

THOU SHALT CULTIVATE AN EMPATHETIC HEART

Sermon VI in the Yearlong Series, "10 Commandments for the 21st Century"

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Early on the morning of August 14, 1942, Nazi soldiers surrounded the Jewish ghetto in the town of Bobowa, Poland, and began rounding up all the men, women and children. Terrified and still in his pajamas, 12-year-old Samuel Oliner hid on a roof, and watched the terrible chaos below. Here, in his own words, is what happened to him next.

"After several hours, which seemed like a lifetime, I escaped from the ghetto. Peasants along the way told me what had happened. The trucks had taken the others, including my [entire] family, to a forest. There the [Nazi soldiers] forced them to undress in the most vile and humiliating way, and made them walk about 60 feet across huge planks laid across a mass grave. They then shot them and watched them fall into the grave. It took 18 hours to kill a thousand people and bury them with a thin coat of soil....

"After that," Oliner went on, "I wandered around the countryside for three days, dazed and in disbelief. I slept in barns or in fields and ate food off the land. Finally I decided to go across the hills to the village of Bystra where a Catholic woman named Balwina Piecuch lived...Balwina knew my family from before the war. When I knocked on the door one night, Balwina immediately recognized me. She knew what had happened at Bobowa. She saw how scared and disheveled I was, took me in and comforted me – hugged me, fed me, and offered to let me sleep in the attic. As I climbed the stairs, Balwina said, crying, 'You poor boy. I will help. You must live!' Balwina changed my name, and taught me how to pretend to be a Catholic, and helped me find a job at a nearby farm...and thus it was that I survived the war."

And then Samuel Oliner concludes: "Balwina Piecuch act of kindness, compassion and bravery not only saved my life, it formed my life. I emigrated to the United States, became a sociologist, and spent my career working to understand what motivates altruists like Balwina and the hundreds of thousands of other people during the war who put the welfare of others alongside of their own."

Here is a picture of the eminent sociologist, Dr. Samuel Oliner...a pioneering thinker who has devoted his long and distinguished career to the study of altruism and compassion in human beings. And what, you might ask, has Dr. Oliner discovered about good people like Balwina Piecuch? After he and his research team – from the Altruistic Personality and Prosocial Behavior Institute he founded at Humboldt State University in California – interviewed more than 1500 of what have come to be known as "The Righteous Gentiles" (those brave, non-Jewish, Europeans who risked everything and endangered their own lives to rescue Jews from the murderous Nazis), he concluded that the one, defining human quality these exceptionally compassionate people all shared was that of empathy...empathy for other people. It was empathy – pure and simple -- that made these people so compassionate and brave.

Again Oliner in his own words: "We found a clear correlation between empathy and altruistic behavior...these helpers simply could not stand by and see others suffer...altruists, unlike bystanders who did not help, had internalized the ethic of caring and social responsibility learned from their parents and other adult models. They all shared the capacity for love and compassion."

This morning, I continue my year-long sermon series here at the Fellowship on “Ten Commandments or the 21st Century” with a sermon on what I shall call Commandment #6: “THOU SHALT CULTIVATE AN EMPATHETIC HEART. As a religious leader who has been thinking about our impossibly complex and difficult human drama for almost four decades now, I am passionately persuaded that empathy is one of the most important spiritual possessions a human being can have. Empathy is something we must both cherish and teach in our religious communities.

Again, Samuel Oliner: “Moral behavior is the consequence of empathy, caring for others, a strong attachment to the moral community, and an ethical obligation to all life. Reaching out to others at considerable personal risk, as Balwina Piecuch did to me as a terrified 12-year-old boy, and as many, many others have done, has been the force behind much that is good in the world. It has saved innumerable lives and inspired new acts of generosity and heroism.”

The work of Samuel Oliner and his research team, along with other researchers in the field, has persuaded me that, in fact, empathy (that quiet quality of the heart) is the spiritual pre-requisite for compassionate and loving behavior. It is people infused with simple, heart-felt empathy for their fellow human beings who naturally act in compassionate, protective or altruistic ways. Said simply, it is most often empathy we find in our hearts which empowers us to be good and caring human beings...it is empathy which leads to compassionate deeds and concrete acts of altruism, not to mention a more humane society.

