

THE LIFE-CHANGING MAGIC OF SELF-COMPASSION

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Now I'd like to share a story for the young and the young at heart. It's a story from my childhood. An embarrassing moment. I'm a youngest child. A little sister. So this is a story of the kind of embarrassment a little sister can feel.

The story is called Tarzan, and there's a point in the story where I say the words "That wild Tarzan cry." When I say that, I'll need your help, and I think you'll know what to do.

TARZAN

I am in the family room of our house in Pennsylvania and an old Tarzan movie is on TV. It is the vines I love. And that thick, misty, black and white picture. And that wild Tarzan cry!

I want to be that cry. Not a sweet little girl in tight little shoes and a dress. Not a mother with Certs and little packages of tissues in her purse and everyone else's heavy coats over her arm. I want to be Tarzan, swinging through the jungle wearing nothing but a loincloth, and perhaps a small dagger. I want to startle all of those white people in their safari outfits who are making black people carry all their heavy things.

That is what I am thinking about when I am suddenly startled by the voice of my older sister.

"CARRIE. WHY ARE YOU TAKING OFF ALL OF YOUR CLOTHES IN FRONT OF THE WINDOW!"

It is suddenly clear to me that I am standing on top of a stool, in front of a large window, wearing nothing but a small scrap of my raggedy pajamas, which I've been working very hard at making into a loincloth for myself.

There is no graceful way to get down off of this stool with my older sister watching. But in a moment I'm on the floor, out the door, up the stairs, in my room with my door shut, my face in my pillow and my body in a tight ball.

A little while later I am back in front of the TV, unable to keep away from the lure of Tarzan, but this time I sit reasonably in a chair wearing normal pants and a normal shirt.

My older sister is sewing. She is more like Jane than like Tarzan. Tarzan would probably fall in love with her.

But I am not like Tarzan or Jane. I am a round, red-faced, little sister.

For those of you who have ever experienced an embarrassing moment, a moment when someone caught you in the act of being goofy, or uncool, or clumsy, not nice, or not very together, did you ever find that you got really mad at yourself and said mean things? Things like,

"How could I be so stupid?" "What's wrong with me?"

Anybody ever have that happen?

Did it help when you talked to yourself that way?

My topic today is Self-Compassion.

I'm calling it The Life-Changing Magic of Self-Compassion. calling to mind for some of you, the best-selling book, The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up.

Some of you know that for more than two decades now, part of my work life has been helping people let go of their clutter, inside and out.

The tidying book is about how transforming your home, your external environment can transform your life. How a place for everything and everything neatly folded and in its place can promote a feeling of well-being and support productivity. Which is true, to a certain extent. I just recently transformed my home office and it is totally making a difference in my productivity and my engagement with writing.

But the practice of self-compassion is basically about how transforming your **internal** environment can transform your life. How you listen to yourself. How you talk to yourself. How you treat yourself, especially when something challenging happens or when you're uncomfortable. Also how you tell yourself the stories of your life.

I find it can be useful to bring loving kindness to incidents from my past that I find difficult to accept. And one way is to turn them into written stories. When it feels safe and like I have the right context, it also helps me to share those stories. When I told you my little Tarzan story this morning, it was a practice of sharing it with safe community.

I could have kept that memory in a box labeled "I am so dumb!" or "what a stupid little kid I was." But sharing stories of my own human awkwardness helps me feel kinder to the child that I was. It helps me feel less alone. And the childlike energy that would have been shut up in a box labeled dumb is embraced, welcomed, and available to add playfulness and creative imagination to my adulthood.

There's also the possibility that when you hear a story like that, any parts of you that feel dopey, or weird, or somehow unacceptable, get to feel a little more welcome and a little less alone. Maybe some helpful energy can be released in you.

Daring to share our awkward, clumsy, and embarrassing stories with each other can deepen our intimacy and help us be a more real community.

Now Laura and I are going to take a step further into this exploration of self-compassion by sharing a poem by a Mexican poet named Ekiwah Adler-Belendez.

Ekiwah was born in 1987 with cerebral palsy. He started publishing books of poetry when he was twelve. The poem is called, The Homeopath and his mother happens to be a homeopathic physician. He wrote it when he was in his mid-teens.

We're sharing it with you today because it so beautifully expresses the art of tuning in to the intricacies of how someone is suffering.

