



South Fraser Unitarian Congregation



A People of Compassion

Soul Matters Thematic Packet
May 2017

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A Note from the Minister

Engaging in the theme of compassion at first glance could very well seem like one of the fluffier, and easier topics to engage in for the month. Let’s face it – compassion sounds “nice”. Just think of how many special meals area offered to the homeless come holiday time – at Easter and Christmas, in particular when the thinking moves along the lines of:

Think of those poor homeless folk. Bring in a can of soup for families that can’t afford one this season. Try to think of others less fortunate than you. Take a moment and pray for peace. Be a bit nicer.

I was thrilled when Karen Armstrong spent a day with us students at Vancouver School of Theology when I was studying there. From her attendance, I joined a multifaith book club based on her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. Each month Jews, Muslims, atheists, Christians, and me – the lone Unitarian, worked through each chapter. Later as one of my responsibilities in my internship year in Calgary, I engaged in the same study guide in the congregation as they prepared to sign the Charter of Compassion. Both times I engaged in the reading guide questions with people who were sincerely wanting to live a more compassionate life, I was struck at how much compassion impacted people’s interactions –

providing an opportunity to deepen a chance meeting or opportunity with someone that lives a different life than I do.

Karen Armstrong takes compassion seriously. Deadly serious, some might say. She gets it. Without compassion, we're simply not going to make it—not only as a human race, but also as families and individuals as well. At one point she calls compassion “the heart of all religion.” I'm not sure if she intended it, but I think her use of “heart” is key. Our hearts keep us alive. The more compassion there is in our lives, the more life there is. Remembering this, I hope, is the gift of this month's session.

Join us on Sunday, May 28th at 3:00 in the Library for our monthly Soul Matters Small Group Ministry discussion circle. Come prepared to talk about your experience engaging in one of the spiritual practices listed in this packet.

What is Soul Matters?

You may be wondering what Soul Matters is. Like other small group programs, its central goal is to foster circles of trust and deep listening. However, Soul Matters adds four unique components:

1. Explore the Worship Themes in More Depth

Soul Matters is not a “stand-alone” program. It is designed as a companion program to a congregation's worship experience. Congregations using Soul Matters position it in their system as “an opportunity to explore our congregation's monthly worship themes in more depth.”

2. Experience the Worship Theme, Don't Just Talk about It.

Unitarian Universalists want to do more than just read and talk about spiritual topics. Discussing a topic is important. But there is nothing like experiential learning. Honoring this, Soul Matters participants are given a spiritual exercise each month to engage prior to their group meeting. For instance, when we wrestled with the concept of grace, small group participants not only read what theologians have to say about it, but are challenged to find a way to bring grace (a gift one doesn't expect, earn or even deserve) into another person's life.

3. Questions To Walk With, Not Talk Through.

In traditional small groups, questions are an opportunity for the group to think together. Soul Matters uses questions differently. We see them as tools for individual exploration. Instead of asking our groups to go through the questions and discussion them one by one, Soul Matters participants are asked to read all the questions ahead of time and find the one question that “hooks them”—the one that speaks to and challenges them personally. Participants then live with--or “walk with”-

that question for a couple weeks leading up to the group. People come to their meeting, not with an answer to each of the questions on the list, but with a story about how this one particular question lead them to deeper, personal learning. This technique leads us away from abstraction and intellectualizing and challenges us to think about how the topic (and question) apply to our daily living.

4. A Reminder That UUism is Distinctive, Not an “Anything Goes,” Religion

Our monthly themes are not just interesting topics. Rather they focus us on a spiritual value that our UU faith has historically honored and emphasized. At each meeting, we are reminded that our faith promotes a preferred way for us to be in the world.

At the start of each month, a resource packet will be made available via hard copy, on our website, and through the Chalice Lighter. Resource packets include articles, poems, quotes, questions to wrestle with, and spiritual exercises all related to the theme. Of course, if you have material related to the theme, you’ll be encouraged and invited to submit them to Rev. Samaya for inclusion into the packet. The services during the month will be related to the theme in some way shape or form – it could be as simple as a chalice lighting that folds in the theme, or the entire service.

