

Caring for One Another

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As young children, I suspect that many of you, like me, embraced the world with wide eyed enthusiasm, and an open heart for all those who entered into your domain. Then somewhere in your youth or childhood, someone with a more realistic worldview, perhaps an older adult, proved to you that the world is a dangerous place, and only a fool would embrace the world with awe, wonder, and a wide eyed embrace. That person may have been your mother, an older sibling, your father, or classmates. For me it was older siblings and classmates, and while they were probably right about the nature of this world, they were clearly wrong about how we ought to live in it. When I was a teenager, and needed to earn over \$2000 one summer in order to return to college, which in 1974 was an incredible task for a college student's summer job, I heard a story that inspires me even today to live life with foolish glee and wonder, despite what realists say. It seems a mother had fraternal twin boys who couldn't have been more opposite in their worldview. One embraced everything with great joy and happiness. The other was deeply anxious and suspicious of everything. She took them to a psychiatrist, who asked her to bring them back the next day to be tested. When they arrived he showed them into adjoining rooms, and gave them a few minutes to get acclimated. When he returned to the more realistic boy, he was sitting in the middle of a room full of toys, crying loudly. The psychiatrist asked him, "why don't you play with the truck". "I might break it", he said. And the pogo stick? "I might fall." "Isn't there anything here you enjoy?" he asked. But of course the answer was no. So the psychiatrist went next door to the other boy, who was standing in front of a large pile of shit and throwing it wildly to all sides. "What are you doing?" asked the psychiatrist. The boy looked at him with a grin and said, "With this much horse shit I figure there must be a pony in here somewhere!" One of the boys may have had a more accurate view of the world, but I can tell you which one of them found more joy!

Now, let's talk about a boy born late in the 12th century to a wealthy merchant in Assisi, Italy. His father named him Giovanni Francesco Bernardone, lavished upon him rich food and clothes, and so he grew up carefree and frivolous. But when he was 20 his city state went to war, and he signed up to fight gladly and with glory, until he was captured, then imprisoned, ransomed, and finally sent home quite ill. Yet during his long illness he had experienced Jesus visiting him in his dreams with a message about how one should live one's life. Joseph Mazzella tells a splendid version of what happened next. This formerly frivolous son of a rich merchant was walking home one day after visiting friends. And as he neared a bend in the road he heard the ring of a leper's bell coming towards him. This was during Europe's Middle Ages and leprosy was a highly contagious and incurable disease. Lepers were not allowed in towns and were forced to ring bells and warn others of their approach as they walked the roads. However before the rich young man could get off the road the leper rounded the corner and suddenly was face to face with him. The leper's body was horribly disfigured by disease and when the young man saw him he drew back in disgust. As the leper lowered his head and began to walk on, however, the young man felt his heart breaking for the leper. He quickly caught up to the man and apologized for how he had acted. He gave the leper all the money he had and hugged him

fervently, tears of recognition in his eyes. The leper looked at the young man with tears in his own eyes and said that was the first time anyone had touched him in many years. That moment began a change in the young man's heart and started him on a different path that would affect the whole world. You see, that young man would come to be known as Saint Francis of Assisi, who is widely remembered for living a life of kindness, compassion, and generosity to the poor and hungry, and for transforming the Christianity of his day through his actions and through his deep embrace of fellow humans.

We can now cure leprosy, but there are still many types of "lepers" in our modern world that could have their lives transformed by our love, our help and our hugs. Many of the homeless, sick, poor, hungry, disabled, elderly, and mentally handicapped sometimes have to wear "bells" that society forces upon them. Many go through life avoided by or looked down upon by others. Like that young man we can make a difference in their lives with just one gesture of caring and love. Like Saint Francis we can let the light of God, however we express incarnating the divine, shine through us to touch their hearts and souls. We may also find, as he did, that their love will touch and change us for the better as well. For in God's eyes, there are no lepers, only children needing and deserving love, and they deserve that love from us. Whoever persuaded you and me, or scared us away from caring for all those in need, they did us a great disservice. Ram Dass, that rascal sage who as Richard Alpert earned a PhD in human psychology at Stanford, and then studied human consciousness at Harvard, whose studies led him to India and even becoming a Hindu Guru, writes that: "At times, helping happens simply in the way of things. It's not something we really think about, merely the instinctive response of an open heart. Caring is a reflex. Someone slips, your arm goes out. A car is in a ditch; you join the others and push. A colleague at work has the blues; you let her know that you care. It all seems natural and appropriate. You live, you help." In that vein we have shared many improbable stories this morning: how Julio Diaz transformed a mugger through kindness; how Penelope Eddy repaid a man, now homeless, who had reached in his own pocket to feed her when she was in need. And now the story of a kid who had everything, yet grew up to be a Christian saint as a result of his war injuries and an encounter with a stray leper on the road. People regularly doing extraordinary things to help other people in real need; as a community we celebrate that.