You may know how to do this with a friend, but often it's harder to remember to do it with yourself.

THE HOMEOPATH

Is your pain unpredictable
Quick and sharp like a hummingbird
Or slow and familiar like an old house?
Do you ache at dawn or at sundown?
Do you shiver and twitch like a rabbit
Or are you still, like an oyster?
Are you thirsty?

If you had a choice,
Would you take a pinch of the ocean's salt
Or bite into a sugar cane?

Do you feel forsaken
Like a rose denied water?
Calm like a bear dreaming?
Disoriented like a seal in the desert?
Angry like a poisonous toad?

Do you yield to touch like sheep's wool
Or feel hardened like granite?

I want to speak to the heart of your pain,
To know how it took root and began.

I want to give you the colors of the rainbow
In imponderable doses.

I want to match it
With whatever shade is inside you.

I want to dazzle your pain
So it may leap out
And begin to dance.

- Ekiwah Adler-Belendez

Self-compassion is not about self-pity or self-indulgence or selfishness. It's not about telling yourself that you're the best or the most important person in the room. It's about treating yourself with care when you are suffering - in little ways and in big ways. It's about

learning to treat yourself as kindly as you would a dear friend going through a difficult moment or a challenging situation.

I did a training in self-compassion a couple years ago. The teacher was Kristen Neff - an educational psychologist who has been doing a lot of research on the subject.

I confess I went to the training kind of smugly, convinced that after years of being a therapist and a clutter coach I already knew everything about self-compassion. But I was pleasantly surprised.

Recent research is showing that self-compassion is linked to

- increased motivation
- increased personal accountability
- healthier habits
- an increased ability to care for and be supportive of others
- to override negative messages
- and to heal from conflict and abuse.

That's big stuff. If learning how to be kind to yourself in hard moments can allow shifts in motivation, accountability, habits, beliefs, and recovery from trauma, that's life-changing.

And the good news is that applying Self-Compassion is a very teachable skill. If you know how to notice and be kind to others when they're hurting, you can learn how to notice and be kind to yourself.

Kristen Neff talked about how people worry that if they're too soft on themselves, they won't be motivated to make needed changes. But when you apply self-compassion you are still holding yourself accountable. You just aren't abusing yourself in the process. You're acting like a helpful, supportive mentor to yourself instead of like the worst boss you ever had.

I was pleased to find that Kristin Neff and her research confirmed my belief that a gentle approach to clutter clearing and other behavior changes can be more effective than trying to bully yourself into changing.

She talked about how when we yell and say mean things to ourselves like, “I am such a slob! What is wrong with me?” even if we’re doing it silently, it’s activating our survival system, the fight-flight-freeze part of our brain.

So, for instance, when you try to bully yourself into facing off with a room full of clutter, it will probably backfire. 1/2-way through you may find that your brain shutting down so that decisions become impossible, you may find yourself losing energy, or getting rebellious, or fleeing the house to go shopping.

On the other hand, speaking to yourself in an encouraging, supportive way, especially when things get challenging, helps you feel safe enough to hang in there and keep at it. When stress reduces, you have access to the part of your brain that can make decisions, prioritize, and problem-solve. This is really good news!

Self-Kindness is a key component of Self-Compassion. Here’s another one. Common Humanity. Kristin Neff uses that phrase to mean that suffering is a normal part of the human experience. Everyone experiences suffering. But many of us judge ourselves when we don’t feel good. We take it as evidence there’s something wrong with us. We can tend to feel isolated and alone. But the truth is, our suffering, big and small, unites us with the rest of humanity.

Here’s a fairly low-key example of how this common humanity component of self-compassion can work when we start attacking ourselves.

I recently traveled to Transylvania with 42 people, mostly members of this congregation, to sing in little villages and to connect with our partner church in Magyarsovát.

We were a close community navigating beautiful, once-in-a-lifetime experiences, and numerous challenges. We functioned really well as a group. It seemed that everyone had brought the best of themselves.

Still, early in the trip I noticed myself occasionally lapsing into the habit of comparing myself with others.

Those who were young and slim and fit.

Those who knew how to pack light.

Those who seemed to sleep well every night.

Those who seemed to have no inhibitions about speaking in a language they barely knew.

