

Compassionate Boundaries
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
October 5, 2025

Reflection on the Theme – Kelly Kanyid

I have never considered myself particularly good at forming and maintaining boundaries. I have always thought myself to be open minded and flexible, perhaps at times too flexible. This has sometimes made it hard for me to identify where my boundaries truly lie. Even when I have been able to identify a boundary in the moment, I have then sometimes struggled to go about upholding that boundary while maintaining my own values. It's tricky business, and I am nothing if not a work in progress.

I spent weeks leading up to this reflection trying to isolate a boundary to highlight, and I struggled to find even one good example to talk about.

And then an alt-right podcaster was murdered and the reaction to that, displayed on the news and on social media was intense. People I know, people I love, were leaving angry and accusing comments on news articles that really bothered me. Somehow I kept finding myself repeating the same phrase over and over again: I will not meet hostility with hostility.

And there it was: that was my boundary.

I can't control what political pundits say about people who vote like me. I can't control that a very loud minority of my fellow Americans would wish harm to my friends who live, look, and love differently than they do. I can't control that the leader of my country would seek to weaponize those sworn to protect us.

All I can do is respond to misinformation with facts. I can utilize my white, cisgendered privilege by putting my body between those with less privilege and those who would harm them. I can meet each new threat with compassion in my heart, and without compromising my values. There is a newer aphorism that I find to be particularly apt in this tricky and hostile time: I will not tolerate your B.S., but I wish you peace. I can hold righteous anger toward the profound injustices that persist in our country while still seeing the humanity in those allowing those injustices. To me this feels like a revolutionary ideal because it seems like the point of much of the media we consume is to keep us angry at each other, to keep us expressing hostility towards our fellow humans. Refusing to meet hostility with more hostility is a radical form of protest. Those in power can cause me to disagree, they can inspire me to action against injustice, they can take everything from me but what Viktor Frankl deemed "the last of human freedoms" which is, "to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." I choose to forgo hostility, but not action. I can remain open minded and flexible without bending the knee. I will take no B.S., but I wish all peace.

Cultivating Compassionate Boundaries© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Cultivating Compassion is our theme this month of October: "We will be a shelter for each other" sings the choir. Perhaps counter-intuitive, but boundaries are important as we begin this month of examining compassion. Compassion is empathy with boundaries.

I shared with you before a learning from last fall when my colleagues and I studied with Frank Rogers, co-director and founder of the Center for Engaged Compassion. He specifically addressed a phenomenon that has been mis-labeled as “compassion fatigue.”

As I said last fall, “This is relevant because many of us are feeling overwhelmed by the results of the presidential election and the pain that is being experienced and will increase for many in our society who have been marginalized and whose marginalization has just been given a national stamp of approval. It will only increase. Those of us in those marginalized groups are going to experience increased discrimination. Those of us who are allies with the marginalized are going to witness increased discrimination. Allies, of course, those who are not in the marginalized groups but who see clearly and abhor the discrimination, have a choice – whether to continue to align ourselves with the marginalized and risk our own discrimination, or we can opt out – we can numb ourselves or go into denial and do things in order to see what is going on. “Compassion fatigue” it’s been called, but Frank Rogers at this retreat, shared some research that helps us break down, understand, and combat the phenomenon.

He is using the research of Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki in an article called “Empathic Distress Fatigue Rather than Compassion Fatigue? Integrating Findings from Empathy Research in Psychology and Social Neuroscience, and Mattieu Ricard’s “From Empathy to Compassion in a Neuroscience Laboratory.”

Empathy is when we feel another’s feelings. It’s when we vicariously experience and understand the feelings, thoughts and behavior of another person. It’s emotional attunement. It’s when we experience parallel emotional experiences side by side with another. It’s when we feel pain at another’s tears. It’s the urge to calm an upset baby because we are distressed by their cries and distress. That’s empathy. Empathy is the automatic biological response that pushes us to care for our young. Empathy accesses the pain-response systems of the body, releasing stress hormones like cortisol, which can lead to poor health, lower immune efficiency, difficulty sleeping, irritability, weakened emotional regulation, etc. Unmetabolized empathy – that is, empathy we haven’t processed and dealt with – can lead to protective behaviors like numbing ourselves and becoming callous, dreading encounters, attempting to fix situations instead of being present to the pain of them, withdrawing emotionally or physically, distracting ourselves or anesthetizing... I wonder if any of those behaviors and symptoms are familiar to you?