Unitarian Universalists have a reputation for preferring the sunny side of life, being thankful for what we have, and focusing our attention on that which is beautiful and pleasant. That can be a good thing, but transformation often requires us to also look into the darker side of life, those who must do without, or with far too little, and yet can still find it within themselves to celebrate their lives. Mary Oliver captures this sense in her poem *Singapore*: "In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl. Disgust argued in my stomach, and I felt, in my pocket, for my ticket. A poem should always have birds in it. Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings. Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem. When the woman turned I could not answer her face. Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win. She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everyone needs a job. Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem. But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps, with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal,

scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly, nor quickly, like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird. I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life. And I want to rise from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course, it isn't. Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she folded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake; I mean the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds." Our life is full of beauty, if we can recognize it, and also depending on how we respond to it

In his book *How Can I Help*, Baba Ram Dass describes how India opened his heart to truly caring for others. He writes: "My first visit to India included a stop in Benares. In the streets there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people with begging bowls who were in the final stages of one illness or another and seemed to be just waiting to die. My heart was deeply pained by the scene. I put lots of change in lots of begging bowls, but even then it didn't seem like enough. In encounters with these people I usually averted my eyes from meeting theirs. I guess I felt guilty that I had so much and they had so little. Finally I was remaining in the hotel rather than face such massive suffering. By the time of my next visit to the city many months later, I had become familiar with the Hindu culture. I now realized that Benares was one of the most sacred cities in India, situated on the banks of the Ganges, the most sacred river. I also had come to know that in this culture, which believed so deeply in reincarnation, the most auspicious place to die was in Benares. To be cremated there on the river bank assured liberation after death. Now as I placed coins in begging bowls I was able to look into the eyes of the people. And to my profound amazement I found in their eyes not the suffering that I had been reticent to face but looks of peace. In fact I even saw in some of their eyes pity for me, lost as I was in illusion. Leprosy, leukemia, blindness, such poverty that they had only a loincloth and begging bowl... and still... peace. How wrong I'd been to assume that they were suffering as I would have been suffering in a similar situation."

Having explored humanist, Christian and Hindu approach to transcending our sense of separateness through caring for one another, let me add a Tibetan Buddhist view, this one from a Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche essay he entitles *Compassion: Survival of the Kindest*, where he writes: "Imagine spending your life in a little room with only one locked window so dirty it barely admits any light. You'd probably think the world was a pretty dim and dreary place, full of strangely shaped creatures that cast terrifying shadows against the dirty glass as they passed your room. But suppose one day you spill some water on the window, or a bit of rain dribbles in after a storm, and you use a rag or a corner of your shirtsleeve to dry it off. And as you do that, a little of the dirt that had accumulated on the glass comes away. Suddenly a small patch of light comes through the glass. Curious, you might rub a little harder, and as more dirt comes away, more light streams in. *Maybe, you think, the world isn't so dark and dreary after all. Maybe it's the window.* You go to the sink and get more water (and maybe a few more rags), and rub and rub until the whole surface of the window is free of dirt and grime. The light simply pours in, and you recognize, perhaps for the first time, that all those strangely shaped shadows that used to scare you every time they passed are people – just like you! And from the depths of your awareness arises an instinctive urge to form a social bond – to go out there on the street and just be with them. In truth, you haven't changed anything at all. The world, the light, and the people were always there. You just couldn't see them because your vision was obscured. But now you

see it all, and what a difference it makes!” Rinpoche says “Compassion, in Tibetan terms, is a spontaneous feeling of connection with all living beings.”

So how do we, like Julio, Penelope, Francis, Ram, and Mingur find it within ourselves to respond to our life with the caring and compassion for others and ourselves we know we have within us, which we know is our best self? First we need to silence, or repudiate those voices of our youth or childhood which tell us we are being unrealistic. We must learn to depend upon the kindness of strangers, and also to be the kindness that strangers can depend upon. That is one thing I learned that summer of 1974, and I returned to Yale \$2700 richer and with new friends. I think we each need to be prepared to reach deeper, to practice compassion in the most unlikely circumstances, and be prepared to encounter a world beyond our belief. Life will present us with opportunities to grow our soul. So in closing, I offer a Jane Kenyon poem called that she *Otherwise*, which she wrote to express her gratitude for the simple pleasures of life as she was dying of cancer: “I got out of bed on two strong legs. It might have been otherwise. I ate cereal, sweet milk, a ripe flawless peach. It might have been otherwise. I took the dog uphill to the birch wood. All morning I did the work I love. At noon I lay down with my mate. It might have been otherwise. We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks. It might have been otherwise. I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls, and planned another day just like this day. But one day, I know, it will be otherwise.” All of our lives will one day be otherwise. We live lives of pain and privilege. We too can become despairing and disconnected when we sense that we are somehow alone in our suffering. Yet reaching out, caring for one another, is the key to our salvation; the window that brightens our souls. As we affirmed in our chalice lighting, “We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other’s beautiful face and complex nature, so that creation need not play to an empty house.”

I love you all dearly. Blessed Be and Amen.