

Developing Compassion
A sermon by Rev. Frieda Gillespie
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I'd like to start this off by shamelessly reading an essay written by my step-daughter, Julia, for a college application. The prompt for the essay was "Name a world problem, your personal connection with it, and how you would solve it.

"When I was ten, my best friend (and the boy who I had the biggest crush on) told me that he was transgender. Josie, previously Joa, was the first LGBTQA+ person who I ever knew, and my thought when she came out was: if she's a girl I can't have a crush on her!

Jokes on me: I crushed on her for the rest of the summer. That should have been my first clue that Josie was the second LGBTQA+ person who I knew.

Birds of a feather flock together, and now at eighteen most of my closest friends are LGBTQA+, and even though we live in one of the most diverse and liberal cities in one of the bluest states in the country almost none of my friends had the love and support they deserved after coming out.

Last summer I accidentally made a joke about being queer to my coworkers, and when I told my friend Vega they were horrified. They asked me if I was going to be safe at work, which had never even occurred to me, because my safety has never been directly threatened as a result of my sexuality. Vega, who is genderfluid and pansexual, has not been so fortunate.

Alex can't tell his grandparents that he's bisexual. Rosina couldn't hold her girlfriend's hand in front of her dad. Will moved across the country halfway through senior year to escape a brother who verbally abused him for being gay. When I think about the pain my friends have suffered as a result of their love, I am shaken to my core.

In middle school, when I decided that I was bisexual, I never even had to come out to my family, because they had never assumed that I would be straight. And in high school, when I struggled to find a label that fit my identity, and then decided labels just weren't for me, they were totally supportive. I am determined to create that kind of environment for every person I come in contact with, LGBT or otherwise.

Children should never fear their families, and more often than not it's queer teens who are afraid to own themselves. It's a problem that exists everywhere, from Framingham, Massachusetts, where Jared still cried coming out to his pro-marriage-equality family to Chechnya, Russia, where gay men are being murdered for their love. As much as I want to, I am incapable of tracking down the families of every LGBTQA+ child in the world and forcing them to understand and respect their child's identity. I believe that, at the end of the day, this issue is one caused by a lack of understanding, and one that can be cured by respect.

I am one person, incapable of forcing an entire planet to conform to my standards of interaction. All I can do is what I have always tried to do: use my fearlessness to be a voice for my people. I can educate, and inspire, and give love and respect to those who have previously been denied it. I can fight to create a world where instead of coming out, people just stop assuming everyone is straight. I can leave behind a legacy of friends and family who live to make the world a kinder place.” That’s the end of Julia’s essay.

The topic of developing compassion brings up the enormity of problems we are bombarded by in this country and the world. We are overwhelmed by news of sad and angering situations that we don’t know what to do about., But feel in some way responsible for I often feel compassion fatigue. I find that I avoid certain news sand tories or articles that I know are going to be painful. It seems that we are called by our compassion to do more than we can do. And we want to protect ourselves from that pain. And yet, Thich Nhat Hanh guides to have compassion for both the sufferers and those that cause the suffering, to see how our suffering and our joy are connected. If we deny one, we deny the other. This is an incredibly tall order.

In Julia’s essay she is expressing compassion for her friends, especially those who have experienced rejection from their families. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for children and teens. The suicide rate among LGBT children 10 to 24 is three times that of straight children. Research has shown that in schools with LGB support groups (such as gay-straight alliances), LGB students were less likely to experience threats of violence, miss school because they felt unsafe, or attempt suicide than those students in schools without LGB support groups.

There is more to the stories of these young people of course. Their parents and grandparents have their own suffering and while they may be denying the identity of their children or grandchildren, there are reasons that may go back generations or go deeper than simply wanting them to conform. Compassion does require respect for another’s perspective. Respect goes both ways. Just the fact that there are other students who accept them as they are, is enough to give them hope.

When my cousin found out that his son is gay, my cousin’s wife was heartbroken. It wasn’t that she rejected her son, but rather her dream of having a daughter-in-law that she could relate to like a daughter was destroyed. This was devastating to her. She loves her son and has struggled to make peace with this huge change in her life as well as her son’s. We can’ t know all the reasons for a person’s pain without really listening to them. Even prejudices are not always simple.

The fears of parents and grandparents that their young people might be gay are reflective of the rejection from the greater society for differences. And children know when they’ve crossed a line that their parents won’t forgive them for. It’s the same story with racial differences. Children are taught that to be an accepted member of the family they must stay away from compassion and friendship with other races. The stakes are very high when we cross these lines because we may lose our entire family of origin. It’s hard to have compassion for parents that

teach their children to hate. And yet, they are acting from a desire to keep their children within the society they live within.

