

Pragmatic Solidarity

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Emily Layfield

When I was a kid, I used to really struggle to do my chores. I have vivid memories of spending hours in the room I was assigned to clean, not allowed to leave until I was done, but completely unable to start until it had been going on for so long that either threat or anger or some kind of urgency could power me through finally getting it done. I've always been a pretty placid kind of person, but chores were one area that childhood me could throw epic tantrums about. It wasn't until I was an adult and got diagnosed with ADHD that I learned that this kind of childhood pattern is really common for people with my kind of brain, and it's got a name - task paralysis. Dr. Russell Barkley, who is a researcher famous in ADHD circles, has a quote about ADHD, that it's not a problem of knowing what to do, but a problem of doing what you know. The experience of knowing exactly what you should be doing, of willing yourself desperately to do that thing, and for some reason being completely stuck and unable to figure out why or how to get unstuck, can be extremely frustrating. It makes it really easy to develop really mean self talk, and to start believing that you are lazy, or broken, or incapable, especially if you are unlucky enough to have people around you giving you those same kinds of messages. And if you find yourself believing that kind of thing, it's even easier to find more and more evidence that supports your belief.

I was really lucky in that for me, there were enough areas where my talents aligned with what the people around me valued, and I benefited from various types of societal privilege and positive reinforcement that meant for a long time, these kinds of struggles just seemed like anomalies. Sure I'd pull the occasional all night work session, or end up in that one class where I could never seem to trudge through the homework assignments, or miss the odd deadline, or lose track of some belongings, but I could generally make up for all of it in other ways that my brain wasn't inexplicably resisting, or build up enough general goodwill that I was given grace. I didn't end up believing that I was a failure, or unwelcome, or incapable. There were many around me, though, who weren't so lucky. One brilliant friend of mine, who also had an ADHD brain, sometimes acted out when he was bored in class, and for behavioral reasons was gradually moved from the advanced classes we shared in middle school all the way down to remedial classes, until he ended up dropping out of high school during our sophomore year. He wasn't lucky enough to have adults in his life who saw him not as a problem to be remediated but as a creative, funny, kind guy who just wasn't thriving in that setting - there didn't seem to be much effort to figure out what could have been driving his disruptions or whether there was another approach that could have made school a welcoming place for him again.

These days, I work as an ADHD coach, and whether my clients are judged "successful" by internal or societal metrics or not, it's all too common to see them wrestling with deep feelings of shame and failure. Knowing what you want to be doing or feel you should be doing but fighting with your brain to actually do it can feel hopeless, and can in turn drive all kinds of self destructive behaviors and beliefs.

This kind of brain can bring lots of gifts, too - we're often extremely creative, adaptable, and resilient, good in a crisis, and tenacious, to name a few - but with a different kind of brain, we often need to find different approaches or circumstances to be able to tap into our strengths, and ways to broaden our lens to figure out how we can shine. Most of the time, when we stop trying to push ourselves to work how we think we ought to and start getting curious about how to work with our brains just the way we are, we figure out how to thrive in our own ways.

I tend to think that might be true in lots of situations - that people do well when they can, and if they aren't, there's likely to be a barrier, maybe internal or external or both, that's making it harder than it might seem on the surface. Shame and judgment, though, can shut us down from being able to see beyond those barriers. In my experience, approaching with curiosity instead can open us up to possibilities we might not have even imagined.

Pragmatic Solidarity by Deborah Willoughby

Have you been noticing that basic human compassion seems to be eroding? Crushed by seemingly intractable crises, we may feel overwhelmed, scared, suspicious, guilty, angry and frustrated. We may notice more people focusing on protecting their own interests, trying to ignore the world's suffering, and, so often, blaming the people who need help. I sometimes log onto an online community discussion forum where I read disheartening comments from people in my neighborhood who are seething with anger at those who are unhoused.

Some sources describe five stages of compassion: recognizing suffering; understanding that human suffering is universal; having feelings in response to another person's suffering; tolerating uncomfortable feelings about people who are in distress; and being motivated to take action. I'm not going to spend time on definitions and nuances of terms like emotional burnout, compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma. What I'm interested in these days is how to keep our hearts open to others, and how to harness that compassion to help people directly while rebuilding the institutions that are responsible for oppression and suffering.