Empathy is merging and belonging and connecting but skips over the authentic, differentiated line between me and you, one and another. Compassion is slightly different. Compassion is when we are connected, but in a way that maintains my awareness of my own state of being, so I’m differentiated from you, but connected to you. It’s a state of being both connected and differentiated, where we connect and belong to the other, while also authentically being ourself and differentiated.

Compassion is a learned behavior. Compassion, says Frank Rogers and the researchers he cites, is restorative. It activates the attachment and affiliation systems of the body, releasing oxytocin, sometimes called “the love hormone.” It relaxes the distress systems of our body, increases resilience and the capacity to emotionally regulate. It is tiring, but in that good way that comes after exercise, yoga, dancing or creating art. We need to rest from a restorative activity not to escape exhausted from a depleting activity.

Compassion has boundaries. I can feel your pain, but I know I am separate from it. Or I can feel your joy, even though I'm aware that I am in pain. I don't lose myself in your feelings, but can attend to your feelings while simultaneously attending to my own. That's why compassion is a learned skill and so much harder than empathy.

Empathy may be "easier" but that is only because it is an innate skill most of us inherit by being human. But is not better in the long run, because of the risk of losing ourselves and losing our way.

I thought Kelly's reflection this morning was brilliant, because in the midst of all this pain resulting from the murder of an alt-right leader who had caused so much pain, she was able to find her boundary – the one that said despite the pain caused by this alt-right leader's rhetoric, and despite the pain caused by yet another gun death in America, she had a choice. Her choice was how to respond to all that pain. She could feed the hostility, or she could respond to misinformation with facts, use her privilege to help the less privileged, meet each new threat with compassion, and not compromise her own values.

And our story for all ages about Daisy who was fluffy, but didn't want to be touched all the time just because she was so gloriously fluffy. We do a much better job of teaching our children boundaries these days, I hope.

I've set a boundary this morning that is, frankly, hard for me to set. That is, I've announced that I'll be retiring at the end of July and will no longer be your minister. This is a hard boundary to set because I have spent my career caring about others and largely putting their needs ahead of my own – at least in my working life. I'm wearing a special stole this morning, the one I was given at my ordination and installation in 2002, sewn for me by the women in my family. I wore it every Sunday over a robe for the first decade at least of my ministry. The robe and stole I put on was a symbol of my role and the fact that I was serving the congregation for a greater purpose and not gratifying my own need for attention and recognition. Though I've since quit wearing a robe, as it began to feel old-fashioned, I continue to wear what I think of as my "uniform" on Sunday – either a stole or one of three pashmina's I own – those large silk scarves - as a reminder of that greater purpose. I wear this special stole this morning because it gives me strength to do and say what I know is important for both this congregation and myself: that I'm putting my needs first by announcing my retirement.

It's not that I think you need me to continue. In fact, you don't. But I have been with you for eight years, will have been with you for nine by the time I leave, and it is not easy to disentangle and relinquish the role. Some of you will be disappointed. Some of us will be sad. I've no illusions that there won't be others who will be glad to see me go. But mostly, it will be hard for me to imagine your future without me involved in it. Even though that has always been my goal and aspiration.

I've put the needs of others ahead of my own for most of my working life, when at work, I mean. And, I've been working most of my life: As classroom aid, a Peace Corps volunteer, a public school teacher and finally, as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Like many of you who have retired before me, it is a hard shift to make, to realize I have aged, that I am an elder, that I don't have to work, and that I'm entering a new phase of my life, that I deserve to put myself and my family first.

So, I've given us both time to adjust. I'm announcing my departure a full ten months before I am leaving. In part, I'm doing this because the last time I left a congregation, I hardly got two months to say goodbye and it was excruciating – for both of us, I'd say. The congregation had even less time than I did

to adjust to my departure because they didn't know I had been looking for another position to bring me closer to home. I, at least, knew I was actively searching and preparing to leave them. But even so, it was hard on me to keep that secret until I'd landed a job and then to surprise them at the end of a church year with my departure.

