

Preparation for T287-Compassion

September begins our “Year of Cherishing”. Some of the goals for this year are to learn to cherish life, become a more expressive people in terms of cherishing, and to expand the field of who and what we cherish.

“Compassion” is the monthly theme for September 2012. All month on Sunday morning we will be exploring compassion. For more resources based on this month’s theme, see the September 2012 Journal (first newsletter of the month) on our church website.

1. Take some time to read the compassion practices on the back of this sheet. Choose one of the compassion practices and try it.
2. Which do you find comes most naturally? Compassion for yourself, or others, or the world? Give examples of a time when you practiced each type of compassion.
3. Think about someone your struggle to have compassion for. Why do you think that is?
4. Now mentally substitute someone you cherish (offspring, parent, close friend) for the person you struggle with having compassion for? How does that change things.
5. Think of someone you cherish. Was there ever a time you didn’t feel compassion? How did that affect your relationship?
6. The shadow side of compassion may be pity. To take pity on someone means we are helping them from our superior position; or in a condescending way. We might ask, “Is it compassion or just making myself feel good?” We might also ask how we distinguish compassion from self-righteousness, “do-goodism”, codependency, and guilt-based giving or helping?
7. What would compassionate curiosity look like in your life?

Taking It Home: Make Your Own “School for Compassion”!

Last year ministerial candidate Christy Baker and Senior Minister Nancy Palmer Jones led a hearty group of learners through a six-month course called the School for Compassion. Adapted from Karen Armstrong’s book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, participants explored ways to deepen their compassion for themselves, for others, and for the world.

Compassion takes practice. Here are a few of the practices we used in our School for Compassion. We suggest you pick one or two and try them on your own or with family and friends. Let us know what you discover!

General Suggestions for the Practices That Follow

1. Set aside a special place and time for your spiritual practice, a few days a week if possible.
2. Sit for a while, considering one or more of the questions that follow. Journal about these questions and the thoughts, memories, and imaginings that arise in response to them.
3. Take up the questions at a pace that feels right for you. A single question may offer a goldmine of discovery. Which questions are you most drawn to? Allow those to guide your practice.
4. Reflect on this spiritual practice around compassion. How is it going? When and how is it difficult? Do you notice any changes in your patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior?

1. Compassion for Yourself

Some of these questions come from the “Vook” (video book) of Karen Armstrong’s *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. Some are Rev. Nancy’s own suggestions. Feel free to modify them to suit who you are and where you are in your life.

- Make a list of all your good qualities. Ask a friend or partner what he or she values most in you. What qualities do you like best about yourself?
- Remember times when you have helped someone—a family member, a friend, a community member, a stranger. What are the kind things that you have done, whether or not anyone has noticed them? Make a list of these memories, either in your mind or in a journal.
- What life experiences do you need to mourn? Are there painful memories that still make you wince or that bring tears to your eyes? Can you give yourself some loving care about these feelings—the kind of care you wish someone else had given you or would give you now?
- Gently, affectionately, take a look at your growing edges. Do you notice times when you “want more”—such as more control over others? More control over life? Do you notice times when you really want to be “right”? Times when it’s hard to listen to another’s point of view or pain because you need something for yourself? Observe these times without judgment—just notice, with gentle loving curiosity, what happens and how you feel. Applaud yourself for noticing! Breathe in peace and breathe out love toward your own growing self.

2. Compassion for Others

The first exercises here help us to bring compassionate curiosity to difficult conversations.

- The next time you catch yourself beginning to debate something with another person, or the next time you find a conversation becoming contentious, ask yourself, “If this person were a guest in my home, how would I treat her or him? Or (if this person is already part of my family/home) how would I treat this person if she or he were my honored guest?”
- If you find yourself becoming defensive or feeling a need to make a point and correct others in a conversation, attempt to shift to a place of asking questions rather than making statements. Express curiosity. Inquire about another person’s particular view and what informs it. Curiosity

can open our hearts to see something from a different perspective than our own. Ask open-ended questions to shift from a debate to a dialogue.

We can practice compassion for others in the midst of our most mundane activities. The following suggestions invite us to take a moment in the midst of our daily lives to send compassion to strangers.

- “If you see on the evening news a person who moves you by his [or her] distress, just breathe it in and breathe out to [that person] love and strength.”
— Andrew Harvey in *The Direct Path*
To Practice This Thought: Send love to a stranger you notice is in need.
- “Sharon Salzberg suggests we practice ‘guerrilla compassion’—silently blessing people on line at the bank, at the supermarket, in the cars next to us in traffic. Each blessing is a tiny Sabbath, a secret sanctuary offered to a hurried and unsuspecting world.”
— Cited in Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*

3. Compassion for the World

Pick one of the following quotations. Read it slowly. Let a word or phrase, an idea or image arise from the reading. Let your mind and heart dwell with this word, phrase, idea, or image as you go about your day. What do you hear, and what do you see, as a result? What do you learn, and what do you now want to do?

- “True compassion does not come from wanting to help those less fortunate than ourselves but from realizing our kinship with all beings.” (Pema Chödrön in *Start Where You Are*)
- “As we feel the pain that all people feel in facing an uncontrollable world, compassion naturally arises—even for our ‘enemies.’” (Ezra Bayda in *Saying Yes to Life*)
- “We are always beginners in the art of compassion. No matter how advanced or refined we believe our understanding to be, life is sure to present us with some new experience or encounter with pain we feel unprepared for. Your partner betrays you, your teacher disappoints you, some event of unimaginable cruelty happens in the world, and once more you are asked to open your heart and receive it. ‘This also, this also’ is the essence of compassion. Over and over you are asked to meet change, loss, injustice, and over and over you are asked to find the strength to open when you are most inclined to shut down.” (Christina Feldman in *Compassion: Listening to the Cries of the World*)