

Empathy ⇔ Goodwill
⇔ Loving Kindness ⇔
Soul ⇔ non-self


Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org
Rev Paul Beckel
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WELCOME

In recent weeks at BUF we've been talking about religious freedom — both as a political phenomenon and as a condition of spiritual growth. If you haven't been here each week, check out the recent sermon texts on buf.org. We've explored mindfulness, epiphany, and soul, all marvelous things to reflect upon in juxtaposition to the distressing rhetoric of division and me-first-ness that is too much with us from day to day.

Freedom of conscience, nonjudgment, non-defensiveness, trust, setting aside our personal agendas in order to reach a higher agenda ... are these, perhaps, aspects of a larger, self-reinforcing spiral of growing awareness... of our unity as an interdependent web of consciousness that transcends time and culture?

Today let's bring into the circle empathy, goodwill, and loving kindness. What do these practices, these states of mind and heart contribute to the flow as we traverse on this course of life? Are empathy, goodwill, and loving kindness the very fluid which buoys us on our journeys?

MESSAGE, Part 1

When Rory McLeod got on the bus the other day the driver greeted him warmly, and handed him a pair of warm gloves. Rory was surprised. He didn't really need gloves that day, but they were his, so he was glad to get them back. He was surprised that the bus driver knew that they were his gloves at all, but especially surprised that she'd held onto them for a whole week. She explained though: had she turned them into lost and found, Rory would have had to pick them up downtown, and she knew he didn't go that way. But she did know he'd eventually be back on her bus.

Maybe it's a trivial example of what you're looking for, Rory said to me. I disagreed. Can goodwill, empathy, and loving kindness be trivial?

Today I'll be sharing with you what I heard when I asked people what comes to mind for them when they hear the words Empathy, Goodwill, and Loving Kindness. The most common response was: "Hmmmm, I'm not sure how to answer that." In fact this was my own response when, after I asked Jane, she turned the question back to me.

It's odd. I've been thoroughly loved. And reasonably well understood. I've received so much good in life that I have not deserved. But when asked to give examples, I flounder. What's that about?

I'll speculate here: maybe it's hard to come up with examples because when asked a grand question like this we may feel like we need to tell a grand narrative with an intriguing conflict, ironic subplots,

characters with complex motivations, and an unexpected but deeply satisfying resolution.

And in fact I believe that every one of us has such tales inside of us. But we're unlikely to produce them off the top of our heads.

Also I, and others, may have responded, when invited to share an experience of empathy, goodwill, or loving kindness... we may have responded, "Hmmmmmmm..." because we are ungrateful louts. But I don't think that's the case. Being grateful, happy, mindful, conscious but not overwhelmed, being in the flow — to be in these states of mind we are not required to have on the tip of our tongue *any particular reasons* for being grateful.

I think it's only a slight tangent to note that the heart of an ardent atheist can be filled with gratefulness for life, without having to identify *who* she is *grateful to*.

I believe this world will be a little better off if a few more of us are a little more grateful. Not necessarily grateful *to* anyone or anything. Not necessarily grateful *for* anyone or anything.

So I'm sharing these stories that might stir up some memories of your own experiences of loving kindness, goodwill, and empathy. Or even if all that comes to mind for you is an indistinct, but grateful, "Hmmmmmmm," that's ok too.

All these stories are from people in this congregation and all have given me permission to share, some with and some without their name. I will probably get some of the details wrong but I hope I can be true to their spirit.

Happily, not everyone felt the burden of providing a complex and deeply satisfying narrative. While some shared things very close to their hearts, Colin Goggin shared that his next door neighbor helped him pull up an old rug and carry it to the dump. Some of the stories involve memories from decades back, others occurred this past week.

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Jill Quick says that her divorce was the toughest thing she's been through. And her biggest help came from friends who had been through similar experiences. And though this was deeply painful, she finds now that she's able to offer empathy to others in ways that she might not otherwise have been able to give.

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Claire Lending doesn't fully understand how she's been of help to her friend who is seriously depressed. In fact, help doesn't seem to be the right word, because one thing Claire does know is that she can't really do anything, she doesn't have any advice, and hasn't even pretended to understand what her friend is going through. She's up front though, about not really getting it. And her friend's response is to say: I don't need you to understand. Thank you just for listening.

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Kurt Yandel mentioned the Leonard Cohen lyric: "I know the burden's heavy as you wheel it through the night. Some people say it's empty but that don't mean it's light."

Kurt says this reminds him that things that don't seem like a big deal to him, well, there may be some

reason that they are a big deal, a big burden to someone else. Or, maybe there is no reason, but it's a reality nonetheless.

