

Compassion Takes Courage

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Reading

Our reading this morning is from the lyrics to the choral Anthem “Te Quiero” which the choir is about to sing. The lyrics come from a poem by Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti. Benedetti is famous for his love poems, and this poem in particular blends images of love reaching out into social justice, echoing our theme of compassion and our own Unitarian Universalist theology that speaks of love as a motive force for justice in our world. I will read it first in its original Spanish and then an English translation by Nina Serrano.

Te Quiero

Tus manos son mi caricia
mis acordes cotidianos
te quiero porque tus manos
trabajan por la justicia

si te quiero es porque sos
mi amor mi cómplice y todo
y en la calle codo a codo
somos mucho más que dos

tus ojos son mi conjuro
contra la mala jornada
te quiero por tu mirada
que mira y siembra futuro

y por tu rostro sincero
y tu paso vagabundo
y tu llanto por el mundo
porque sos pueblo te quiero

y porque amor no es aureola
ni cándida moraleja
y porque somos pareja
que sabe que no está sola

si te quiero es porque sos
mi amor mi cómplice y todo
y en la calle codo a codo
somos mucho más que dos.

I love you

Your hands are my caress
my daily reminders
I love you because your hands
work for justice

if I love you it's because you are
my love my accomplice and my everything
and in the street arm in arm
we are many more than two

your eyes are my spell
against a cursed day
I love you for your gaze
that looks and plants the future

and for your open face
and your wanderer's footstep
and your weeping for the world
because you are of the people I love you.

and because love is not a halo
nor morality tale
and because we are a couple
that knows [we are] not alone
if I love you it's because you are
my love my accomplice and my everything
and in the street arm in arm
we are many more than two

Sermon

Throughout January, we explored the theme of courage. In our exploration, we looked at the idea that courage is a foundation for all other virtues, the foundation because to live our values fully, to be who we are and remain true to our ideals, especially at the testing point, requires courage. Certainly this is true of compassion. It takes courage to live compassion. Maybe this seems strange. Perhaps compassion seems easy. After all caring about others and showing kindness, this seems pretty basic. But compassion is infinitely more broad and deep than this, and true compassion takes not only courage, but practice and discipline.

Here's a story that gives a more nuanced and deep understanding of compassion and the courage needed for compassion. I am grateful to Michael Hipps for allowing me to share this story. A few weeks ago at a retreat for the Right Relations Ministry, Michael shared a piece of his story of addiction and recovery. He talked about the people in his life, his friends and family, who cut him off when he was using. He owned that when he was using, he mostly went to people for

money or for help because he couldn't manage the details of his life. The people who wouldn't help, he hated them the most and was so angry with them. But when he went into recovery, he realized it was those people - the ones who said no to him - who loved him the best. To love him best, took courage.

I imagine in this room - nearly all of us have either wrestled with addiction ourselves or love people who have - maybe both. I certainly have. I have loved ones who are active addicts and these are the most painful and difficult of all my relationships and I have struggled for years over how best to love, how best to have compassion for and with these loved ones. It is these relationships, these relationships hampered by addiction and dependency where compassion requires courage - the courage to draw limits, to say no, even to turn away.

At first this seems wrong. Love is giving, caring, helping. How does love - how does compassion - lead us to say no? It starts with understanding what compassion is and what it isn't. Compassion means having empathy, feeling with another person's suffering. The Latin root for compassion means to "suffer with" or "endure with." However, compassion is often misunderstood as pity. In fact, most English dictionaries define compassion as sympathetic pity, feeling sorry for someone. This is unfortunate, because this definition misses the power and the courage that are the marks of true compassion.

In Buddhism, which holds compassion as the most essential religious virtue, there is the idea of the near enemy and the far enemy. The far enemy is a quality opposite to the virtue - so for compassion, the far enemy is cruelty. That makes sense - cruelty is the opposite of love, the opposite of compassion. The near enemy, on the other hand, is perhaps more dangerous; the near enemy is a quality that can masquerade as the true virtue. The near enemy of compassion is pity. And it is an enemy because when we mistakenly cultivate pity instead of compassion, we get further from the ideal. Given that even our dictionaries define compassion as pity, perhaps this is why we struggle to achieve really compassion in our society as a whole.

So how is pity different from compassion and why is it an obstacle or an enemy to compassion?

Fundamentally, pity creates separation. Pity sees people who are suffering as different from ourselves. The American Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield says, "pity says, 'Oh, that poor person.'" It sets up a separation between ourselves and others, a sense of distance and remoteness that can be condescending and paternalistic. Pity can turn quickly into judgment. Alternatively, it can lead to the belief that a person is incapable of doing for him or herself. Neither of which are actually compassionate.

Compassion, at its foundation is about relationship, creating bridges between people, not as a distant observer, but as a brother, a sister, a neighbor, a friend. Compassion is about an awareness of our shared suffering, our shared vulnerability; it does not mean immersing ourselves in the suffering of others to the point of anguish.

