

Self-Compassion in the Digital Age

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

Delivered to the UU Church of Columbia, Missouri

Sunday, June 5, 2016

I'd like to invite you into a thought experiment. Take a moment and summon forth your inner critic.

I'm sure you know the one. The meta-part of your thoughts that sits by like the snarkier of the robots on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, passing judgment on your unfolding life, as if it were a bad B movie and you the unfortunate star.

I imagine my inner critic as the perfect version of me both inside and out. Which makes her, of course, insufferable.

I would hazard a guess about your inner critic, knowing mine as intimately as I do, and knowing we all are human in the same society.

It probably believes you are not good enough at any number of things and suspects your very worth as a person depends on exactly those things.

It is likely jealous of the success of others and thrives on making unflattering comparisons.

It almost certainly goads you to work ever harder and do ever better, insisting you must earn your spot on this crowded planet.

It possibly stops you from speaking your mind, out of fear.

It might whisper that revealing your most valued part of yourself to the world is just asking for trouble.

It definitely advises you not to get too close to others, for fear they will see all the flaws you are surely hiding.

And it probably assures you that while you are never good enough, at least you're better than so-and-so.

Perhaps your critic is a rather active fellow. Perhaps she peers out only once in a while, with a martini in hand and a choice, cutting comment.

Perhaps yours never gained much of a foothold in your head, or perhaps you two have been duke-ing it out for years.

Imagine that inner critic stands in front of you now. Take a good look at them.

And get curious about them.

Where did they come from? Were they within you from the start? Did someone put them there? Did the expectations of our culture build them up in you a piece at a time?

And what precious piece of you is hiding out just behind them? Too timid to come forward, passing, as it would, through the inner critic's gauntlet.

One of the core beliefs of Unitarian Universalism is "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." We believe that every person on this planet is born worthy of love and flourishing from the start, by virtue of their being here. Our worthiness is not something we have to earn. Our dignity is not something we can lose.

This is a challenging belief on many fronts. In part because it challenges us to recognize the worth of lives that our society and culture do not value, even the people we may find repulsive. And it is challenging because it requires us to see the worth of our own lives.

To truly practice Unitarian Universalism is to know ourselves beloved and to extend that same love to our world and our human family within it.

The calling to extend love is hard enough, especially when we've got this inner critic hanging out with us, questioning all our tactics. But it is darn near impossible when we secretly suspect that we, ourselves, are in some way unworthy of that same love.

We heard in this morning's reading that when the Dalai Lama learned of the western term self-hatred, after first being confused, he was immediately worried. "Are people like that violent?" It seems to me that the answer, one way or another, is yes. How we understand ourselves becomes how we understand the world, and the lens of hatred is one that does violence to the spirit, if nothing else.

Even in a less extreme lack of self-compassion, the same principle applies: The more suspect we find our own worth, the less likely we are to treat others as worthy.

Anne Lamott has written that "Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor. It is the enemy of the people." The same might be said for that inner critic, whose constant questioning of our own worth leads us away from every impulse to reach out in love.

The inner critic is the voice of the oppressor, whether that oppressor is born from within or imposed from without.

Myself, I believe that voice of oppression is mostly trained into us by a culture that continually co-opts our sense of inherent worth in the service of productivity and consumerism. These dual aspects of our culture tell us that our worth is something we must either earn or buy, rather than something inborn.

If our value only exists in the marketplace – our worth measured solely by what we can produce or what we can buy – then the same principles that fueled practices like slavery still apply. The human becomes an object in the workings of the economic machine rather than a free subject in the world. And our worth is assigned by that economy rather than born from within.

Most commonly, in this model, we begin to believe that love, like everything else, must be earned. This belief will always set us up to feel outside the embrace of love. Because,

as celebrated essayist Rachel Naomi Remen writes: “Love, like grace, is never earned. All love is unconditional. Anything we need to earn is only approval.”

We might also believe that our worth can be bought, if we can only acquire enough wealth or security or the latest anti-aging cream.

In this model, we are in a zero-sum game with our fellow human, struggling and scrapping to grasp a limited supply of self-worth – a struggle made literal and embodied in a culture that perpetuates poverty wages, unjust health care access, and discrimination in many forms; a struggle that falsely confirms our suspicions of our own unworthiness; a struggle that takes up residence in our head and perhaps even heart as inner critic holding us apart from our best, most loving self.

As with many of our most ingrained problems, I believe the answer to this conundrum is spiritual. The message that we are unworthy unless we do this, or buy that, or beat out this other person, it is so deeply engrained, repeated so early and often, that if we are to resist remaining divided from ourselves and each other, we will need to drill down deep within.