But not everyone in our culture agrees with the importance of empathy in human affairs. Do you all remember, during the confirmation process for Justice Sonya Sotomayor, that our president was harshly criticized by some members of congress for saying that one of the qualities he was looking for in his nominees for the High Court was “Empathy.” It was as if these congressmen equated empathy with sentimentality or the excesses of a “bleeding heart.” Again, to me – and to Samuel Oliner – empathy is one of the most important possessions any human being can have.

But, with all this said, the question quickly becomes: 1) what precisely is empathy...and, perhaps of equal importance, 2) is empathy for others something we can cultivate in our spiritual lives and teach to, or instill in, our children?

Let’s begin by defining empathy...by looking at the etymology of the word itself. The English word “empathy” comes from the Greek word “empathia” which literally means “feeling into.” Empathy, then, is the human quality of “feeling into” or “feeling with,” as several authors I consulted put it, the situation of another. This is a much stronger human connection to another than sympathy, which I think of as the quality of feeling from a distance about what another person is going through. While sympathy is an important level of human caring, empathy goes deeper, and motivates us to actually do something tangible to relieve the suffering of others. I like the way my colleague, the Rev. Richard Gilbert, from Rochester, New York, puts all this:

“Empathy (which is feeling the feelings of others) is at the core of kindness; it is the irrational root of ethics; it is the central ingredient in human compassion.”

Compassion comes from the Latin “com” meaning “together” and “pati” meaning “to suffer.” Thus the word means, literally, “to suffer together.” In German, the word is “Mitleid” “feeling the misfortune of the other.” There are times when our only response to another’s pain is to share it. “Sorrow shared is sorrow halved,” as an old German saying puts it. Empathy, then, comes from a feeling of deep sympathy for another, and it is accompanied by a strong desire to

alleviate the pain or remove its cause. Sympathy – feeling pity – turns to empathy – feeling with – and finally issues in action to serve the needs of the neighbor.

And empathy at its best is not some complicated intellectual process but a simple emotional one. I am reminded of the story about a 9-year-old girl, who is sent by her mother for a loaf of bread at the store that was a short five-minute walk down the street from where she lived. When the 9-year-old had not returned home with the bread after half an hour, the mother grew concerned. Just as she was about to set out to see what had become of her daughter, the girl bounded in the door with the loaf of bread. “What on earth kept you so long?” the mother asked. The daughter answered, “On the way back from the store, I came upon a boy who had fallen off his bike and hurt his leg...I had to stop to Help him cry.” Empathy, then – pure and simple – is the quality of compassionately feeling with or feeling into another human’s predicament or pain...and, because of that close identification with what that person is going through, causes us to do something compassionate about it.

So empathy leads to goodness. And an absence (or lack) of empathy in the human heart conversely can lead to great human evil.

I had a wise, old colleague on Cape Cod – The Rev. Peter Fleck – who, on his deathbed, was having an extended conversation with another colleague about what his years in ministry had taught him. He said, “I have become convinced that human evil is only possible if you look into the eyes of another human being and do not see God there.”

As a Unitarian Universalist, committed to the theological idea of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, I am passionately persuaded that this is true...if we do not see our common humanity when we look into one another’s eyes and lives, then we can do great evil to one another. One painful example of the evil that can happen when empathy is absent happened recently in Washington, DC, where I lived. It was reported in *The Washington Post* the next morning. One afternoon at rush hour, an emotionally distraught woman had climbed over the railing on a high bridge on Interstate 95 over the Rappahannock River. As a State Police negotiator tried to talk her into his arms and safety, impatient motorists – who were possibly going to be late to work because of the disruption – began yelling, “Jump! Jump!” which the woman finally did...to her death. Evil happens when we look into the eyes or the life of another human being, and do not see God (or even ourselves) there.

But, as real as such acts of indifferent cruelty are in human affairs, let me flip this theological and ethical observation back to the positive...for that is where I want to take us this morning. Another positive way of saying all this is that human goodness and compassion blessedly can happen (do happen!) when we look into the eyes of another human being and see a reflection of God (or at least a reflection of our own selves). What Balwina Piecuch saw, when the knock came at the door that night in 1942, was not some subhuman creature to hate (as the Nazis portrayed all Jews)...but simply, from the heart, a fellow precious human being to protect.

The same could be said of that brave and selfless Rwandan hotel manager – Paul Rusesabagine, whose brave and compassionate actions were recently portrayed in the moving film “Hotel Rwanda.” Mr. Rusesabagine – at great risk to himself and his family – singlehandedly saved over a thousand Tutsi refugees from Hutu genocide in the terrible Rwandan civil war in 1994 because he found himself emotionally unable to turn his back on the desperate human beings who begged him for protection.