Please feel free to contact Rev. Samaya for more information.

Spiritual Practice – Compassion

Please choose one of the following spiritual practices to engage in and be prepared to discuss your experience at our Soul Matters small group ministry on Sunday, May 28th after the service at 3:00 pm.

Option A – Understanding Worldviews

Our strength lies in appreciating and learning from the similarities and differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews which contribute to fair, inclusive and healthy communities for all people. Understanding more about each other’s worldview can bring greater compassion for how the differences impact each other’s lives.

What cultures do you come from? How do they affect your worldview?

Spend five minutes writing down some brief points about what you know about some common traits of Indigenous worldviews and some of the common traits of the dominant Western worldview?

Then read ‘**Indigenous Peoples Worldviews vs Western Worldviews**’ posted by Bob Joseph on the ‘Working Effectively with Indigenous Peoples’ Blog:

<http://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>

If you are an Indigenous person, identify in what ways are your own cultural backgrounds and worldviews are similar and different than other Indigenous cultures and worldviews you know of. Consider how they are similar and different than the dominant Euro-Canadian worldview.

If you are a non-Indigenous person, identify in what ways are your own cultural backgrounds and worldviews are similar and different than Indigenous cultures and worldviews.

Come back to the group with something you learned about the impact of worldviews on relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and how what you may have learned affects your sense of compassion.

Option B – Compassion and Justice

What is the relationship between feelings of compassion and support for justice?

Consider this quote: “The fact that Canadians shy away from honestly appreciating aboriginal title is about more than just boredom. Many Canadians enjoy the emotional benefits of projecting their compassion on Aboriginal Canadians in need — as an explanation of lingering colonial guilt. Their efforts to raise living standards — which give them a greater say over land use — are perceived as a choice made by the more powerful party.”

Read the editorial from which this quote was taken, ‘Aboriginal title isn’t about compassion - its about law’ <http://ipolitics.ca/2015/12/15/aboriginal-title-isnt-about-compassion-its-about-law/>

During this month, bring curiosity to your responses about issues relating to Indigenous peoples. Consider the role of compassion: does it to help us engage with the suffering of other human beings? When can it condescended into pity? How do you help yourself distinguish between these two? Come back to the group with something you learned about your own responses and how compassion can instead support the Unitarian principle which promote in justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Option C - Show a Little Compassion for Yourself

It stuck out as if written in neon lights: “If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.” That was written by Buddhist writer and teacher, Jack Kornfield. He also wrote this: “Sometimes a firm “no” or “I can’t” or “I won’t allow that; it is beyond my limit” is the most spiritual and compassionate thing we can say.”

So it’s not all about saying no to yourself! Or thinking about yourself less! As Kornfield reminds us, compassion and sensitivity toward others is no good for anyone if it isn’t built upon sensitivity toward oneself.

Thus, this spiritual exercise invites you to
FIND A WAY TO BE COMPASSIONATE WITH YOURSELF.

You don't need to be told this, but I will do it anyway: this is trickier than it seems. This is not simply about being nice to or pampering yourself. As with compassion for others, compassion for yourself begins with a clear recognition of pain and then moves from there to an act that strives to relieve that pain.

Maybe that means forgiving yourself. Or finding a way to say, "I'm ok the way I am." Judging and beating ourselves up are two of the least compassionate acts we inflict on ourselves. How do you beat yourself up? And what might it mean to stop it?!

Maybe your struggle—your pain—is not about judgment. Maybe it involves the inability to say no. A friend tells me that she was taught that compassion means suffering for the sake of others and helping whenever and however you are asked. It led to her tolerating the irresponsible behavior of her alcoholic husband. Over time she learned that setting boundaries and walking away was the most compassionate thing she could do—for her husband as well as herself. Another friend is beating himself up for not being able to find work. He was a "top dog" at a large company. Now, he says, nobody is interested. He beats himself up every day!

