

Sustainable Empathy

Glasgow Unitarian Church - 29th June 2014 - Lyanne Mitchell

In the English language, we find that the idea of WATER is expressed in a great variety of forms: as a LIQUID; as a LAKE, as a RIVER, as RAIN, DEW, WAVE, and FOAM. Another example of the same kind, the words for SNOW in Eskimo, may be expressed as SNOW ON THE GROUND; as, FALLING SNOW; as DRIFTING SNOW; as SNOWDRIFT.

In gaelic, I believe there are many words describing types of 'rain'. Like the word 'Snow' for the Eskimos, 'Rain' is also too small a word to describe a big, ever-changing reality of life....4 letters are not enough it would seem!

I greatly enjoyed a book called 'The Secret Life of Bees' written by Sue Monk Kidd in which one of the characters says that there 32 ways to say 'love' in the Eskimo language - but having researched this, it turns out that there are at least 20 Inuit dialects and languages....so asking about love in the Eskimo language is like asking "what is love in European?"

'Love' is also 4 letter word - also too small to describe all it can mean. But just for fun, I had a go at listing as many words as I could in English for 'love' or components of 'Love. I managed to find 15. Have a go yourself sometime and we can compare notes!

One of the words on my list was 'Empathy'.

Do you remember that fluffy pop song in the 60's ? - *"What the world needs now is love, sweet love."* Not to denigrate love, but I think that what the world needs right now is a lot more empathy. Empathy seems to be one thing that "there's just too little of."

Empathy is often defined as the ability to feel or share something of another person's experience. An empathic response is one that lets another person know that you are tracking their feelings accurately, and that you really get what they are saying. Sometimes the most empathic response we can make when we try to give comfort to someone following a death or other tragedy is just to sit with the person in silence, and look into their eyes.

The poet, William Blake, captures the feeling of empathy in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* when he writes:

*Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief?*

*Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrow's share?
Can a father see his child
Weep, nor be with sorrow filled?*

*Can a mother sit and hear
An infant groan, an infant fear?
No, no! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!*

Empathy is not something that one political party or religious group owns. It is a human response to the sufferings of another person. Obviously, empathy makes its way into political or religious discussions when we fail to take into account another person's experiences or sensitivities. The sad reality is that few laws are written with the people actually present, whose lives will be most affected by the law .

On one level, empathy flies in the face of our "winner take all" or "I Me Mine" culture. Too often, the message that seems to dominate our society resembles the bumper sticker with the message "Whoever dies with the most toys wins the game."

I believe that most of us are better than that. The nearly universal expressions of revulsion and disgust at what is happening in Syria, Nigeria, Ukraine...and now Iraq and other war torn parts of our world, are just one sign of hope. They are a sign of hope that underneath all of our political differences, there is a layer of compassion, and the ability to "feel another's woe."

As Unitarians, empathy should be at the core of our faith. One might call it our version of "applied theology."

While researching for this service, I came across a website for an American UU church advertising ***'Tea and Empathy: Monday Midday Conversation'***

When I was on a visit to London a couple of years ago, I was travelling back to our son's home at the end of a really hot day. I was in the underground and there was obviously a problem with the train because the platform was packed solid with commuters waiting, tightly packed like sardines, sweating in the intense heat. I could barely get on to the platform there were so many people. I asked around and nobody knew what was going on and there were no announcements or staff nearby. So everyone just waited uncomfortably, absorbed in their mobile phones.

For some reason I looked up and noticed a man slowly trying to make his way through the crowd. He touched someone on the shoulder and I thought he had met up with a friend, but then he moved past her and kept going. And as he threaded his way through, he lightly touched each person on the elbow or arm as if he knew them and had now arrived at his destination. There was something intimate about the way he moved through the crowd. As if he knew all of us. I found it so interesting to watch - couldn't help developing all kinds of theories about what was going on. Maybe he wasn't a Londoner; maybe he was from another country with a different sense of personal space. Or maybe he was a politician, skilled in the art of connecting, just for a split second, with each of hundreds of strangers. Maybe I was witnessing the secret of great leadership.

Suddenly, I heard a gasp. Somebody was falling in the middle of the crowd. People were catching him and lowering him to the floor. It was that same man! People were shouting, "Get help! Get help!" and so I started to make my way toward the stairs to try to find a member of staff. But before I got there, it seemed that the man was already coming to. He was getting back up, helped by the people around him, saying, "That was the strangest feeling." He had simply passed out from standing for so long in the heat.

All of my theories about this man had been wrong. As I had been watching him make his way through the crowd, he had probably been feeling his grip on consciousness slipping away and he had been trying to almost hold on to people as

he passed by. The intimacy I had noticed was actually borne of **vulnerability**. And the people around him responded to his vulnerability with intimacy: Somebody offered him her bottle of water. He had been vulnerable and so his boundaries were down, his edges were soft and his heart was open. And it had been really visible even to me, a complete stranger.

I think many of us have had experiences like this – times when we're sick or heartbroken or in pain or we've witnessed something awful, we feel like our channels are open for connection with others, even strangers. We become transparent. Paul Simon sang :- *"Losing love is like a window in your heart / everybody sees you're blown apart / everybody feels the wind blow."*

Wonderful lines!

Have you ever noticed how our feelings can change towards someone who is usually very much in control, assertive, always organised, even powerful - when for some reason, that person lets down their guard and allows you to see their vulnerability. Suddenly, you can feel so much closer to them and they become so much easier to like or to love.

"tragedy," "injustice," "assault," "devastation." These words get worn thin through repetition – they have less and less impact each time we hear them and I think for many of us they have virtually no impact at all any more. We can't possibly hold it all. We can't possibly walk around all the time like that man in the subway, exposed, vulnerable, acutely aware of our dependence on others; and we can't walk around all the time like the crowd who reached out to him, seeing vulnerability in our midst and extending ourselves intimately to help. We simply can't sustain a level of emotion and action which measures up to the horrors of our time.

And yet we don't want to get inured to it all either. We don't want to go numb. We don't want what is sometimes called "empathy fatigue." As religious people, we want **sustainable empathy**. A supply that flows through us without depleting us. We want to plug into the Source of Compassion itself that some of us call God – compassion that flows evenly to all creatures and never gets used up. And I think

this is the right metaphor – plugging into something larger than ourselves instead of trying to generate it all from within.

One of the best ways to plug in like this spiritually, is actually to **unplug** a little from everything else. This place allows us to do that. We all need peaceful times and places in our lives to think, to reflect, to meditate, to pray.

As Unitarians, we have faith that there is a source of boundless compassion in the universe. We experience it in our vulnerability and our intimacy and we realise it in our action. We don't know whether everything happens for a reason but we do know that as human beings we have a stake in what happens. We have a responsibility to preserve our own capacity to care about it.

And though we may not always walk around like the man in the subway station aware of our vulnerability, and though we may not always behave like the crowd, rescuing the vulnerable in our midst, we know deep down that we are interconnected with all of existence.

The fate of the world is the fate of each one of us. We reject violence and war, when we remember the suffering and loss that they bring.

Let's take a deep breath, open our hearts once again, and raise our voices for a future world of permanent peace and try our best, to cultivate within ourselves, 'sustainable empathy'.

Thank you for listening.