True self-compassion, the kind taught by the world’s religions and reached through spiritual practice, is the way out of this conundrum. These traditions teach us that we are made in the image of God, or possessing of Buddha-nature, or beloved by the ancestors, and more. Each has its own practice – meditation, prayer, service – for engraining that fact in our bodies, minds, and lives. The more we listen for Spirit, the more deeply we understand the ground of being that undergirds our lives, the less space in our heads for our snarky commentator judging us and others.

However, this spirituality must be rooted in tradition, and the accountability of community, and the rigor of our best discernment, lest it become yet another form of commodification of the self, reinforcing the assumptions of an economy built upon our alienation from our innate self-worth.

Spirituality educator and activist Nichola Torbett has observed: "In this country, we treat spirituality as a health additive, like the protein powder you can get sprinkled on your imperial smoothie. For just a small extra charge, a little prayer or meditation can make you run better, smoother, in service to the exploitative systems in which we are immersed."

“No!” she says, “Our spiritual practice is meant to make us dangerous, to temper us like steel into cogs that grind the wheels of injustice to a halt.”

And Unitarian Universalist minister and activist Ashley Horan reminds us: “Capitalism teaches us that self-care should be indulgent, Escapist, and a commodity to be purchased as a luxury for those who can afford it. Spiritual practice – individual, or communal – is an alternative to that model, the way that we prepare ourselves to be fully, truly, deeply in community with the world that so desperately needs us.”

This Self-compassion is also not the same as self-esteem, self-aggrandizement, or cheap self-forgiveness. It does not move us into self-obsession, but away from it and into deeper openness to connection with community.

Self-compassion is essentially kindness. It is, in the words of womanist theorist bell hooks: “giving ourselves the love we often dream of receiving from others.” It is the act of seeing ourselves as wholly human, connected to all of humanity and thus inherently worthy even as we are inherently fallible. And, as Psychologist and Buddhist practitioner Kristen Neff points out from studies cited in her book *Self-Compassion*, it makes us more kind, more motivated, and more accountable for our actions.

When our worth is not dependent – when we know we need not earn it or buy it, when we know we cannot use it all up – then we are free to give ourselves away in the service of love.

Of course we also must remember that self-compassion is necessary for us all, but in different ways and to different degrees for different people.

Built as it was on the patently de-humanizing practice of slavery, our economy and the culture that has grown up with it have always been in the business of assigning relative worth to human life – some lives more worthy and others less.

The less worth assigned as inherent by our culture, the more necessary, the more courageous, the more radical fierce self-love becomes. In our country that means that people of color, women, LGBTQ folk, differently-abled people, and economically disadvantaged individuals all get different and powerful messaging about the relative worth of their lives as somehow lesser, as object to be used rather than subject to be respected.

The black, lesbian poet and theorist Audre Lorde reflected upon this in an essay in her book *A Burst of Light*, about her experience with cancer. She wrote: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” There are those of us, she points out elsewhere in our writing, who were never meant to survive in our society, much less love themselves.

Every movement for liberation, then, is based first in a fierce and uncompromising love for self and community. We see this in the contemporary movement for black lives, we see it this month as LGBTQ folks all over the country celebrate pride. We see it everywhere people claim their humanity where humanity has been culturally and economically denied.

But here is another point for us to recall. The flip side is also true. The *more* worth assigned as inherent by our culture, the more oppressive and the more dangerous to others our self-loathing and self-doubt become.

This would include those assigned greater social value: white folks, men, heterosexual, cisgender individuals, the typically-abled, the upper middle class.

Those who fall in these categories are not exempt from the inner critic implanted in our brains. The whitest, most masculine, most able-bodied, heterosexual, upper-class person is also likely to secretly doubt their own self-worth in a society that makes all dignity suspect. Perhaps their self-worth feels even more tenuous to them because of the appearances they know they are just barely keeping up.

But the power they wield makes them far likelier and far more able to step on or diminish the humanity of others in the mad scramble to claim human value. When our self-loathing or self-doubt makes us feel powerless, we are all the more likely to wield the power we do have unthinkingly or even with hatred or violence. A lack of self-compassion makes us dangerous.

Many of us exist in more than one of these identities at once, grappling with a complex math of culturally assigned worth. For every moment I am dehumanized as a woman, I am granted superiority as a white person or straight person, etc. The thing is, a true self-compassion that facilitates my connection to others may be exactly the antidote to all of it.

In the end, each of us is tasked with self-compassion for different and important reasons. Claiming our common humanity and dignity is the pathway to liberation for all of us.

Loving ourselves enables us to love our neighbors, and claiming our worth and the worth of all people is the most powerful way we can resist a culture that teaches dignity should be earned or bought.

So the next time your inner critic peaks around the corner of your mind, or weighs in with some choice and devastating judgment, remember that they are the voice of the oppressor, the voice of empire colonizing your mind.

Listen instead for the deeper, more resonant, more beautiful voice of spirit, Buddha-nature, God, your most authentic and dignified self. She is there too, waiting to speak.

Let her. Our common humanity depends upon it.