I think most of us at least aspire to be compassionate, caring people. We take seriously the admonition to love our neighbors as ourselves, although I swear some people take that literally to mean their next-door neighbors and not, you know, those troublemakers on the next block, much less those who live in other states or countries. That's why hearing about times when people go out of their way to be kind, such as the person who brought water for Amethyst's dog, is so heartening.

Sometimes our lack of compassion is linked to feeling overwhelmed by the suffering in the world. For others, it may be rooted in ignorance, of simply not understanding—or being open to understanding—why someone is struggling. Emily's powerful reflection reminds me of the impact of invisible barriers.

I worked for newspapers for 20 years, and I felt that gave me a strong understanding of the way the world worked and the institutional barriers that kept some people from getting ahead. But then I went to work for a nonprofit social service agency that connected callers to organizations that could help with shelter, food and many other services. Every day I had another illusion shattered. Our “safety net” had huge, gaping holes in it, and I hadn’t realized how bad it was.

When I told my brother about my nonprofit work, he replied, “Do you tell people to get a job?” I was his older sister, so, of course, I responded with sarcasm and some eye-rolling. But then we talked about it. Stan had lived in the same small city since infancy, with a really tight group of lifelong friends who took care of each other. He had a lot of skills and abilities that made him highly employable. He simply could not imagine being unable to find a job.

So I told him about a call I’d taken from a cabinet maker who lived in a town where vacation homes were booming—until the housing market collapsed. The man had lost his job and didn’t have health insurance. He told me he had been selling his tools to buy gas to go look for work—and then he fell off a porch and was badly injured. The hospital in town had written off most of the bill for his emergency room visit, although he had no idea how he’d ever pay for his ambulance ride, much less the orthopedic surgery he needed if he was going to recover the use of his arm. And now my brother understood. He identified with that caller, and felt deep compassion for him. My brother also immediately picked up on how difficult it was for me and my coworkers, who often had to tell people that we didn’t have any resource referrals for their situations.

Like many who work in helping professions, my coworkers were traumatized by talking to dozens of people a day who were experiencing crises that were directly related to long term traumas and the lack of health and social supports.

Occasionally we could connect people with just the right organization that would provide a solution. Mostly these were short term solutions, like an agency that could pay a family’s electric bill one time, so they could keep the power from being cut off. That would mean, for example, that a child with severe asthma could use a nebulizer at home—for a month. I usually allowed myself to hope that even a one-time bit of assistance might turn out to be the key that would turn things around for a family. You never know.

I was taking calls during the Great Recession, before the Affordable Care Act expanded Medicaid access to more Americans. Try telling uninsured people with agonizing toothaches that maybe they could get one of the handful of appointments at a low-cost dental van scheduled to come to their area in four months. Or explaining to desperate callers that the weather forecast was one degree over the threshold for opening severe weather shelters that night.

Occasionally a coworker would grow impatient with callers, blaming them for whatever bad decisions must have caused their problems. It was a tough job. When a highly analytical coworker was promoted into management, they made an enormous difference by adding staff trainings on systemic issues that

caused people to lose their homes, get sick, and struggle with the side effects of poverty. It turns out we were less likely to blame the victims when we understood that the excesses of capitalism, institutional racism, generational poverty, and similar factors were direct causes of income inequality and shortages of affordable housing.

Back in the 1960s, when cities were erupting with angry protests not unlike what we experienced in Portland in 2020, Martin Luther King said this: “A mere condemnation of violence is empty without understanding the daily violence that our society inflicts upon many of its members. The violence of poverty and humiliation hurts as intensely as the violence of the club.”

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Remembering those words can help us keep our compassion alive even in the most difficult of times. We can choose to open our hearts and recognize the humanity of the people who are suffering. Yes, there is personal choice and accountability for bad decisions. But there are other forces at work. We do everyone a disservice if we fail to educate ourselves about systemic racism, practices designed to maximize corporate profits by keeping wages low and housing prices high, and cynical political strategies that divide voters and limit our freedoms.

