

Reading:

“Clearing” by Martha Postlethwaite

Do not try to save
the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create
a clearing
in the dense forest
of your life
and wait there
patiently,
until the song
that is your life
falls into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worthy of rescue.

WORTHY OF RESCUE

A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton

Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City

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The Mind & Life Institute was conceived in 1987 by the Dalai Lama—the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people--along with a Chilean scientist and an American social entrepreneur. The mission of the Mind & Life Institute is to bring science and contemplative wisdom together to better understand the human mind and create positive change in the world.

The Institute convenes annually for Mind & Life Dialogs with themes ranging from “Destructive Emotions” to “Epistemological Questions in Quantum Physics and Eastern Contemplative Sciences.” At one of the first conferences, the Dalai Lama was asked by a neuroscientist, “How do Buddhists understand self-hate?”

The Dalai Lama speaks English, but his translator accompanies him for the sake of clarity. This question engendered a long back and forth between the Dalai Lama and his translator, and finally the Dalai Lama, bewildered, responded “Very very rare.” The neuroscientist replied, “No, it’s not rare in the West.” The Dalai Lama’s eyes got big, and he asked the neuroscientist, “Do you have this?” And the neuroscientist replied “Yes.” The Dalai Lama asked other attendees at the conference, “Do you ever feel self-hate?” and many raised their hands.

As the leader of a community living in exile, it seems surprising that the Dalai Lama is unfamiliar with self-hate. He fled Tibet in the middle of the night when he was a young man, and he has witnessed the pervasive destruction of Tibet and constant violence against his people. How is it that he is not familiar with self-hate? Is he protected by a strong sense of self-esteem, having been raised as a global leader since he was a toddler? Actually, no. The Dalai Lama’s resilience and courage result not from self-esteem, but from self-compassion.

Kristin Neff, Professor at the University of Texas and author of *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, conducts studies comparing self-esteem and self-compassion, and her work affirms

the virtues of self-compassion as an alternative to self-esteem. People with high self-esteem rely on accomplishment and comparison to others. As a result self-esteem is only effective when fueled by success. And self-esteem, if overblown, can lead to arrogance, a lack of self-awareness, and an inability to see opportunities to grow. Those who have cultivated self-esteem and not self-compassion, often dismiss their failures either by berating themselves or ignoring their failures.

Self-compassion, on the other hand, leads people to see themselves more accurately, accepting failures and setbacks and learning from them. Director of the Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism, Emma Seppälä writes, “With self-compassion, you value yourself not because you’ve judged yourself positively and others negatively but because you’re intrinsically deserving of care and concern like everyone else.”

Compassion, whether it’s directed at yourself or another, involves two steps: 1) notice that the person is suffering, and 2) respond to the suffering warmly and helpfully by trying to understand and listening, putting aside judgment and criticism. When applied to self-compassion, this means 1) allowing your own suffering, and 2) responding to it kindly without harsh criticism.

You can measure self-compassion by asking yourself how strongly you agree or disagree with statements such as “When I fail at something important to me, I try to keep things in perspective” and “When I’m feeling down I tend to think that most other people are probably happier than I am.”

Neff identifies the elements that are key to self-compassion. They include approaching negative emotions with openness and clarity, and understanding that suffering and inadequacy are part of the human experience.

The first element, when you approach negative emotions with openness and clarity, enables you to see the big picture, that you are more than that negative emotion which can feel so powerful that it overtakes your whole field of awareness. When you apply the two steps of compassion to yourself—allowing your suffering and responding to it warmly and without

judgment—you put the negative emotion in perspective. For example, self-compassionate people who feel anxious might say to themselves, “anxiety is arising” instead of “I am anxious. “Anxiety is arising” reminds you that the feeling is only part of a much larger experience. With this approach it is easier to catch yourself before you try to bury the anxiety or beat yourself up for it. Anxiety is a part of who you are, and that’s ok. You can be curious about it, offer yourself warmth and kindness in responding to the discomfort. The same goes for all your negative emotions: having perspective on them, not over-identifying with them, allows for spaciousness.