It is easy to feel compassion for animals captured in the wild, or to feel the suffering of domestic animals that have been abused. I find it harder to have compassion for poachers, abusers and destroyers. My first response is always anger. However, it isn't that hard really to reflect on what their lives may be like. Having compassion for people who kill and destroy doesn't mean excusing or condoning what they do, but rather empathizing with what they are going through—what their lives are like, both outer and inner lives. Jane Goodall the famous scientist who studies Chimpanzees in the wild, worked out that poaching wasn't going to stop until poachers had another and better way of feeding their families. When her foundation worked on giving them better alternatives for their livelihoods, they jumped at the chance to change.

I heard an interview this week with a young man who had been inducted into a white supremacist group at the age of 13. He left it finally and he said what turned him around was meeting Jewish people, meeting black people that he found he respected and appreciated. He started to feel foolish and ridiculous even for his supremacist beliefs and horrified at the violence he had perpetrated against non-white people. He devotes his life to helping other to see past the rhetoric and crazy conspiracy theories that he had believed. Compassion comes with empathy.

Jennifer told me a story about a mother gorilla she encountered in the zoo years ago that had an infant. Jennifer was there with Tim when he was an infant in a stroller. The mother gorilla was chewing up leaves to feed to her infant baby. And she tried several times to feed Tim through the glass in the same way. It's remarkable that she could recognize him as a primate infant and that she wanted to feed him. She had empathy. Surely if a Gorilla can have that kind of empathy for another species, we could have that kind of empathy for other children who are in need.

Years ago, before the ending of Apartheid in South Africa, I went to hear Desmond Tutu speak. He is one of the great religious leaders of South Africa and he still works with others around the world for human rights. At that time he said something that has always stayed with me. He said that in order for white South Africans to allow Black South Africans to share equal power that they would have to go through a spiritual struggle. They would have to see how they have become dependent on their wealth for their very identity and how that dependency, the fear of losing their wealth, of having to share it with Black people, keeps them from having compassion, keeps them from seeing Black people as equals. Tutu with these remarks was demonstrating compassion. Eventually there were enough white people of influence who weren't afraid and apartheid was abolished. Problems of poverty and racism still continue there and in this country as well.

I have seen, from a distance, deep poverty in my life around me, in Birmingham Alabama in the 70's, in the ghettos of South Africa in the 90's, in the streets of Tijuana in Mexico, in the ghetto

neighborhoods of Los Angeles and among farmworkers in the Central Valley of California. Not to mention all of the places I've read about and seen pictures of. I'm sure you've had these experiences too and were affected by them as much as I was. It's easy when you have the means, to walk away and get on with your life. I think what is most painful in these encounters is not feeling compassion, but knowing that we don't have enough compassion to help.

Karen Armstrong, biblical scholar, writer, historian, wrote a book called, *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life*. In it she outlines a program to follow to develop our capacity for compassion. She made it a 12 step program to harken back to 12 step addiction programs, she said because we are addicted to egotism. I think we all have compassion especially for those we love. Often we have particular people or animals that we care deeply about. So, we start with some ability to empathize with others.

I'm not going to outline all of Armstrong's 12 steps but just a few:

The first is education about compassion. What do we know about it and what is there to know? The biggest thing is that every religion in the world lifts up compassion as a prime directive. There is some form of what we call "The Golden Rule" in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Greek philosophy, any religion you can name. In fact that might be the primary test of whether an organization is a religion. The golden rule says to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. It's expressed in various ways but the essence of it is to treat others the way we want to be treated. Think about what that entails—we have to recognize the common humanity between us and everyone, anyone else. In Unitarian Universalism this is expressed in our 7 principles starting with respect for the worth and dignity of every person.

Armstrong writes, "...as we begin our journey, we should recall that the sages, prophets, and mystics of these traditions did not regard compassion as an impractical dream. They worked as hard to implement it in the difficult circumstances of their time as we work today to find a cure for cancer. They were innovative thinkers, ready to use whatever tools lay to hand in order to reorient the human mind, assuage suffering, and pull their societies back from the brink. They did not cynically throw up their hands in despair, but insisted that every person had the ability to reform himself or herself and become an icon of kindness and selfless empathy in a world that seemed ruthlessly self-destructive. We need that energy and conviction today."

The second step she offers is to look at our own world: our families, our workplaces, our church and see how compassion is there or lacking. How can we make a difference for those who are our immediate concern?

The third step is compassion for ourselves. It seems to me to be vital to understand our limitations and possibilities. We cannot act fully and whole-heartedly if we are burdened by guilt, shame and self-judgment. We need to accept and love ourselves as we are. She points out that this is possibly the hardest compassion to develop. We all have ideas of how we should be, what we should do. Can we look at ourselves realistically, with empathy and caring for ourselves?

Skipping ahead- it isn't until step 6 that she gets to action. And then action in small ways in our daily life that are Golden Rule moments either given to or received from others. We build our capacity for compassionate action in small acts of kindness that over time, heal our cynicism, our grief, our self-judgment. Let's make it a spiritual practice to heed the bumper sticker, "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless beauty"

May it be so.

Closing Words There is no need to run outside for better seeing... Rather abide at the center of your being For the more you leave it the less you learn. Search your heart and see... The way to do is to be.