“A Bridge Between Us”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

February 6, 2022

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/.

Reading

“Empath” by Heather Swan, from Healing the Divide: Poems of Kindness & Connection, Ed. James Crews

…Later, telling the story,
he says he imagined as he ran the desperation
of those men—*Not much older than me!*—
that pushed them into a life like that.
Like a rabbit looking up at the hawk
and not seeing talon or beak,
but the soft underside of the wing.

Sermon

It is said that the Buddhism began over 2,600 years ago when a prince’s life was turned upside down. Siddhartha Guatama, who would become the Buddha, lived in a palace as the son of a local king, in the foothills of the Himalayas. As a young prince, he was waited upon and his every need was taken care of. His father desired to shield him from the world outside of the palace walls and so kept him within the luxurious circle of royal life. While the prince lived in sheltered opulence, all around him regular life was taking place. As the story goes, one day when he was in his late twenties, he became curious and ventured outside the palace and into the village by chariot.

The prince witnessed four things that would change his life. These are called the Four Sights. First, he saw someone who was sick. Then, he saw an old man. Then, a corpse being carried to the burning grounds. Up to this point, the prince had not been familiar with the suffering of others or the realities of sickness, aging, and death. Finally, on his way back to the palace, he

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came upon a wandering ascetic, a spiritual person who practices extreme self-discipline, who was wearing his robes and carrying a single bowl. It was then that he knew he needed to renounce his wealth and station and devote his life to a spiritual path.

Given the almost mythical nature of this ancient story, we have to imagine many of the details of what exactly took place. I am especially interested in what those encounters with the sick person, the old person, and the corpse were like for this young prince. What did he feel when he encountered those people? Did he say anything to them? Did he have any desire to offer help or care to those he encountered?

The experience was certainly powerful as it led him down the path to enlightenment and the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, the foundational teachings, or dharma, of the Buddhist religion.

Our worship theme this month is "widening the circle." A circle is an elegant shape. Boundaries clearly marked. Symmetrical.

A small, closed circle might offer security and comfort like Prince Siddhartha's palace life. Widening the circle calls us to expansion and moving from one fixed state to something more spacious and inclusive.

This action, of making the circle bigger, is an act of welcome and hospitality and is at the heart of our pursuit to care for one another and our planet.

Fortunately, human beings have an emotional and intellectual capacity that primes us for this necessary spiritual action of widening the circle. And, that is empathy.

Empathy is baked into our evolution. It is a capacity for survival that we simply cannot live without as is evidenced in the behaviors of primates as well as other species.

Empathy involves both feeling and thinking. Affective empathy refers to our ability to feel what another is feeling whether those are positive or negative emotions. When we feel affective empathy, we feel emotional resonance with someone else and our brains actually create the same neural patterns. A friend feels sad, and we feel their sadness. Your child lights up with joy, and you feel joyful. Cognitive empathy refers to our ability to understand what another person is

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feeling and thinking. This is sometimes called "perspective taking." You may not physically feel the same emotion, but you have knowledge of the emotion or the considerations at hand.

In the poem I shared for today's reading, we hear empathy at work. An empathic reader of the poem will likely feel fear and relief in empathetic response to the teenager and his mom. And, the son, the main subject of the poem describes his own empathetic inclination to the robbers, wondering what their lives were like that they could become that desperate. Even in moments of distress, empathy can arise.

While humans have developed the capacity to empathize as a natural human trait, we do not all empathize equally. Someone with a neurological divergence may have a brain that isn't wired to empathize naturally or easily. The skills related to recognizing emotion need to be taught and learned with more intention.

For others among us, the challenge is over-empathizing with others. Perhaps it's how you're wired or how you've been socialized over time, for whatever reason you may have a tendency towards empathy as a default way of relating to others, taking on the feelings of others above your own or consistently taking on the perspectives of others even before forming or recognizing your own thoughts and opinions.

The "empathy trap," as it's called, is especially dangerous for those in helping professions or in the role of caregiving. So much of one's attention is given to those you are helping or caring for that it can become a default emotional stance to engage empathetically at the cost of one's own emotional health and well-being.

