

PRACTICING COMPASSION AND CONNECTION MORE FULLY

Lecture 2 in the 2011–2012 Minns Lectures

What Was And Is Required:

Three Forums on the Renewal of Unitarian Universalism in the 21st Century

The Rev. John A. Buehrens

Delivered at First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco

Friday, January 20, 7 pm

The Rev. Stephen Furrer, Interim Sr. Minister, Moderator

Respondents:

The Rev. Dr. William G. Sinkford;

The Rev. Meg Riley

What doth the Lord require of thee

but to do justly, to love mercy,

and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8

Thank you for that introduction, Stephen. And to the congregation of this church and its staff for so graciously hosting this evening. I knew that this second Minns Lecture for 2011–12 needed to be delivered here, in this magnificent sanctuary, where the words that inspire it, from Micah 6:8, are inscribed on the wall above me. “What doth the Lord require of thee. . . ?”

Last spring, instead of the traditional six lectures by an individual UU minister, the Minns Committee sponsored a conference at First Church in Boston moderated by the Rev. Larry Peers, under the title “Composing the Unitarian Universalist Future: Where Are We Now, What’s Possible, What’s Next?” The entirety is available, as this evening will be, on video, online, at www.minnslectures.org. I commend to you the brilliant insights of six of our finest ministers. But I sat there inwardly responding, “What was and is still required of us is to serve justice, to practice compassion and connection, and to walk more humbly.” Only then will we truly thrive.

The Minns Committee accepted my proposal to continue the conversation about our UU future. Last fall, at King’s Chapel, my first lecture was devoted to the challenge of serving justice more effectively, especially in an age when economic inequality has been growing so rapidly, and when the power of unlimited corporate money in politics threatens to vitiate our democracy. I must admit that by the end of my talk, a tone of righteous indignation, even anger, at the economic injustices of our world, was palpable. Then I closed with the positive observation that

we Unitarian Universalists have been pioneers in using stockholder activism to rein in corporate short-sightedness and misconduct, and in building broad, effective coalitions to do so; pioneers in helping people from India to America to the Arab Spring do grassroots organizing on behalf of human rights.

One of my respondents was the Rev. Nate Walker, Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, who first came to my attention by so effectively challenging Monsanto Corporation on the results of their corporate behavior that he was invited to sit down with their executives for literally days of ethical dialogue. Nate emphasized doing justice with compassion, even for those with whom we deeply differ. He echoed something I've often heard from Bill Sinkford as well: the moral necessity, as Gandhi put it, of trying "to be what we want to see." If we want to see compassion and connection, we had better practice them more fully, perhaps especially with those with whom we feel we deeply differ. Not that this is easy. Nate would gladly admit that.

Returning to his own pulpit, Nate gave a sermon seeking to summarize some of what he had said in his response to my lecture, using these eloquent words: "When we feel the impulse to be the interrogator we must choose to be the generator of visions larger than ourselves. When we feel the impulse to be enraged we must accept the invitation to be empathetic and no longer make people objects of our aggression. When we feel the impulse to be furious let's dare to be curious. When we feel the impulse to be righteous let us transform our soapbox into a music box. Let us dare to be powerfully playful."

Then, just a week later, he repeated those words as he told this confessional story on himself: Nate had been persuaded by his partner to attend a lecture in New York City in a series devoted to the general thesis that the world would be better off if religion would just entirely disappear. (My own experience suggests that just as nature abhors a vacuum, so does the human spirit. There's a parable in the gospels in which a demon is cast out of a man, his soul swept clean – making room for seven other spirits more evil than the first. But I digress! Back to Nate...)

The lecture was expected to be very crowded. So Nate and his partner arrived very early, and claimed two good seats. Before the lecture began, his partner got up to go to the restroom,

leaving his coat on the seat. Every seat was by then taken. A well-dressed woman came along, took the coat, put it on the floor, and sat down. Nate said, “Excuse me, but that seat is taken.” The woman in essence replied, “It certainly is now! I sponsored this event.” Nate was outraged. His response was something like, “Oh, I see, you belong the 1 percent, do you?” Then he took out his phone. “Are you famous? Let me help! Let me take your photo! I’ll entitle it ‘Entitlement.’” Let’s see how you like having your behavior described on the internet.” His partner returned. Nate then went to the house manager, showed her the picture, and was offered a season ticket to the series on why the world would be better off without religion! They sat in a balcony back row. He gradually let it go. But when he showed the photo and told the story to a friend, she asked, “Why are you keeping the photo, if you’ve let it go?” Nate deleted it the next Sunday as he told the whole story to his congregation.