We can exercise our own compassion by speaking up when other people are judging and blaming those who are struggling. We can look deep within to consider how we may have benefited from inequitable systems that hold others back. We can listen humbly to those who are marginalized, so we can better understand what needs to be done. And then we can get organized and get moving to achieve pragmatic solidarity.

We can make a difference by providing more than empathy to someone who is suffering. Paul Farmer, quoted in the book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, explained how he was able to provide excellent medical care to people in situations of overwhelming need. You focus, really focus, on immediate help for the person in front of you. And then, you do your best to create systemic change. The organization he helped found, called Partners in Health, is predicated on the idea that compassion, or “suffering with,” is not enough—it must be linked to practical efforts to stop the suffering, with actions and solutions led by those most affected.

Partners in Health says this: “Pragmatic solidarity is a social justice approach that combines immediate, practical action, such as providing medical care, with responding to the root causes of suffering and injustice. These actions and solutions are led by those most affected. Solidarity alone won’t heal communities. Medical expertise is also insufficient on its own. Caring for patients means treating the medical aspects of the disease along with the structural violence that caused it.”

This philosophy also promotes a preferential option for the poor, meaning they put the needs of the most vulnerable first. It’s rooted in liberation theology, along with the understanding that marginalized people cannot flourish if there is, as Farmer wrote, “hunger, unfair political arrangements, ongoing

assaults on the environment, and no safety net to protect the sick, the unemployed, and the frail. The current rules of modern capitalism cannot rid us of structural violence.”

I’m of the mindset that we can and should recognize and respond to institutional inequities, the daily violence that society inflicts on marginalized people. This approach is not just for people in helping professions, although those fields can be a model for everyone.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but the brilliant manager at my workplace was using many of the tools of radical social work. One definition is this: Radical social work involves understanding oppression in the context of social and economic structures rather than affixing the problems to the individuals who are oppressed.

It’s interesting that there are similar so-called radical approaches to building more equitable and less-violent systems in other parts of our society. Health care providers and teachers have been paying attention to these lessons for years, for example.

We can aim for radical hospitality, especially right here in our church, knowing that it’s always going to be a work in progress. We can aim for universal design, creating programs and spaces that allow everyone access. One Unitarian Universalist publication says this: “Radical welcoming extends beyond simply letting folks in the door, it also means that the congregation is willing to be changed by those who come in. ... We’re willing and delighted to bring new people into leadership and encouraging of their revisionism and revising ‘the way things are done around here.’”

Can we start with compassion and move toward pragmatic solidarity? Can we change institutions, including our own, to address the sources of oppression? I think we’re already doing it to a certain extent. I’m in awe of the heart, the courage, and the openness of members of this community. Of the people who work directly with our neighbors in the Maplewood Moseley Community Garden, and those who welcome the participants of the Family Promise program. I mean the Green Team and the Global Majority gathering, and so many more of this church’s initiatives. And that’s not even mentioning the work that members are doing in the greater world. Yes, I’m talking about the Green Bag program, and the volunteer who assists when emergency workers are called to traumatic incidents. Those who are working diligently to try to improve our elections, expand reproductive freedom here and around the world, and, really, everyone who is willing to challenge a damaging status quo.

So, yes, we start with compassion, with open hearts that care about others who are suffering. And then we look beyond the immediate details to identify the systemic injustice that causes this suffering—and we think about what we can do about it. For a lot of older, heterosexual, cis gender, white people like me, it can take some effort to expose ourselves to inclusive, socially conscious and research-backed changes in the way we see the world. But it can be done. And while greater awareness of systemic injustice can be painful, I believe it’s so important because that’s how we can become part of the solution, starting with the uncomfortable fact that we have benefited from these systems that oppress others.

I don't think of myself as a radical, but I'm proud to say I'm learning from people who are. They lead with compassion and they work creatively and humbly, taking direction from those who are suffering in order to create justice.

I'll end today with hopeful words from the Unitarian Universalist minister Thandeka, who writes: "This common world I love anew, as the life blood of generations who refused to surrender their humanity in an inhumane world, courses through my veins. From within this world my despair is transformed to hope and I begin anew the legacy of caring."