And the same could be said for the Rev. Waitstill Sharp and Martha Sharp, a Unitarian Universalist minister and his wife from Wellesley Hill, Massachusetts, who repeatedly risked their lives in Europe during World War II to help many hundreds of Jews escape Nazi persecution. In 2006, Israel's Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority honored the Sharps (and only one other American has ever received this honor), honored them as courageous and righteous gentiles who "acted according to the most noble principles of humanity by risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust." None of these brave and compassionate acts would have happened without the spiritual and emotional presence of empathy in the hearts of those who risked and cared.

Now...it is inspiring to recount these true stories of extraordinary human empathy, compassion and bravery. But what does all this have to do with us? We can only hope, of course, that if we ever found ourselves facing such human evils as genocide or other forms of inhuman violence, that we too would bravely act to save and serve others. But to me the more important and practical spiritual focus for us today is to ask ourselves how we can – in our routine living here in these relatively safe and humane United States – how we can cultivate greater empathy in our hearts and lives...and in the hearts and lives of our young people. The good news is that there is a lot of evidence that empathy is a natural human quality that can be cultivated!

First, it seems clear that we are all naturally born with it. In his wonderful book *Emotional Intelligence*, Dr. Daniel Goleman asserts that all human beings come into the world with a strong empathetic impulse. "The roots of empathy," he writes, "can be traced to infancy. Virtually from the day they are born, infants are upset when they hear another infant crying...infants feel empathetic distress even before they fully realize that they exist apart from other people – a response that is the earliest precursor of empathy." And Dr. Harvey Hornstein, in his important little book *Cruelty and Kindness*, asserts that parents, teachers and other adult role models (who model empathetic and compassionate behavior in their daily living) can and do produce more altruistic and empathetic children. "The development of empathetic, altruistic dispositions in children is very much contingent on the quality of parental behavior that the child observes. Parents who shower their children with rewarding squeals, kisses and hugs after they witness acts of generosity by their children are more likely to rear empathetic, altruistic children than those who are more coolly dispassionate about such benevolent gestures." Again and again in his interviews with the Righteous Gentiles who saved Jews during World War II, Samuel Oliner discovered that these brave and empathetic individuals learned empathy from their parents. "My parents taught me to respect all human beings," said one rescuer. "My parents taught me discipline, tolerance, and service of other people when they needed something," reported another.

I am honored to tell you that back when I was preparing this sermon, I was able to have a conversation with Samuel Oliner himself. Now those of you who are getting to know me won't be surprised when I tell you that I was born totally lacking the "Shyness Gene," and so after I read his research on empathy and altruism, I decided I wanted to talk to him directly...to make sure I had his ideas and research right. So, I did what any self-respecting introvert would do...I simply Googled Dr. Samuel Oliner, found his office phone number at Humboldt State University in California, where he is still actively studying empathy and altruism at this institute, and dialed his number. He wasn't there, but I left a long message on his tape answering machine, and then e-mailed him the draft of this sermon about his work. Miracle of miracles, he called me back in a couple of days! I had a wonderful and meaningful 30-minute phone conversation with this wonderful and thoughtful man. He is now 83 years old, and one of the things he said to me in our conversation (in his thick Polish accent that the decades had not been able to destroy) was this: "Rev. Alexander...I am very much an optimist about human behavior and goodness.

We know that it is easy to teach prejudice and hatred – individuals and communities of people successfully do it all the time. But I am passionately convinced that we can also teach altruism and empathy. At home and in our schools and churches, (where we have a captive audience, we can teach our children to think and act empathetically and compassionately.”

So, if the good doctor is right (and I pray and believe he is!), empathy is something we can instill in young people, first and foremost, I remind you, by exhibiting it ourselves. The bottom-line truth here is that our kids (and other young people whose lives we touch) grow up to be empathetic and altruistic adults because they have heard us articulate compassionate values and, even more importantly and powerfully, seen us treat others with respect, compassion and care.

This is perhaps the greatest moral responsibility we have as adults...to express and model empathy and caring for others in our everyday lives.

