

The Core of the Human Predicament
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

We are currently in the Christian season of Lent and, depending on the moon sighting, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan will begin tomorrow. These are both seasons that remind the worshiper of one's human limits. Lent begins with ashes placed on the head and the words heard of "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Both Lent and Ramadan are seasons of fasting. In Ramadan one goes from sunup to sundown without food or water. The limits of human existence are felt. One does not fast or remember that one will someday die to torture oneself or to be morbid. There is, for the practitioners of the faiths, a larger purpose. One recalls one's place before God and within the community. The questions are front of mind: Who am I and what am I to do?

In Richard Gilbert's curriculum, *Building Your Own Theology*, in the session on Human Nature he includes this, "Psychologist Carl Rogers once compared his understanding of human nature with that of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr spoke of 'original sin' as a function of self-love, claiming too much, grasping after self-fulfillment, thinking of oneself more highly than one ought to think. Rogers looked at his years of practice and concluded that it is not self-love that is at the heart of the human predicament but self-hate. Only as a person comes to love the self can love of the other unfold. Self-love or self-hate: which is at the core of the human predicament?"

My grandsons drive me crazy. I regularly ask them questions that ask this or that and they regularly answer me with "yes." But in this case, I think I too would answer the question "Self-love or self-hate: which is at the core of the human predicament?" with "yes." Not one or the other but both. Depends on the day. Depends on the moment.

I have sat at awards banquets hoping, even expecting, that my name would be called. I have lied about something I did or did not do, because I was ashamed of something I did or neglected to do and did not want to admit that I was not perfect.

Maybe setting up the dilemma as self-love or self-hate is not really the best way to consider the human predicament. I like far better a Buddhist understanding that I came upon as I searched for this week's dharma reading for the Wednesday meditation.

Pema Chödrön in her book, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* writes that, "One of the classic Buddhist teachings on hope and fear concerns what are known as the eight worldly dharmas. These are four pairs of opposites – four things that we like and become attached to and four things that we don't like and try to avoid. The basic message is that when we are caught up in the eight worldly dharmas, we suffer.

“First, we like pleasure; we are attached to it. Conversely, we don’t like pain. Second, we like and are attached to praise. We try to avoid criticism and blame. Third, we like and are attached to fame. We dislike and try to avoid disgrace. Finally, we are attached to gain, to getting what we want. We don’t like losing what we have.”

Pema Chödrön notes that it is not the pleasure, the pain, the praise, the criticism or blame, the fame, the disgrace, the gain or the loss that hook us but our feelings and the stories we tell ourselves about them. As Chödrön puts it, “A tiny thought arises, then escalates, and before we know what hit us, we’re caught up in hope and fear.” Is that criticism true? Will I get fired now? I didn’t deserve that. Those high school bullies should see me now. What am I going to do with this windfall? I will do this and this and that.

The Buddhists tells us to notice what we are doing and then be kind to ourselves. Chödrön ends her chapter on the eight worldly dharmas by saying that we begin our practice for ourselves, but as we notice the ways we get hooked by the worldly dharmas we will also begin to notice that other people also get hooked and because we see it in ourselves, we will build compassion for others.

Self-love or self-hate? Back to that. I think some self-love is appropriate. After all the Golden Rule tells us to love others as we love ourselves. Whether you call it love or compassion we need to give it to ourselves as well as to others. Self-hate though. That, I think, is never appropriate. Even a person who has done something terrible- murdered, raped, tortured – is never going to get past being a person capable of doing those things if they cannot get past self-hate. As love is appropriate for self and others, so I think hate is inappropriate for others and for ourselves. Self-love needs to be moderated so that it does not prevent love of others but hate needs total eradication.

At the turn of the twentieth century Unitarians spoke of human progress going “onward and upward forever.” Then came two world wars. “Now, I become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” I think the idea of human progress onward and upward forever was far too optimistic. Today there is a civil war in Sudan, a war between Hamas and Israel, a war between Ukraine and Russia. Gangs are ruling Haiti’s capital city. I could go on. Those things are in our news every day. But there are also people feeding the hungry, mentoring children, caring for the sick and injured, doing big and little kindnesses that usually don’t make the news.

Alexander Pope, an English poet of the turn of the eighteenth century put it like this,

“Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
(One) hangs between, in doubt to act or rest;
In doubt to deem (one)self a God or Beast;
In doubt (one's) mind or body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, (one's) reason such,

Whether (one) thinks too little or too much;
Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;
Still by (one)self abused or disabused;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurld;
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!”

Self-love or self-hate: which is at the core of the human predicament?” is the wrong question. I think the better question would be knowing that the eight worldly dharmas or however many there may be get us and everyone else hooked into hope and fear how should we respond? The answer of Jesus, the Buddha, me and many more is with compassion. That is really the point of Lent and Ramadan and so many other times of religious ritual to strengthen one’s compassion for self and for others.

The protagonist of the story we heard earlier by Marc Colagiovanni When Things Aren’t Going Right, Go Left reminds children and the rest of us to have compassion for ourselves. But compassion should not stop there. Twentieth century German physicist Albert Einstein said, “A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. (One) experiences (one)self, (one’s) thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of (one’s) consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” I would say that spiritual practices like fasting are meant to be one means toward working on the task of freeing ourselves from the delusion that we are separate and widening our circle of compassion.

I have read that a drawing done by a white, American, middle-class child will often have the child front and center. For many other children in the world the child will be but one small figure in the larger landscape of the drawing. Fast for Lent or Ramadan. Meditate on the eight worldly dharmas. Contemplate your place in the universe. However we define or do not define the human predicament, whatever words we use to define that predicament, whatever spiritual, intellectual or emotional tools we use to consider these things, the response remains the same, compassion. And I think that is what is important. Physical therapist and yoga teacher Judith Hanson Lasater puts it clearly and succinctly, “There is no question for which compassion is not the answer.”