Some of you will stop comparing yourself to others and forget about trying to get rid of that last ten pounds. Others will finally admit that a 60-hour work week is a form of self-violence and thus commit to observing the "Sabbath." At least one of you will make the decision to tell your overly-critical parent that you're not coming home over the summer. Another will dump that boyfriend who never—never—asks you anything about yourself! And yes, some of us will simply spoil ourselves: a random trip to Kingston, Ontario, a full body massage, that motor cycle you've always talked about, finally hiring a cleaning professional to take care of the bathrooms!

Whatever it is: figure out where your pain is, decide what you need to address it and then do at least one compassionate act for yourself.

Option D – Loving Kindness Meditation

Try out this loving kindness meditation. Letting in the struggles of "all beings everywhere" and trying to feel compassion for that widest of all circles is no small thing. As you tried it, did it make you feel the spirit and power of life surge through you? Or did it cause you to hyperventilate?

(As you call to mind your hopes for these wider and wider circles of being, you might try to imagine yourself "breathing in" their concerns, taking them into your heart, transforming that into loving kindness and then "breathing out" compassion into the world.)

Begin by sitting down in a comfortable position, closing your eyes. Sit with your back erect, without being strained or overarched.

Take a few deep breaths, relax your body. Feel your energy settle into your body and into the moment.

See if certain phrases emerge from your heart that express what you wish most deeply for yourself, not just for today, but in an enduring way. Phrases that are big enough

and general enough that you can ultimately wish them for all of life, for all beings everywhere.

Classical phrases are things like, "May I live in safety. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease."

You can gently repeat these phrases over and over again, have your mind rest in the phrases and whenever you find your attention has wandered, don't worry about it. When you recognize you've lost touch with the moment, see if you can gently let go and begin again.

May I live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease.

Call to mind somebody that you care about--a good friend, or someone who's helped you in your life, someone who inspires you. You can visualize them, say their name to yourself. Get a feeling for their presence, and then direct the phrases of loving kindness to them. May you live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease.

Call to mind someone you know who's having a difficult time right now. They've experienced a loss, painful feeling, a difficult situation. If somebody like that comes to mind, bring them here.

Imagine them sitting in front of you. Say their name. Get a feeling for their presence and offer the phrases of loving kindness to them.

"May you live in safety. Be happy. Be healthy, live with ease."

Think of someone who plays some role in your life, some function that you don't know very well, that you don't have a particular feeling for, or against. Maybe the checkout person at the supermarket where you shop, the gas-station attendant, somebody that you see periodically. If someone like that comes to mind, imagine them sitting in front of you, and offer these same phrases of loving kindness to them.

May you live in safety. Be happy. Be healthy, live with ease.

We connect into these phrases, aiming the heart in this way, we're opening ourselves to the possibility of including, rather than excluding, of connecting, rather than overlooking, of caring, rather than being indifferent. And ultimately, we open in this way to all beings everywhere, without distinction, without separation.

May all beings live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease.

All people, all animals, all creatures, all those in existence, near and far, known to us and unknown to us. All beings on the earth, in the air, in the water. Those being born, those dying.

May all beings everywhere live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease.

You feel the energy of this aspiration extending infinitely in front of you, to either side, behind you, above and below. As the heart extends in a boundless way, leaving no one out, may all beings live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease.

And when you feel ready, you can open your eyes and see if you can bring this energy with you throughout the day.

Listen to this spoken out loud at:

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Health/2000/07/Opening-The-Heart.aspx>

Watch a different version at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaQTqFh_9Kk

Questions To Live With

This month, the questions to live with take on a different form. I invite you to engage in one over the month along with the spiritual practice of your choice.