I know for some of you that the helping and care-giving roles you play whether personally or professionally can be draining for this reason, and some space needs to be taken from the empathetic stance in order to preserve one's self amidst the swirling emotions and needs of others.

Engaging empathy with skillfulness is of benefit to others and also ourselves. Instead of simply letting empathy happen or not happen, we can acknowledge that there is also choice and agency involved.

Leslie Jamison, in her book The Empathy Exams, puts it this way: "Empathy isn't just something that happens to us—a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain—it's also a choice we

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make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves. It's made of exertion, that dowdier cousin of impulse. Sometimes we care for another because we know we should, or because it's asked for, but this doesn't make our caring hollow. The act of choosing simply means we've committed ourselves to a set of behaviors greater than the sum of our individual inclinations…"[1]

I would add to her statement that we can also choose wisely when we put forward that exertion to extend ourselves and when we might need to hold back.

Compassion is a close cousin of empathy but distinct. Compassion is rooted in our empathetic response to the suffering of another person and also encompasses our desire to help. The space between these two emotional stances is where we can skillfully movie so that both our empathy and compassion can be of benefit to others and ourselves.

Both empathy and compassion are needed if we are to build bridges across difference and heal division that keeps us separate from one another.

This is the premise of a new project by StoryCorps, that some of you may be familiar with, called One Small Step.

The project was conducted with people all across the country including here in Vermont. People were paired to interview one another with an intention of bringing people together who have different life experiences and political views. The entire archive is online, and I highly recommend listening in on these conversations.

In one conversation, I was struck how a bridge was made between two people with very distinctive political orientations - one was a self-described pro-choice, progressive named Valerie and the other an independent-leaning, pro-life, Republican named Kathy.[2]

Kathy shared how she had faced gender discrimination early in her career in the broadcast industry. It was a male-dominated field, and she regularly dealt with sexual harassment and discrimination in hiring. It was tough and lonely, she recounted to Valerie. Valerie responded empathetically, saying to Kathy, "How difficult!"

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[1] Leslie Jamison, The Empathy Exams: Essays (Greywolf Press, Minneapolis: 2014), 23.

[2] https://archive.storycorps.org/interviews/kathleen-gaffney-and-valerie-wood-lewis/?tm=1800

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Valerie shared about her life including raising four children, one of whom lived with multiple disabilities who they lost at the age of fifteen just a few years ago. Later in the conversation, Kathy made her own empathetic connection, telling Valerie, “I’m sorry about your son.”

(As an aside, Valerie is actually a Unitarian Universalist who lives in Burlington.)

These moments of expressing empathy created an emotional connection that made it easier later in the conversation for the two women to discuss their differing political opinions.

This same pattern was evident in other conversations. People shared something personal, often challenging, and their partner responded in some way that let them know they were with them, that they felt for them or understood where they were coming from.

The psychologist Paul Bloom has argued that empathy is not a good basis for moral action and can actually lead to more bias guiding us to favor those more like us than those who are different. To the extent that this is true, the design of the One Small Step project is kind of brilliant. It creates a container in which people have to leave behind familiar relationships and engage with someone who, at least on the surface, is unlike them in key ways.

Also notable to me was how the interviewees remained quite self-differentiated, that is strong in their stance of who they are and what they believe.

I believe that empathy can be employed skillfully when we are intentional in our desire to connect across difference and even work together across difference.

Being able to direct our empathy and compassion beyond our most intimate circles is necessary if we are to build more inclusive, just, and sustainable communities.

This doesn’t mean taking on everyone’s feelings around you or attempting to help in every situation you encounter suffering. We all have limits.

But, I wonder where your own circle of compassion could be widened even a little bit. Whose suffering have you yet to recognize? Whose perspective needs more of your understanding?

If we widen our circle of compassion, what might be possible?

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I close with this short poem by Miller Williams entitled “Compassion.”

Have compassion for everyone you meet
even if they don’t want it. What seems conceit,
bad manners or cynicism is always a sign
of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.

May empathy be the root of our compassion, and may our compassion be wide, and may we receive it in turn.

So may it be.

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