I am using my internship supervisor, the Rev. Ruppert Lovely, as my model this year. The first Sunday I was in the pulpit with him – this was the Countryside Church in Palatine, IL, a Sunday in September – he announced his impending retirement in June, and I had an entire church year processing that news with the congregation and with him. His departure was a much bigger deal, as he had been with the congregation for 36 years – his entire ministry was in that church, but nevertheless, I learned so much that year about healthy goodbyes with a congregation and this time, I'm in the position to grant us that time to process together.

“Not to make it all about me, which is what people say when they make it all about themselves” – according to Jimmy Kimmel – on his return episode after being suspended. If you somehow missed this episode in American life, late night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel was pulled off the air indefinitely after including in his opening monologue comments relating to the killing of aforementioned alt-right activist and pressure from our “want-to-be King”. Many of us (my house included) canceled Hulu and Disney in response – 1.7 million subscribers, apparently, and guess what, he was returned to the air. I'd never really watched Jimmy Kimmel before this – I knew who he was, but I tend to watch Stephen Colbert, but like millions of others, I had to watch his return. Which is all a prelude to the part of his dialogue when he says “not to make it all about me, which is what people say when they make it all about themselves.”

He goes on to say, “This show is not important. What is important is that we get to live in a country that allows us to have a show like this.”

And what I want to say is that this minister is not important. What is important is that we get to belong to a tradition that allows the members to be in charge, the congregation to conduct its own business, to select its own minister and expect its members to construct their own theologies. Our new values statement, after all, was voted on by our delegates from member congregations throughout the UUA. We are a democratic faith, and it is our loyalty to democracy that makes these times in this country so challenging and our collective voice so very important.

And this congregation is not important. What is important is that it exists in a country that separates church and state. What is important is that we have the freedom to believe and worship as we like, a freedom that feels increasingly under threat with this administration.

Buddhist teacher, Willa B. Miller, writes, “Fierce compassion is not mild. It is courageous and active. It upholds others in their deepest goodness, but challenges them when they fall away from it. Compassion of this sort implies that we can love others enough to tell them the truth.”

I've tried over the years to love you enough to tell you the truth. I'm sure I've failed at this from time to time, but I have tried. The truth is, often when I'm preaching about something – like this morning, the boundaries of compassion – it is because I myself still need to learn this lesson. A dirty little secret we learn in seminary is that we are often preaching that which we ourselves most need to hear.

That is a kinder way to articulate Jane Austen's quip from the novel, *Persuasion*, “Nor could she help feeling, on more serious reflection, that, like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been

eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination.” There’s a reason that’s my favorite quote.

I have struggled throughout my career with drawing appropriate boundaries and not losing myself in my unconscious ability to empathize. Being with people can be very draining when I’m empathizing instead of practicing compassion. Ministry has been an opportunity to learn to do better, and even though I’ve not perfected the art, it is nevertheless, still time for me to retire.

The Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh, will be in the pulpit next Sunday. She works for the UUA in the Pacific Western Region, and is our contact for the region and association. Our Board of Trustees holds a retreat next weekend, and Rev. Sarah will be there to help us out and answer questions about what is next for this congregation after my retirement. She will preach on Sunday and has offered to hold a Q&A for the congregation that Sunday as well. You no doubt have many questions. I know the search process has changed since you last called a minister -me in 2017 – and so I think we’d all like to know what the protocol and next steps are for the congregation. If you can, please join us next Sunday and /return at 12:30/ or/ stay until 12:30/ to ask Rev. Sarah your questions. If you’re unable to join us, we still have 10 months together to figure this out. You will be okay and your next minister will be very lucky.

The future is unknown. That is the nature of the future. If we knew it, it would be the past. It is human nature to wonder about the mystery of the future before us, and the great religions remind us to trust in that mystery. To trust that whatever happens, we will be okay. Julian of Norwich said, amidst the immense suffering of the Middle Ages, - and doesn’t it feel some days that we are returning to the Middle Ages – but this Christian mystic was to have said “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

To be optimistic is not to deny reality, but to have courage and to endure. *We are going, heaven knows where we are going, but we know we will.*