1. What is compassion and what is not compassion?
2. How can you make your family a school for compassion, where children learn the value of treating all others with respect? What would life be like if all family members made a serious attempt to treat one another “all day and every day” as they would wish to be treated themselves?
3. What would be the realistic criteria of a compassionate company, organization, school or community?
4. How do we apply compassion to those we fundamentally disagree with; certain politicians, business leaders etc.
5. How does knowing that we all have a “dark side” help or hinder your ability to cultivate and practice compassion?
6. How are empathy and compassion different, yet alike?
7. What defenses do you use to shield yourself from suffering?
8. Karen Armstrong writes that “When we cling to our certainties, likes, and dislikes, deeming them essential to our sense of self, we alienate ourselves from”¹ ourselves and from each other. How do you experience this practice of clinging? To what do you cling? When and how?
9. Karen Armstrong refers to the Chinese philosopher and mystic Shuangzi who explained that the unenlightened are like “a frog in a well who mistakes the tiny patch of sky he can see for the whole; but once he has seen the sky’s immensity, his perspective is changed forever.”² Discuss times when you have been transformed, if only for a moment by seeing the whole perspective or being in touch with the mystery of life.

Story – The Whole Boy³

Stories of half-people or half-animals are told in Spain, India, the Middle East, and North America, and by the Tempasuk Dusuns of North Borneo. The latter group’s tale of “Half Boy” is full of suffering and joy and conveys the universal message of our need to feel whole. This is a deeply moving story and ye it’s important to be cautious about the negative association between physical “half-ness” and a lack of psychological wholeness. To make the tale more

¹ Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, p. 118

² Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, p. 122

³ Adapted, *Ancient Stories for Modern Times: 50 Short Wisdom Tales for all Ages*, retold by Faye Mogensen, pp. 35-40.

surreal and more certain to be received as metaphorical, the needy boy is imagined to be a needy boy "full of holes."

Long ago and far away, and yet not so long ago nor far away, there was a boy. This was an ordinary boy in every way, except that he felt as though he were full of holes. The boy felt as though he had holes everywhere: in his heart, in his head, in his arms, in his legs.

He felt as though he had as many holes as he had a body, and the boy nicknamed himself as "Hole Boy," beginning with an h.

This feeling of being full of holes made the boy sad and mad all at once. It stirred up trouble inside him, and so he caused trouble all around him.

When the fishers were preparing to set their lines, Hole boy tangled them.

When the farmers were planting their fields, Hole Boy raced through and trampled the ground.

When the musicians were preparing to play, Hole Boy shouted and stomped and screamed as loudly as he could.

When the other children were trying to play Hole Boy found a way to get in their way.

The older Hole Boy grew, the more trouble he caused. People soon had enough and they let him know!

Children began to jeer and throw sticks at him

Women called him a pest and shooed him away.

Men scolded him and chased him off.

Finally, it was unbearable to have him around. He could hardly bear himself.

Some people wanted to drive him out of the village; others wanted to destroy him.

But there was one woman who had watched the boy, and she noticed that the trouble was as much inside him as it was outside.

She had compassion for the boy and believed he could change.

She said, "You say you are full of holes and you call yourself Hole Boy. You cause trouble, but I think it is this feeling of holes that causes your bad behaviour. If you could feel whole, with a w, everything could change.

The woman continued, "If you venture out into the world, I think you will find the part of you that is missing. I think you will find a boy who also has holes. That boy will make you whole. You will become Whole Boy - with a w. Then you will find your goodness.

The woman's words were puzzling, and yet they were like sweet nectar to the boy.

Never before had anyone had faith in him or shown him such kindness. For the first time ever, he felt warmth in his holey heart. For the first time ever, he had hope.

The next morning, Hole boy set off. His steps were hesitant and uneven, but he made his way along through thick bush and past giant trees.

Wind whistled through his holes and blew him about.

Branches snagged him and stopped him short.

Vines grabbed him. Animal sounds frightened him.

The river roared right at him; its spray splashed and soaked him.

But on he journeyed.

Finally at nightfall, he crept into a village square, and asked the people, "Have you seen a boy like me, who is full of holes?"