And there is one more important piece to this empathy equation, and that is our theological beliefs and religious principles. In her very important book, *The Great Transformation: The Beginnings of our Religious Traditions*, religious historian Karen Armstrong asserts that in the Ninth to Second Century BCE (the so called Axial Age before the birth of Jesus), four distinct religious traditions “that have continued to nourish humanity to the present day” – Confucianism and Taoism in China...Hinduism and Buddhism in India, monotheism in Israel, and philosophical rationalism in Greece – all moved in response to the violence and inhumanity of their age to articulate a new ethic of empathy and compassion toward all human beings everywhere. I quote her: “The Axial Age...was pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity ...the prophets, mystics, philosophers and poets of the Axial Age [taught] a spirituality of empathy and compassion...they insisted that people must abandon their egoism and greed, violence and unkindness...and embrace respect for the sacred rights of all persons.... Each tradition developed its own formulation of the golden rule...the Axial traditions all taught that if people behaved with kindness and generosity to their fellows, they could save the world.”

As Unitarian Universalists, we of course flow directly out of this universal ethic of the Axial Age and the ethic of Christianity which developed a couple of centuries later. Our spiritual and ethical roots are primarily Judeo-Christian, humanistic and rational...and as a faith, we have always taught the importance of compassion and connection between persons everywhere.

Empathy is indeed a part of what we call ourselves...we are Unitarian Universalists... Universalists who, for the hundreds of years since our founding as a spiritual movement, have seen and affirmed a precious and indissoluble (universal!) connectedness between all persons. And further look – if you will -- at the seven guiding principles of our faith which are printed as they are every Sunday on the backs of your orders of service this morning. From start to finish, ours is a religious tradition of human empathy, compassion and connection. And so, with these beliefs close to our hearts, we have everything we need to lead empathetic, compassionate lives, and teach these highest human attributes to our children.

Indeed, one can say – and I did last week in my sermon on “What it Means to Be a Unitarian Universalist,” I think – that the primary purpose of our religion is to cultivate and strengthen empathy and compassion in our daily lives. Our religion calls each of us out of the narrow confines of concern for the self, to a wider ethic of compassion and connection with human beings everywhere...that is the soul and the substance of our religion itself.

I want to end this morning by telling an old Hasidic tale told by Holocaust survivor Ellie Wiesel, which reminds us of the power and goodness of empathy. The story goes that back in the days of the Roman Empire, a young Jew in his late teens in Jerusalem wanted to journey to the great city of Rome, which was then the bustling capital of the world as he knew it...a terribly exciting, adventurous destination for a young man. His mother (as mothers are wont to do) protested about all the dangers and difficulties of such a trip. "But how will you manage? What will you eat? Where will you sleep?" Her adolescent son, of course, didn't really have any satisfactory answers, yet he persisted, pressing his case to go to Rome. Finally, his mother relented, saying, "Well, all right, perhaps you will make do, finding food and work...but for sleep, for sleep you must take this pillow which I have made for you, where you will lay your head each night to find rest."

Well...the son eagerly went off to Rome, and each evening – after enjoying the sights and sounds and sensations of the busy city – he would venture out into the quiet countryside beyond the walls of the city, with his pillow and other sparse belongings, to find a peaceful place to sleep. It went on like this for many days...but one night, just as the boy was falling asleep, the pillow caught fire...it spontaneously burst into flames.

Why, Wiesel asks?

The pillow caught fire because that night the Temple in Jerusalem burned. And then Wiesel explains. It was the flames of empathy, concern and connection which kept the Jewish boy awake that night. Wiesel says that all Jews (no matter how far they may wander from Jerusalem) mystically belong to one another in an indissoluble human community of connection, compassion and concern. Thus it was empathy, pure and simple, that kept the boy awake, that night the Temple burned, to the human suffering back in Jerusalem.

As we lead our lives in this complicated and conflicted 21st century, we must teach our hearts to obey a simple-but-crucial commandment, "Thou Shalt Cultivate an Empathetic Heart." Empathy is the most valuable spiritual possession of any human being because it keeps us awake to and protective of the worth and dignity of other persons, and it increases our own humanity and worth.

So...dear Vero friends... may your pillow catch fire! Over your lifetime, may your heart grow in its capacity to express and embody empathy for other human beings, no matter how different or difficult they might seem to you. May your pillow catch fire, and may you each evermore become human beings who know, deep to the heart, of your indissoluble connection to and responsibility for your fellow human beings.

May your pillow catch fire....and may empathy...pure, simple human empathy...evermore infuse and ennoble your humanness.

Amen.