When I started to make those comparisons, two things happened. One was I started to feel my own inadequacies. It emphasized to me that I was feeling bulgy, slow and old, had packed too much, wasn't a very good sleeper, and on and on.... Then on top of that I felt self-judgment for comparing myself to others.

This process could have spiraled downward very quickly, but I know now, in times like that, there are some things that help. I reminded myself that the feelings I was having were not unique. I could be pretty sure I wasn't the only one on the planet experiencing the tyranny of comparisons and finding myself lacking. And I probably wasn't the only one in our touring party going through it.

We live in a culture that tells us we're supposed to be the best. If you're up, then I'm down. Either I'm a superstar or a loser. So it is natural that

the comparison voices will occasionally flair up. It doesn't have to mean I'm a terrible person for feeling that.

Somewhere in there I must have also remembered that it would probably help if I joked about it with people I trusted. To exaggerate my angst about the person whose shoes never seemed to smell bad or the person whose clothes always looked cute.

Of course, once I came out of the closet about it, keeping it light and playful, then I got to find out others were having their own comparison wars going on inside. We could laugh about it. It got normalized. It lost its power. I could move on. And as my self-compassion kicked in, I had room in my heart and mind for the mixed bag of gifts and challenges that each of us navigates each day. And I could once again just feel part of a happy, traveling, singing tribe.

When you're part of community, it's tempting to want to present yourself as being enlightened, on top of it, and politically correct. It takes a certain kind of courage to reveal the places where it gets messy for you. That's why I so appreciate that most Sundays The Black Lives Matter Committee has someone present an Eracism Minute like Erica did this morning.

Often it's a minute of honest sharing about the messy business of trying to be a good person in a racist world.

It turns out even good-hearted, liberal Unitarian Universalists can behave in racist ways and say racist things. Usually it's unconscious. So we're trying to get conscious. To shine a light on the bad habit of racism we've inherited. And the eracism minute is a practice in normalizing this so that we as a community will get brave enough to work at naming it, facing it and addressing it in ourselves and in the culture.

But it's challenging. It's embarrassing. Even when we're working hard to do everything right, it's so easy to mess up. Speaking as a nice white liberal I

will say that when I offend, or even start to worry that I may have offended, it causes a lot of turmoil inside.

Oh shoot. I told a story about Tarzan right after the Eracism minute. Was that insensitive? I tried watching an old Tarzan movie recently and it was intolerable to see the way black people were portrayed. That was so stupid.

When the discomfort gets going, my auto pilot response is to want to disappear. Hide. Shut down. Give up on trying. Keep in my safe little bubble. Some other options would be to:

- Get defensive. Describe how liberal and open-minded and politically correct I am.
- Label the offended person as too sensitive.
- Or over-apologize, be so upset with myself that the offended person feels obligated to comfort me and reassure me that I'm a good person.

But here's another option. I could keep breathing, and if someone expresses having been hurt or offended, apologize, do my best to stay engaged, and listen. Then, as soon as I have some alone time, take care of myself. Be kind to myself.

This could be as simple as breathing and saying something like:

This is hard. I'm learning. It's okay to mess up some. I don't have to do this perfectly. Even though I wish I'd done that differently, I still want to treat myself with kindness.

Or I could take out my journal and write for five minutes about what happened and how it felt. Or have the 90-year-old wise woman I will become one day write me a letter of forgiveness and encouragement.

Self-Compassion allows us to take responsibility for our own well-being. It just isn't fair to ask ourselves to be perfect when we're in a process of learning and growing and challenging old patterns. That is always a messy process. But it's also not fair to ask those we have oppressed or

offended or hurt, to rescue us from our own shameful feelings. When we build an internal environment of kindness and warmth, it equips us to do the challenging work of becoming more inclusive and aware.

(Song – *From the Inside*)

Now let me share one more aspect of self-compassion.

Mindfulness. That means a willingness to observe thoughts and feelings with openness and clarity, without over-dramatizing them, without seeing yourself as a victim And without pushing them away or burying them. Seeing them instead as weather traveling through, or visitors arriving and departing.

Practicing the art of mindfulness through meditation, journaling, or just stopping to periodically breathe, notice, and take stock, allows us to greet emotions and thoughts more lightly, so that we don't use them as evidence that we are unacceptable or needing to be banished from the tribe. They just are what they are.