They pondered for a while. Finally an old woman said, "We have heard of one like that, somewhere near the sunset."

The next morning Hole Boy set out again and now he made his way for two days through thick bush and past giant trees.

Wind whistled through his holes and blew him about.

Branches snagged him and stopped him short.

Vines grabbed him. Animal sounds frightened him.

The river roared right at him; its spray splashed and soaked him.

But on he journeyed.

Finally, he came to the next village. When he asked about another Hole Boy, they too pointed towards the sunset.

The next morning Hole Boy set out again and now stumbled and bumbled for three days through thick bush and past giant trees.

Wind whistled through his holes and blew him about.

Branches snagged him and stopped him short.

Vines grabbed him. Animal sounds frightened him.

The river roared right at him; its spray splashed and soaked him.

But on he journeyed.

On the third day, as he approached a third village, he heard a loud cry, "Another Holy Boy! Another Holy Boy has arrived!"

Before long, Hole Boy saw the other boy, the Holy Boy, coming toward him. There could be no doubt that it was the other half! The two boys were the same size. They were each complete in precisely the places where the other had holes. No one knows why, but that's the way they were.

The boys recognized themselves in one another. Even so, they weren't quite sure what to make of each other. They circled around one another, sometimes smiling, sometimes suspicious.

They began to wrestle.

They tussled and tossed and swung one another around.

They stirred up the dust and the dirt and the water in the river.

The wind began to howl, rain pelted down, thunder roared, and lightning flashed.

The boys fought all through the night.

The storm raged all night long.

At last, the sun rose.

All was quiet except for the birds, who sang more beautifully than ever before.

In the calm of the morning, a single boy walked out of the river and out of the forest.

He was a Whole Boy now. A Whole Boy (with a w) and without a single hole – except for the ones that we all have.

Whole Boy said goodbye to the people of the village and made his way back through the forest.

Not once did the wind blow him about. Not once did a branch snag him. No vine tripped him. No animal sounds frightened him. Even the river was calm.

When at last Whole Boy arrived in the village where Hole Boy had begun the journey, he found the woman who had believed in him.

She welcomed him home with her arms wide open.

Whole Boy laughed.

That night they feasted, sang, and danced in celebration of his wholeness.

For Reflection:

- When has another person's faith in you made a difference to how you behaved?
- When have you believed in someone when others did not? How did you maintain that belief and what difference did it make?
- How do your challenges relate to Hole Boy's struggle in his journey?
- How do your challenges relate to the struggle between the two boys? What kind of struggle do you experience when you strive for greater wholeness (or integrity) in your life?

Quotes on Compassion

Singing the Living Tradition Reading No. 661

The Heart Knoweth

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken.

The whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether.

How many persons we meet in houses, whom we scarcely speak to, whom yet we honor and who honor us!

How many we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with!

Read the language of these wandering eye-beams.

The heart knoweth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Definition: sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others. "the victims should be treated with compassion"

Synonyms: pity, sympathy, empathy, fellow feeling, care, concern, solicitude, sensitivity, warmth, love, tenderness, mercy, leniency, tolerance, kindness, humanity, charity

The first outburst of everything God does is compassion.

Meister Eckhart

If we want a genuine smile, then first we must produce the basis for a smile to come. On every level of human life, compassion is the key thing.

Dalai Lama, *A Policy of Kindness*

Compassion is a spirituality of meat or milk; of adults, not children; of love, not masochism; of justice, not philanthropy. It requires maturity, a big heart, a willingness to risk and imagination.

Matthew Fox, *A Spirituality Named Compassion*

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein

The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another.

Thomas Merton

Holding to the Constant

Break into the peace within,
Hold attention in stillness,
And in the world outside
You will ably master the ten thousand things.

All things rise and flourish
Then go back to their roots.
Seeing this return brings true rest,
Where you discover who you really are.
Knowing who you are, you will find the constant.
Those who lack harmony with the constant court danger,
But those who have it gain new vision.