The American Buddhist teacher and author Pema Chodron uses this analogy: our clear and open minds and hearts are free flowing water, and our stuck and constricted minds and hearts, our negative emotions, are ice. When emotions are running out of control, obscuring our clarity and openness, our journey becomes knowing ice, becoming intimate with ice. We can’t find the flowing water by chucking out the ice, we have to melt it with warmth and curiosity. Where else are you going to find the flowing water?

A second element of self-compassion is seeing that your suffering and inadequacy are fundamental to the human experience, a recognition that you are not alone in your suffering. We may know this is true intellectually, but we often don’t know it experientially. Without self-compassion we harbor feelings of isolation, forgetting that our imperfections, our mistakes, and our challenges are necessarily built into the human condition. When you feel vulnerable and you’re not seeing yourself as one of almost 8 billion fallible human beings, you can feel that you’re struggling alone. Practicing self-compassion means sensing that all humans experience failure, and frustration.

Consider the challenges we’ve all faced over the past few months as we’ve sheltered in place—our livelihoods are threatened, our social connections are severed, our safety is always in question, our attendance at birthdays and graduations and funerals is impossible. Every person on this planet is affected somehow by COVID, and yet most of us can’t help but have had moments thinking, “My world is falling apart, and no one understands.” This is where self-compassion can rescue us—instead of looking only inwards we can open our hearts to our shared predicament.

What changes when you practice self-compassion?

One important benefit is that when you are self-compassionate, you see your mistakes as challenges, as opportunities for improvement. Your openness to making mistakes in the first place fosters a mindset of growth.

A second benefit of self-compassion is a willingness to apologize. When you accept your fallibility, you don't let your shame or defensiveness get in the way of saying you're sorry.

Because mistakes and failures are considered normal to self-compassionate people, they also benefit from resilience. A study conducted on veterans who returned from Iraq found that half of them experienced post-traumatic stress disorder. The veterans filled out questionnaires to determine their levels of self-compassion, and those who were more self-compassionate had less severe symptoms of PTSD. A study conducted on older adults showed that self-compassion is associated with reduced psychological distress when they are faced with health issues.

Another benefit of self-compassion is a decreased proclivity to rumination. Instead of stewing on negativity, you can sense when you are stuck and dislodge the ruminating thoughts.

There is one benefit of self-compassion even more compelling than all the rest, one that makes you realize that you can heal the world by offering compassion to yourself: self-compassion allows you to feel greater compassion for others. In fact there is evidence that self-compassion stimulates the same parts of the brain that are associated with compassion toward others. The same regions of the brain light up when people have self-compassionate thoughts as when they feel empathy, altruism, and forgiveness! And self-compassionate people are less likely to experience personal distress, meaning that they can better handle others' suffering without being overwhelmed.

Pema Chodron writes, "Learning how to be kind to ourselves, learning how to respect ourselves, is important. The reason it's important is that, fundamentally, when we look into our own hearts and begin to discover

what is confused and what is brilliant, what is bitter and what is sweet, it isn't just ourselves that we're discovering. We're discovering the universe.”

By allowing and exploring our emotional pain instead of denying or rejecting it, by seeing our difficulties as part of the human condition, we discover peace and equanimity. And we then come from a position of strength to offer our open hearts and minds to this world so worthy of rescue.

Closing Reading:

“The Guest House” by Rumi, translated by Kabir Helminski

Darling, the body is a guest house;
every morning someone new arrives.
Don't say, “O, another weight around my neck!”
or your guest will fly back to nothingness.
Whatever enters your heart is a guest
from the invisible world: entertain it well.

Every day, and every moment, a thought comes
like an honored guest into your heart.
My soul, regard each thought as a person,
for every person's value is in the thought they hold.

If a sorrowful thought stands in the way,
it is also preparing the way for joy.
It furiously sweeps your house clean,
in order that some new joy may appear from the Source.
It scatters the withered leaves from the bough of the heart,
in order that fresh green leaves might grow.
It uproots the old joy so that
a new joy may enter from Beyond.

Sorrow pulls up the rotten root
that was veiled from sight.
Whatever sorrow takes away or causes the heart to shed,
it puts something better in its place-
especially for one who is certain
that sorrow is the servant of the intuitive.

And if the pearl is not in sorrow's hand,
let it go and still be pleased.
Increase your sweet practice.
Your practice will benefit you at another time;
someday your need will be suddenly fulfilled.