THE GUEST HOUSE

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,

who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

- Rumi

So much suffering comes from judging our thoughts and feelings.

After the election in November I was in shock. I was devastated. Deeply sad. Angry. Hopeless. Judgmental of others. I felt cynical and collapsed. And it was easy for self-judgement to come creeping in to beat me up further for having those feelings.

I'm supposed to be an optimistic person. An inspiring person. A non-judgemental person. I was breaking my internal rules and I didn't feel like me. But it was me. I was hurting. And the only thing that comforted me was encountering other people who were also hurting in a similar way.

Self-compassion did find its way into my mire. I gave myself permission to feel lousy. I gave myself permission not to know what to do. And as I did that it seemed to make room for more internal resources to activate.

One day a friend shared a dream with me. It was about a major rescue of a political figure and it involved a whole team of people with a variety of superpowers coordinating their efforts. After she told me about it, we started lamenting that we didn't have any superpowers.

But then I suddenly realized I did.

No, I couldn't leap tall buildings at a single bound. I couldn't run faster than a speeding train. And I had no truth-telling lasso. But I made a list of superpowers I felt I did have. Here's a sample:

I can do long-term creative projects and stay interested.

I can listen well.

I can remember the words to songs.

I can make a good meal out of whatever is in the fridge.

Sure these are things you don't normally think of as superpowers. But still. You never do know what will be needed when you're trying to heal the world.

I also found it freeing to make a list of superpowers I don't have at this point in my life. Maybe I will have them someday. Maybe not. For now I'm going to practice being okay with not having them. Here's a sample from that list:

Solving complicated technological problems.

Fixing the plumbing.

Building a shelter in the wilderness.

Speaking multiple languages.

I can't do those things right now, but there are others who can. And somehow coming up with lists of Superpowers I did have and Superpowers I didn't have lifted my spirits. It helped me to feel like part of a community where no one has to be perfect, but everyone has something to contribute.

Take a moment to think about it? What are your superpowers? I know you have some. And chances are that many of you overlook them because they come to you so easily.

Are you good at running a meeting? Designing a ritual? Making things grow? Singing? Fixing a broken pipe? You never know what will be needed in the times ahead.

On the same day I wrote about superpowers I spontaneously found myself writing a poem of encouragement to myself. Just a gentle nudge in a positive direction. And it helped. I say it to myself whenever I feel bombarded with depressing or overwhelming news. It continues to help me. So I'll share it with you now.

POST-ELECTION STRATEGIZING

None of my superpowers function well
When I am swamped by doubt.
I grip and hold my breath so tight
And that just wears me out.

It cuts me off from what I know.
From sources vast and wide.
And I forget that help is there
Around me and inside.

I have great gifts, great tools, great help
So when I'm clenched in fear
And try to keep life safe and small
I've forgotten why I'm here.

Life is in me to be spent,
And shared and risked and known.
If I had never taken risks
I never would have grown.

I'm here to be a solid tree
That's weathered every storm.
Not scurrying or worrying
Or trying to fit the norm.

Each moment I can make the choice
To breathe my way to now
And trust that what it mine to do
I'll figure out somehow.

It's never mine to judge if it's
Significant or not.
It's just to see what comes to me
And give it what I've got.

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When we meet ourselves with compassion, when we allow ourselves to feel what we actually feel, and remember that we are not alone in those feelings, things can move and change. New possibilities can come. We can breathe our way to now and trust that what it's ours to do we'll figure out somehow.

Self-judgement stifles our energy and blocks our superpowers. Self-compassion frees them up so they can be of use. And we need every gift, helpful quality, energy, and superpower freed up for the times ahead. May it be so.

(These are new words to the song Somewhere Over the Rainbow which can also be read as a poem. – Written by Carolyn Koehline, 2017)

SOMEDAY WE MAY BE PERFECT

Someday we may be perfect and we'll find
Endless love for ourselves and absolute peace of mind.

Someday we will make choices, wise and true,
Doing only the things we're sure we are meant to do.

Someday we'll let these fears go by and leave our
disappointments far behind us.

Where stacks of paper aren't so high and our to-do's don't
make us sigh.

That's where you'll find us.

Someday we may be perfect.

But for now

We'll find love for each other and for ourselves

Somehow.

Though we're imperfect as can be

Compassion waits for you and me

Right now.

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