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Kurt, and his wife Kara Black lived years ago in cohousing. They told me about how the group had to make a lot of decisions together, and that this could be more than a little contentious. Decisions about rules for pets, and children, and meals, and vinyl siding, and especially about money. But the group developed a decision making process that they called "cultural sharing." It was really amazing, Kara said. They would sit in a big circle and each person spoke about how their values around the given topic had been shaped by their culture or upbringing. And it wasn't always easy, or fast, and there were often tears (Kurt said he'd never seen anyone shed tears over vinyl siding before, but this person was really shaken that he'd come to see the rationale for vinyl siding).

Kara says that the group arrived at some very creative and elegant solutions that they probably would never have reached without this very deliberate process.

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Daria Haynes went to a county commission hearing this week on the topic of Accessory Dwelling Units. She said the hall was packed and that this was contentious issue. But she experienced, as an observer, an orderly process, with a very long line of people speaking emphatically but respectfully, each with a three minute limit, while the audience, following the rules, refrained from clapping or cheering or booing. Daria says she felt that people were really listening to one another, especially when she compared this to the so-called conversations she's observed in anonymous online diatribes.

She speculated that maybe we treat one another with more respect when we're face to face. She also wondered if she perceived things differently because in this case she was genuinely just an observer, as a real estate professional who needs to know what's going on, but no stake in the outcome. She acknowledged though, that she's not always so neutral on contentious issues, and perhaps then doesn't approach conversations with open-minded curiosity.

I shared my own speculation, a confession really: I wondered if the crowd were able to maintain their composure primarily because of the three-minute limit. This, I imagine, says something about where I find the limits of my own empathy. Because I believe I am genuinely interested in alternative perspectives, but I'm not particularly patient hearing the same rhetoric vomited up again and again, such as in the current political arena, with its mind-numbing cycle of superficial counterfactual and poorly reasoned arguments that have been droning on for as long as I can remember.

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Still, I do believe it's possible, once in a while, to break a pernicious cycle.

Barbara Gilday told me about her great Aunt Ethel. As a teenager on a farm in the great Canadian plains, Barbara, along with her neighbors, would gather at threshing time to help one another in the fields. But after a long day of driving tractor, sweating, and fending off the harassment of a neighbor boy, she didn't feel particularly neighborly or gracious.

She wanted that boy to know what kind of person he was dealing with and so she balanced a bucket of water on the edge of a door so it would fall on his head when he came through. As Barbara waited with anticipation for that satisfying moment, Aunt Ethel came by and calmly asked what she was doing.

Barbara, upset and indignant, explained. And Ethel simply said: If you do that you'll be reducing yourself to his level. Is that what you want?

Barbara told me, then, that she changed her mind. And in the telling, I heard in her a deep sense of gratitude.

CHALICE CHOIR

MESSAGE, Part 2

Ursula LeGuin writes: Love doesn't just sit there, like a stone, it has to be re-made, like bread; re-made all the time, made new.

Jennifer Smith says she was grateful when she found herself in a coffee train — at a coffee shop drive thru where there had been a long line of people paying for the order of the person behind them. Apparently someone at some point, paid for their own order, then asked to pay, additionally, for the order of the people in the car behind. I understand this kind of thing has been known to go on for hours. Jennifer was grateful, but also chagrined. It was nice to learn that the person ahead of her had paid for her order. It was not so nice to learn that the car behind her carried seven people who had just made a large order. All she could do was to scrounge up all of the change she could find in the car, which she knew would not be enough. But I have a sense that she's looked for opportunities, since then, to pay it forward.

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I have a bittersweet feeling about this story. It reminds me of so many situations when I could have done something to help another person often something quite simple. It seems in retrospect that I could have done something to help, I wish I had done something to help, but in reality I could not. Maybe I was distracted; maybe I didn't have time; maybe I didn't have twenty-five cents. Retroactively, something makes me want to have done it differently. But I could not. Our limits at any given time are real. We can't be all things to all people at all times.

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One person said that she'd found herself physically depleted from empathizing too much. For a long time she didn't recognize how much she continued to carry with her from encounters with the pain of others. This is a person I think of as especially compassionate and understanding. And it's a realistic reminder that the body has its limits and so does the spirit. None of us can take in an endless stream of pain from others without having a healthy way to let it go. Likewise we each have limits of how much local national and global bad news we can take in. Goodwill relies on good boundaries.

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Here are a couple of stories about such boundaries at the extremes. The first one involves the deliberate repression of empathy. Little Jane (Beckel) Brunt had a three-legged dog named Fern, who she trained in obedience and brought to the 4H fair... where the judges stated flatly that she and Fern would not be allowed to compete. They explained: if you win, people will just think we felt sorry for you. This made no sense whatsoever to Jane because this was not a subjective matter of which dogs looked the best or showed the best; this was about meeting objective behavioral standards. But the judges put up a wall: you don't want people just feeling sorry for you.

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And I agree, empathy can be twisted into pity in a way that is not conducive to growth for anyone. But is it wrong to attempt to move beyond our most limited concepts of goodwill?