Last June at the UUA General Assembly in Charlotte, NC, the annual Ware Lecture was given by Karen Armstrong, the English historian of religion and former Roman Catholic nun whose latest book is called *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. I was impressed enough that I persuaded the relevant committee at my congregation in Needham to adopt the book as our “common read” for this current year. I facilitated the first discussion of the book. Only to find that far fewer people than normal had bought the book, read it, recommended it to others, or liked it. And it didn’t take me long to figure out why. As the borrowing of the twelve-step metaphor implies, Dr. Armstrong is convinced that much of today’s world suffers from addiction – to reactivity, polarization, and a lack of adequate empathy or compassion. Her little book constitutes an enchiridion, a spiritual handbook, implying that it takes a life-time of careful spiritual discipline to shed such an addiction, and become truly, consistently compassionate. Somehow I think Nate Walker would agree. But what I found, to my disappointment, is that many Unitarian Universalists do not think we need any such spiritual discipline at all. One of my people put it succinctly: “We’re compassionate enough already, it seems to me. It gets fatiguing. I don’t need to be reminded to be even more so!” In other words, we are liberals, progressives; by definition, compassionate; because we *think* we are.

I ended my first lecture with an allusion to a phrase used by the late Dr. James Luther Adams, our leading theologian and ethicist in the twentieth century. JLA would warn liberals against

“believing in the immaculate conception of virtue.” Instead, he would add, we must “practice the social incarnation of the good we love.” In other words, we need to “be what we want to see.” But that takes step-by-step spiritual discipline, which many of us don’t like or think we need.

My own forty years in ministry has had three phases. I think many do. Justice-seeking came first. My call to ministry, as I’ve said many times, came after the death of Dr. King and in explicit relation to the words of Micah. Serving my first pastorates in Tennessee and Texas, I met some beleaguered liberals who wanted justice in the worst way, and who, for lack of compassion, patience, or humility, sought it that way as well, and then burned out. But I also met amazingly persistent, effective justice-seekers who had such virtues. I think of the late Bro. Will Campbell, who during the Civil Rights movement had horrified his employers at the National Council of Churches by deciding that the best thing as a white Southerner was to declare himself Chaplain to the Ku Klux Klan, and focused on converting white racists.

The word translated as “mercy,” or “compassion” in Micah’s Hebrew is *chesed*, also rendered as “loving kindness.” As an ideal, it is first attributed to God, and not to fallible human beings, because it has the further connotation of persistence and covenant loyalty, which we often lack. And yet from Channing and Ballou onward, one of our claims as Unitarians and Universalists has concerned what the former called “Likeness to God” – the idea that we could not attribute such qualities to God if they were not already present, at least in potential, within ourselves. There’s a long, rich heritage of rabbinic commentary and *midrash* aimed at trying to reconcile divine justice and mercy, often suggesting that both were necessary. “‘So,’ said the Holy One: ‘If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, its sins will be oppressive; on the basis of judgment alone, how would the world be able to exist? I will create it with justice and mercy together and then, maybe, it will be able to stand!’”

My friend Dan McKanan, who holds the UUA Emerson Chair in Unitarian Universalist Studies at Harvard Divinity School, in his book *Identifying the Image of God*, has shown how the radical core of liberal theology among American Unitarians and Universalists derived from seeing the divine image in every human being – in the enslaved, in Native Americans, the poor, women. While others stuck to reading the Bible in ways that justified continuing forms of oppression,

they asked whether such interpretations met two tests: those of reason and of true compassion. Their transcendentalism challenged the social contract behind the American Constitution – which had slavery inscribed into it – and eventually demanded that it be amended. Such theology mattered not just back then, but also continues to matter in the world of today.

If you need those connections spelled out, let me remind you of the words of poet Marge Piercy, “Connections are made slowly. Sometimes they grow underground. You cannot always tell by looking what is happening.” Or as another great poet, Thomas Hardy, once put it: “The spirit of poetry and of high religion is the same: imaginative compassion.”

