Empathy: Compassion, Charity, Respect, Justice

Introduction

The four virtues bundled here all start from recognizing that other people have value, just as we individually do. The UU first and second principles derive from this: we affirm and promote...

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

The Golden Rule is based on these same ideas: Treat others as you wish to be treated.

Charity and compassion should be rooted in empathy and respect. Consider this observation:

Service is not the same as helping. Helping is based on inequality, it's not a relationship between equals. When you help, you use your own strength to help someone with less strength. It's a one up, one down relationship, and people feel this inequality. When we help, we may inadvertently take away more than we give, diminishing the person's sense of self-worth and self-esteem… Serving is also different to fixing. We fix broken pipes; we don't fix people. When I set about fixing another person, it's because I see them as broken. Fixing is a form of judgment that separates us from one another; it creates a distance. So fundamentally, helping, fixing and serving are ways of seeing life. When you help, you see life as weak; when you fix, you see life as broken; and when you serve, you see life as whole. When we serve in this way, we understand that this person's suffering is also my suffering, that their joy is also my joy… We may help or fix many things in our lives, but when we serve, we are always in the service of wholeness. -- Rachel Remen

Shared readings of quotes, poems, songs, etc., with time for comments

Compassion and Charity

Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world. -- Desmond Tutu

Whether the universe is composed of an infinite number of blind atoms or one all-seeing nature, two things are clear: first, I am a part of the universe governed by nature; and second, I am related in some way to the other parts like myself… Because I am related to the other parts like myself, I will not seek my own advantage at their expense, but I will study to know what is in our common good and bend every effort to advance that good and dissuade others from acting against it. If I am successful in this, my life is bound to flow smoothly, as one would expect for the dutiful citizen who is always looking out for others. -- Marcus Aurelius, 121 – 180

Make a gift of your life and lift all…by being kind, considerate, forgiving, and compassionate at all times, in all places, and under all conditions, with everyone as well as yourself. This is the greatest gift anyone can give. -- David R. Hawkins
The people who feel connection have the compassion to be kind to themselves first and then to others, because, as it turns out, we can't practice compassion with other people unless we can treat ourselves kindly -- Brené Brown, paraphrase from her TED talk: Power of Vulnerability

Take care of yourself —
you never know when the world will need you. -- Rabbi Hillel
Shoulders -- Naomi Shihab Nye
A man crosses the street in rain,
stepping gently, looking two times north and south,
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.
No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo
but he's not marked.
Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,
HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing.
He hears the hum of a boy's dream
deep inside him.

We're not going to be able
to live in this world
if we're not willing to do what he's doing
with one another.

The road will only be wide.

Respect

One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say. -- Bryant H. McGill

I have no right, by anything I do or say, to demean a human being in his own eyes. What matters is not what I think of him; it is what he thinks of himself. To undermine a man’s self-respect is a sin. -- Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. -- Elie Wiesel

After all, what can a first impression tell us about someone we’ve just met for a minute in the lobby of a hotel? For that matter, what can a first impression tell us about anyone? Why, no more than a chord can tell us about Beethoven, or a brushstroke about Botticelli. By their very nature, human beings are so capricious, so complex, so delightfully contradictory, that they deserve not only our consideration, but our reconsideration -- and our unwavering determination to withhold our opinion until we have engaged them in every possible setting at every possible hour. - Amor Towles, from A Gentleman in Moscow
Justice

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest. -- Elie Wiesel

Justice should remove the bandage from her eyes long enough to distinguish between the vicious and the unfortunate. -- Robert G. Ingersoll

If we desire respect for the law, we must first make the law respectable. -- Louis D. Brandeis

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. -- Martin Luther King, Jr.
Shared experiences

Time to share reactions, thoughts, understandings, experiences, etc. related to these virtues.

Some seeds:

What do you think about the quote at the beginning of this session contrasting “helping”, “fixing”, and “serving”?

Brené Brown observes that “there can be no empathy without vulnerability.” How does showing compassion or working for justice make a person vulnerable? How does that affect our willingness or ability to do these things?

Brown also observes that “the people who feel connection have the compassion to be kind to themselves first and then to others, because, as it turns out, we can’t practice compassion with other people unless we can treat ourselves kindly.” Does that seem true?

One more from Brené Brown regarding compassion: it is based on “…the deeply held belief that we’re inextricably connected to each other by something greater than us. And that thing that is greater than us is rooted in love and compassion…” Is there “something greater than us”? Or is it enough that we recognize our commonality?

What are some qualities in a person that make you respect them? On first meeting someone, what external cues trigger a sense of respect, or the reverse? When have you noticed respect being withheld or reduced?

“Equality under the law” is fundamental to our sense of justice in America. There are at least two ways to look at that. One is the expectation that laws are administered equally. Another is the expectation that laws affect everyone equitably. (Not “equally”; for example, a graduated income tax shifts tax rates according to ability to pay.) We fall short of these ideals in many ways. Which shortfalls come to mind, that trouble you? Are there ways to address them?

Do you think that the moral arc of the universe is bending toward justice?

More group discussion

Why are these virtues important? Why are they hard to live into? Where can we improve in our own lives?