.

Namaste, Shalom and Amen.