The first phase of my ministry came to a culmination with chairing a mid-80s UUA Task Force on Social Responsibility, aimed at bringing the experience and best practices of other progressive religious movements to our own justice-making. By then, like many Unitarian Universalists, I’d begun to draw more deeply on the poets, scriptures, the wisdom stories of many traditions. I had also begun to make adult education and young adult ministry, and not just preaching or activism, key to my efforts to make Unitarian Universalism stronger and more effective. “Only connect!” said E. M. Forster.

So both in Dallas and then in New York City I began doing even more teaching than preaching. Promoting ministries by, to, and for young adults – so that no one under the age of thirty-five could cross the threshold of the church without being invited by another young adult to a lunch bunch, a discussion, a retreat, or a social ministry project. “Only connect!” speaks especially to what Unitarian Universalism needs to do to be effective with young adults. Nate Walker, I’ve noted, has over three thousand friends and followers on Facebook and YouTube. My own plunge into that world has been shaped by my nine-year leadership with Freedom to Marry, and is rather “old school” by many standards.

But I’ve also been inspired by the example of my predecessor as Minister of the First Parish in Needham. During World War II, the Rev. Mort Gesner wrote over eight hundred letters to the eighty young men and women from the parish who were serving in the military. He did so because the President of the American Unitarian Association, Frederick May Eliot,

recommended doing it. Some became leaders in the nearly five hundred new lay-led Unitarian fellowships started in the decades after the war by another member of the congregation, AUA staffer Munroe Husbands. Today what I try to do is to stay in touch, electronically, with young adults who grew up in the parish. Once a year, on the Sunday between Christmas and the New Year – this year on New Year’s Day afternoon – we hold a service called “Transformations,” when four or five of them report back on their spiritual growth, whether in college, City Year, volunteering abroad, the military, or as budding musicians or creative artists. I refer them, when possible, to UU congregations where they have settled, or to the UU Church of the Younger Fellowship.

Many UUs bemoan the fact that we don’t do more to retain our young adults. But this is rather directly connected, I’m afraid, to the fact that our congregations and members do not contribute adequately to shared mission efforts. In my first lecture, I made a strong case for the UUA to cease asking churches to give on the basis of “head tax,” so many dollars per individual member. No other denomination I know does that. It’s a mark of our upper middle class individualism, causing congregations to drop most young adults and other non-contributing constituents. Instead the UUA should ask for a greater percentage of local congregational budgets. The current average is only about 3 percent. Other mainline denominations get from 8 percent to 18 percent! No wonder they can start more new congregations, youth and young adult ministries, and the like. This failure of connectional generosity is ultimately a failure of imaginative compassion for the future of our faith.

When the Rev. Margot Campbell Gross, now Minister Emerita of this church, was doing her internship with me at All Souls in New York City, the number of young adults, many leading our most creative forms of social ministry, grew to over three hundred. I did a great deal of counseling with them, reminding myself that the two key spiritual tasks of young adulthood are finding transformative meaning in what old Freud called “*lieben und arbeiten*,” loving and working. Finding a life-partner, and finding a vocation, the work in which one’s joy and passion meet the world’s great needs. This, of course, is almost as paradoxical a duality as compassion and justice. So if someone said to me, “I hate my meaningless work and I’m thinking of going to seminary,” my response was often, “So . . . how’s your love life?” But if they said, “I’ve broken

up again, and I can't find anyone to love," I might also wait to ask, "So . . . how do you like your work?"

My daughter Erica, now a member here, met her husband Andy while working in Washington. She was a Senate aide, on health care and the environment. Andy now helps develop wind farms. Sunday their second daughter, Hannah, will be dedicated here. But Erica is the daughter who, when told, "You can go to Mommy's church or to Daddy's church, but you can't stay home," went to her Mom's Episcopal Church, was an acolyte, crucifer, and confirmed as Episcopalian. But when she moved to DC, she couldn't find a church with the vibrant diversity she'd found during grad school at Columbia at Riverside Church, under Jim Forbes; until she ventured into All Souls, DC, led by my brilliant UU colleague, Rob Hardies. Then she called me up.

"Dad," she said, "I'm going to join the Unitarian church here. Now don't tell Mom! I'll do that. But I've got a question." "Yes . . . ?" I said, thinking of abstract theology. "I'm just wondering: How much should I pledge?" I gulped, thanked her for knowing that the Free Church is not free; that it is a voluntary community, dependent entirely on the generosity of those who support it, and then said, "Well, Erica, as you know, with UUs it's all a matter of individual conscience. What did you have in mind?" She named a number. It made me proud. I knew her salary, her educational debts. "Well good," I said, "It's all about growing, spiritually, including generosity. You're doing that."