They act with compassion;
within themselves, they can find room for everything.
Having room, they rule themselves and lead others wisely.
Being wise, they live in accordance with the nature of things.
Emptied of self and one with nature,
They become filled with the Tao.
The Tao endures forever.
For those who have attained harmony with the Tao will never lose it,
Even if their bodies die.

Lao Tzu

May we creatures of bone and tissue
know our bodies well:
the fourth rib, and how it rises
higher than the third, not so high as fifth;
how it feels to the thumb, slowly traced,

and under it, how the heart rests.
May we know that space where
no ribs lie, and unshielded, we bend.

May we know the bottom of each
toe, and that tender arch where
no skin touches ground;
also skin smoothed soft by clothing.

May we know the quick curve of the head
before it sits on the spine,
and the tiny hollow just behind the ear;
the length of the forearm,
lifting food to lips, and how the lips become
a circle, waiting---and knowing this,
cease our study of war.

Nancy Shaffer

Videos and Podcasts

Bill Moyers Journal: *Interview with Karen Armstrong*

With economic, political, and social strife across the globe, prominent religious scholar Karen Armstrong discusses our human commonalities and her work on an international charter for compassion. The renowned author of *The Battle for God* and *The Bible: A Biography*, Armstrong is a 2008 recipient of the coveted TED Prize.

Podcast: <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/03132009/profile.html>

Transcript: <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/03132009/transcript1.html>

Charter for Compassion Website

<http://charterforcompassion.org/>

Originally the vision of Karen Armstrong, this effort brings together voices and prominent religious leaders from all cultures and religions to remind the world we already share the core principles of compassion.

<http://charterforcompassion.org/learn/history/>

Video of the speech where Karen Armstrong wins the TED Prize and makes her wish to have the TED community help her create, launch, and propagate a Charter for Compassion.

<http://charterforcompassion.org/learn/talks>

Watch these six short talks on compassion from six different perspectives.

Movies and Television About Compassion

The Good Lie

This is a 2014 American-Indian drama film by Margaret Nagle. The film follows the story of six siblings from Sudan who are trying to flee during the Second Sudanese Civil War. A kind employment counselor and the sacrifices of the siblings to keep each other safe, makes the movie a must watch! With three cast members who actually witnessed the War, the film is an amazing journey about love, family and compassion.

Schindler's List

One of the most famous movies about Nazi Germany, Schindler's List is a 1993 movie following the life of Oskar Schindler, known to have saved the lives of many Jews. Beginning as an unmoved member of the Nazi Party, Schindler is deeply moved when he sees the massacre following the emptying of a ghetto. He then turns into a protector of the Jews and tries to save more and more people till his last breath. What's better? It's a true story.

Le Havre

Le Havre is a 2011 French movie that focuses on the life of an old couple – Marcel Marx and Arletty and their community. Life changes as a small illegal immigrant arrives in their lives. Based in the port city of Le Havre, the film shows the extent to which a society goes to be kind and compassionate towards an innocent child. Filled with funny remarks and great acting, Le Havre is a must watch!

Pay It Forward

The life of 12-year-old Trevor McKinney changes completely when he receives a class assignment to do something that would change the world for the better. Inspired by the power of kindness, Pay It Forward is a 2000 American school drama that revolves around Trevor's school project 'Pay it Forward'. The project is designed to spark many moments of kindness by paying favours received forward to three others. It is a very emotional movie, so grab some tissues for sure!

Freedom Writers

Set in 1992, the movie is an adaptation of the life of a school teacher struggling to teach kids coming from racially different and violent family backgrounds. Released in 2007, the film follows Erin Gruwell and her class as they change from frustrated violent enemies to empathic and helpful friends. Guided by Gruwell, they identify their similarities and learn to be there for each other. Gruwell uses different techniques to bring together the divided group and what happens in the end is no less than a miracle. It is a definite watch for everyone!

Future Themes

This is our last thematic packet for the church year 2016-2017. Watch the Chalice Lighter for the themes in 2017-2018.