Many years ago, one among us was accepted into professional school — a couple of different schools — just as her mother was diagnosed with cancer. She anticipated, then, moving far away, because the nearby school — which would enable her to remain close at hand through her mother's illness — was simply not affordable.

Until a family friend made an unthinkable offer of tens of thousands of dollars to cover tuition so that she could stay close to home. That over-the-top act of kindness (certainly not pity) she says, gave her something that she could never replace. And it has “raised the bar” and continues to invite her to imagine expansive possibilities for empathy, goodwill, and loving kindness — larger possibilities than she would have otherwise ever imagined.

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Another person mentioned, with sadness, how early children seem to learn to withhold empathy in order to exert emotional control over others. But I also heard about more than one preschooler who's incredibly touching gestures had warmed aching hearts... and knees.

Becky Curtis says that as a preschool teacher she's finding it increasingly difficult to sit down on those very low chairs. A four year old recently noticed her struggle, and asked why.

Becky explained that she has arthritis in her knee and that it's a little swollen and doesn't bend very well. He listened with a very concerned look on his face, and said, "Can I give you a hug?" She said, "Yes, a hug will help me!" So he laid his head on her knee for a few seconds, rubbed his cheek on it and wrapped his arms around her legs! It was “Soooo sweet,” she said. Becky believed that he was really thinking about how it would feel to have a knee that wouldn't bend and wanted to help her feel better.

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So where did this sense of connection come from? Has it been passed, will it be passed, from generation to generation?

Ted Williams and I were having a conversation about something else. And somewhere within that conversation Ted mentioned how finding our purpose in any given moment is about finding the intersection between our own deepest hunger and the world's greatest need. He noted that this changes over time — sometimes even from day to day — so we can't predict where and how that intersection is going to take place.

Later, when I asked Ted for an anecdote about empathy, goodwill, or loving kindness, he told me that when he went off to college his father was not pleased to see him turn into a flaming liberal. But he and his father continued to share a mutual respect.

When his father retired, he moved to Tucson, where Ted was then living. And later, when Ted moved away, he was surprised to learn that his politically conservative father had started volunteering at a soup kitchen in Tucson which Ted knew was led by people who were even further to the left than Ted ever was. And his father kept at it too. Apparently the politics of the place and its leaders was beside the point. His father saw a need, he knew he could help, and he did.

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Heidi Ohana said that when her son Mac died, someone she hadn't seen for probably 20 years, someone she didn't even really know that well ... they'd been campfire pack leaders together back in Iowa when the kids were really little. Now just a Facebook friend, Carol found out that Mac had died and she came out here for no other reason, Heidi says, no other reason than for me. She didn't even stay overnight. The only reason she came was for me. That touched me.

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The thing is, we don't always know it, or don't always believe it, when people say that we've made a difference in their lives.

Chad Nuckles-Flinn told me about Auntie Mam, his great aunt in Boise who was like a grandparent to him. When the time came for Auntie Mam to move out of her house into assisted living, Chad packed everything up from the house, took it across town and unpacked what would remain. But before she actually moved in Auntie Mam got a complete physical examination, and learned that she had cancer. She decided that she was too old to fight it and said she wanted to die at home. So Chad packed her back up, and fortunately the house hadn't sold yet, so he unpacked what remained of what remained back at home. Chad and his mom were with her when Auntie Mam died three weeks later. Chad says this experience was profound, especially with their long history together. He found in this time that he was beginning to grasp some things that he didn't get or didn't pay attention to as he was growing up with Auntie Mam always there.

One thing in particular that sticks with him, he says, is that her appreciation during this time, spoken and unspoken, helped him to hear that he was important, that he was appreciated.

Chad clarified that he'd been thanked many times by many people, and that many others had told him that they appreciated him. But those words had always kind of just whisked past without really taking hold. But now for the first time, through what she said, and what she did not say, for the first time, he really got it, he really understood that what he had done had made an impact on another person's life.

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But what are the limits of our capacity? How far can we go? How far do we need to go? Will it ever be enough? Ursula LeGuin, the science fiction writer who died this week, wrote once about our capacity to save the world, and to save ourselves: "The future has become uninhabitable. Such hopelessness can arise, I think, only from an inability to face the present, to live in the present, to live as a responsible being among other beings in this sacred world here and now, which is all we have, and all we need, to found our hope upon."

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In my inbox this morning, I found a few more stories of goodwill, empathy, and loving kindness from people who had initially responded, "hmmmmmm." And of course I should share at least one story of my own. So watch for more in the Midweek Update, our newsletter, this coming Wednesday. In the meantime, at coffee hour, and in the days ahead, with an open heart, consider sharing your own story with someone who needs a lift. Or set your story aside, and share whatever the moment calls from you.