But here is my question for you: Out here on the West Coast, as I saw on my first sabbatical, back in 1979, church attendance is no longer socially driven. Nor is it in most of America today, except in the so-called Bible Belt. Individuals, and their families, come seeking meaning, spiritual depth, and personal growth. God knows the number of free market competitors for those things – from therapies, roshis, gurus, workshops, retreats, etc – could hardly be thicker. As I say, "Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does the human spirit." Relatively few, however, offer ongoing community, connection, and compassion extending beyond their tradition, center, or generation, yet open to wisdom from multiple sources. We do.

So what are we doing to connect more fully, to teach compassion more deeply? Not yet enough! Too many UUs prefer to just *think* themselves compassionate, rather than to do the hard work of practicing it more fully, by giving time to spiritual discipline, and money to connect with others. Too many of us seem still to believe, at some level, that the world would be better off if religion would simply disappear entirely. We don't yet sufficiently articulate how false that thesis is. Yet anthropologists and sociologists are helping.

I'm thinking of Berkeley's own Robert Bellah, perhaps still best known for leading the team that produced the 1985 classic, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in America*. That book included a California spiritual seeker named Sheila – who called her own faith “Sheilaism.”

By the way, I think I once met a version of Sheila, not here in California, but outside an ashram in India. The guru was being picketed by partners from our UU Holdeen India Program, because the ashram was exploiting local people held in bonded labor, a modern form of slavery, to tend the grounds and clean up. A well-dressed devotee from LA actually told my friend Vivek, who was leading the protest, that she couldn't believe there was a problem, because the guru was so eloquent in his teaching about compassion!

So I don't want to deny for a minute that religion and its leaders can be blind, misguided, or complicit with oppression and even violence. One global organization we Unitarian Universalists founded, Religions for Peace, works by getting religious leaders of integrity, who advocate non-violence and pluralism, to challenge those who give their own faith a bad name. This is what the Interfaith Alliance, which we also started, does here in America, countering the Religious Right.

Bellah's latest book is *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. It's a brilliant summation of what scholars have concluded about how religion first emerged, what purpose it has served in human evolution, and how it functioned in the evolution of early cultures that, in the so-called axial age, starting roughly at the time of the Hebrew prophets like Micah, the Greek philosophers, the great Chinese teachers, and the Upanishads in India, began teaching variations on the core of authentic compassion, “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.”

Karen Armstrong starts her own twelve-step approach to learning how to practice compassion more consistently where you would expect an historian of religion to start: by suggesting that first we have to learn what compassion really is, cross-culturally, and where it comes from. These days, amid the Occupy protests, I like to point out that one thing that the great religious traditions have in common is that they all grew up in the marketplace, calling people of differing traditions, gods, even differing currencies and measures, to a higher, more self-critical standard.

Today “making the *ephah* small and the *shekel* great,” as prophet Amos saw merchants doing, takes many more forms, but there are still far too many instances of two sets of rules in actual practice: one set for most of us, the 99 percent, and another for the wealthy and powerful, the 1 percent. Some New Age optimists insist that we are the brink of a new axial age. They credit the web, and globalization. But if that were the case, says Bellah, there would be signs of a new global culture emerging, whereas what seems to be happening more pervasively is just the breakdown of older, more traditional cultures, driving some of the frightened toward new forms of tribalism, fundamentalism, and selfish individualism. America itself is not immune.

“It is no accident that . . . the United States, with its high valuation of the individual person,” said Bellah at our 1996 UUA General Assembly, “is nonetheless the only North Atlantic society where such a high percentage of people live in poverty. Just when we are moving into an ever-greater valuation of the sacredness of the individual person, our capacity to imagine a social fabric that would hold individuals together is vanishing. This is in no small part due to the fact that our religious individualism is linked to an economic individualism which, though it makes no distinction between persons except monetary ones, therefore ultimately knows nothing of sacredness. Because if the only standard is money, then all other values are undermined.”