This is where developing compassion takes courage and practice and discipline. Let's go back to Michael's story, but you can also think of your own. "Those who said no to me, who cut me off, loved me best," he says. In relationships marked by addiction there are often layers of judgment,

blame, dependence and pity woven throughout, and frankly, love and compassion get distorted by these.

Compassion is about walking with another person, not fixing a problem for them. Compassion makes us witnesses, a loving presence to another's suffering, but also affirms people's own agency, courage, and responsibility for their lives. In the end, compassion seeks the fullest unfolding of each person, it seeks the health and strength and agency of each person, including the self.

Here is another example, on a societal scale of this difference between compassion and pity. Listen for the echo of the near enemy.

During the Civil Rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King said that it was the white moderate that he had begun to see as a bigger obstacle to freedom than the violent segregationist. White moderates he said, had sympathy, even pity, for African Americans suffering under oppression. They agreed with the goals of the movement, but they were not connected enough to feel the urgency of the need for liberation. They felt bad for the injustice, for the suffering, but they preferred to have freedom wait for some better, more convenient time, when it might not disturb the status quo.

Their pity, which reinforced separation and condescension, made them greater obstacles to justice than those actively fighting against the movement. So while compassion seeks an end to suffering and the fullest development of people, pity - and this might be surprising to you - pity tends to reinforce unhealthy dynamics and disparity - whether in our families and personal lives, or in society at large. It's why no one wants pity - because to be pitied is to be put on the margins, on the outside.

There is so much deep truth in this. And especially in how pity keeps us from seeing our shared suffering, our shared vulnerability. In a recent article, the Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis, an African American pastor at Middle Collegiate church in New York City, reflecting on Ferguson, Missouri, spoke to how the perpetuation of racism, and I would add poverty and war, imprison all of our hearts, white people and people of color, rich people and poor people. She specifically speaks of race and says "the lie of white supremacy imprisons all of [our hearts.] For whites, guilt, shame and paralysis can result." (Odyssey Networks blog post: Release. Repair. Restore: Thoughts Beyond Ferguson Toward Racial Healing, 11/26/24).

I would argue it is similar with poverty. We know the truth of inequality, we know the growing disparity in the US and across the world. We see it. We are not blind to it. Our hearts break, but for those who have means, we wrestle with guilt, shame and yes, paralysis. We are all caught - separated, our hearts hidden, stymied by the realities of inequality. The remedy is compassion. The remedy is to see how our own hearts are imprisoned and that we must join with others for our own liberation - a liberation that overcomes separation and fear, and frees our hearts to love.

Dr. King saw the deep relationship between love, power and courage and the need for these to be joined to really redress war and poverty and racism. He saw the absolute challenge to these evils to be a love that binds people together across race, across class, across circumstances. He said,

“I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

Unarmed truth and unconditional love - what a powerful image of compassion. We see this in the personal as well as the societal. It's what I hear in Michael's story - that those who loved him best, were those who gave him the unarmed truth, not cruelly, not without love, but with honesty and clarity. And they were there, after he had done his work in recovery, waiting with unconditional love.

And this is the way we must engage our justice work as well.

In the poem “Te Quiero” from the choral anthem, Benedetti writes, “love is not a halo or a morality tale.” That would be pity – separation and judgment. He describes a picture of love that is at once personal, and also devoted to a greater justice. He says, love is walking arm and arm in the street, in the struggle, and by walking arm and arm, we are many more than two, we are stronger and greater because we are together. The image is not of fixing another, jumping in as a savior, or moral judge, but walking together, accompanying each other, arm in arm. This is key because this compassion – this love - is the root of just relationships, just partnerships, where we own our own responsibility and foster power, agency and authenticity in ourselves and each other. We don't pity each other for our struggles, nor try to fix them for each other. Instead we move together arm in arm, recognizing the way our struggles are bound together.

This is a very fine point to make, so let me echo it again. Pity disempowers. It takes away power and agency, thereby actually reinforcing unhealthy dynamics and disparity, whether it be in our personal relationships, families or society. So if we mistake pity for compassion, we can end up teaching a condescending or paternalistic way of looking at the religious message to love our neighbors and in so doing never foster the actual virtue of compassion, the actual work of connection and building bridges of powerful relationships.

Here's another way to hear the difference between the road to pity and the one to compassion. In his book, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*, Shane Claiborne writes, “Don't choose issues; choose people. Fall in love with people.” Build relationships of love and friendship across boundaries of suffering and marginalization, “then you won't have to worry about which cause you need to protest. Then the issues will choose you. [For] it is our love ... – not our rage or our arrogance – that counts.”

It may be that courage is the foundation for all the virtues, but I submit to you that the most essential spiritual, religious, human, humane virtue is compassion. And that the most important and difficult work we can do in our lives is to grow in our hearts a loving commitment to a spiritually connected humanity, to grow in ourselves an abiding commitment to the preciousness of life, each life, to commit ourselves to the work of developing and living compassion. And to do so will take courage, but it will also inspire courage. As the Dalai Lama has said, “The more you are motivated by love, the more fearless and free your actions will be.”