Thanks to a ratings-driven media guided by the mantra, “If it bleeds, it leads,” many secure, middle class Americans are convinced that violence in our world is threatening and increasing. Steven Pinker, in his new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, shows that in fact quite the opposite is true. We harbor a deep-seated conviction that there was a peaceful golden age, when in fact rates of homicide and violence were (and are) far higher in

hunter-gatherer and tribal cultures than where functioning states, civilizations, modernity, and human rights have emerged. This process is complex. Pinker cites six trends and five historical forces, not to mention inner demons based on old patterns of predation, dominance, revenge, sadism, and ideological self-regard, that have had to be overcome by culturally mediated morality, taboo, reason, self-control, and, yes, empathy – or, more accurately, compassion.

Recently I did a series of public forums at my own congregation on the criminal justice system. Violent crime in America's cities peaked forty years ago. But the over-reaction has been huge. The rate of incarceration in liberal Massachusetts, for example, went up by 800 percent between 1976 and 2008. For the last six years I've been visiting, along with a team from my congregation, a prisoner named Willie, who has wanted to earn a college degree while behind bars. Most states make that virtually impossible, despite the fact that it cuts recidivism rates enormously. Willie is eligible for parole. But he can't get it. The state parole system was rife with political patronage, and the public – and the so-called victims' rights groups, many quietly funded by unions of correctional officers, who want more prisons, to create jobs, while keeping men like Willie from paying taxes, instead of costing the state for housing him.

Not that I am in favor of universal deinstitutionalization. We've seen what that did to put people with long-term mental illness on our streets without adequate support systems. Nor unilateral disarmament in what is still, though less so, a dangerous world. Neither is Pinker. He closes his book by showing how what in game theory is called the Pacifist's Dilemma works to reduce violence. Not responding at all to violence is maladaptive, as both history and experiment show. Over-reaction is also maladaptive. The only way to reduce violence is by stepping down the cycle of retribution – by bringing a modicum of compassion to international and domestic policy. We know this, I think. But we often smother our own message and potential influence by being too idealistic and coming across as sentimental.

“To expect too much,” said the writer Flannery O'Connor, “is to have a sentimental view of life. And this is a softness that ends in bitterness. Charity is hard and endures.” So is real compassion. Yet the progressive religion, with its tradition of testing faith by reason, can be an agency of renewal and transformation in society.

Starr King once called me, in an honorary degree citation, “the evangelical rabbi of liberal religion,” so let me close with one of my favorite rabbi stories.

A religious community, a monastery, had fallen on hard times. Once it was a regional mother house for a thriving, influential order of monks. But secularization was even stronger, and provoked internal worries and disputes and cutbacks, their traditions of charity, hospitality, vibrant worship, wise teaching, and outreach to the young were gradually reduced, almost lost. The community, in fact, was reduced to only a handful, an abbot and four monks, all over seventy. They were depressed, a bit contentious, suspicious of change and of one another.

The monks owned a little hermitage on their grounds which they allowed a rabbi from the town to use. One night the old abbot decided to visit the rabbi there, and share his worries. “I know how it is,” the rabbi empathized. “The spirit seems to have gone out of God’s people. Almost no one comes to schul any longer.” They wept about it a bit, and prayed, read parts of the Torah and the Nevi’im, the Prophets, and then just sat in silent meditation together. When the time came for the abbot to leave, he asked his new friend the rabbi if he had any parting advice.

“You know, it’s strange,” said the rabbi, “but as we sat in silence together, I had this thought: that if Messiach is anywhere today in our world, he may well be hidden in your community.” When he came back, the monks asked their abbot what the rabbi had said. So he told them.

The old monks began wondering. Could be true? Could he have meant the abbot? They began taking his spiritual leadership more seriously. Or did he mean the monk in charge of worship? They began chanting and praying with him more fervently. Or could it be their resident scholar and teacher? They began studying more. Or could it be the one in charge of charity to the poor? They began going out with him more to visit the sick, to gather donations to feed the hungry. Soon the one in charge of hospitality to guests was inviting more young people to come visit, to consider joining the community. And since everyone had a new and more fervent sense of compassion for one another, new, younger members of the community did begin to arrive, and to expand the worship, teaching, good works, hospitality, and witness of the community. Until, long after the five old monks had died and been laid to rest, the townspeople and villagers all

around could say, along with their successors, “These were the faithful. They did what was required of them. They served justice, embodied compassion, and walked humbly with their God.”

So may it be for us all. Amen.