

**Self-Compassion as Spiritual Practice**  
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It's 2:15 and I'm driving down the QEW from my then home in Hamilton for a meeting in Toronto at 3:00 pm. And I run into a traffic jam. I'm going to be late again. I should have left earlier. I know that at this time of day there is likely to be traffic. Why do I do this all the time? This was so stupid of me, all I had to do, was leave a bit earlier. But no, I had to check Facebook first and then I had to look at that video – what a waste of time! How dumb is that? Maybe I should call and let them know that I'm going to be late – but that would just take more time and maybe I can still make it. What is the problem here anyway, why are all these cars going so slow, maybe if I move into that lane – where did that car come from? I didn't even see it. I should be more careful! I am such an idiot! Why can't I just leave earlier and get there on time?

Any of this sound familiar? You might not be chronically late like I am, but you probably have other things that you do that you wish you didn't. That voice in your head may use different words, but I'll bet that you do have a voice in your head that is not very nice to you.

Today I want to talk about changing that and why being more compassionate with yourself is important and how it can be a spiritual practice – a spiritual practice that will lead you to be more compassionate with others as well.

But before I get into that, let's look at what we mean by Self Compassion and by Spiritual Practice.

Let's start with Spiritual Practice. These words are thrown about by many, but what do we really mean when we say Spiritual Practice? In preparing for this talk, I thought I should start by looking up just what this phrase means. Doing a Google search on Spiritual Practice led to many web sites that seemed to describe what ever their type of practice was, as spiritual practice, and then described how to do it, but didn't give a broader meaning.

Doing a bit more research, I found some things that seemed a bit more helpful.

From Wikipedia – this: “A spiritual practice, spiritual discipline or spiritual exercise includes any activity that one associates with cultivating spirituality.” Of course this then would lead to needing to define spirituality and since that seems like a whole sermon on it’s own, I continued looking for definitions that better met my purpose.

And then I found this on the Findhorn website: “a path of transformation and growth in your everyday life.” I like that one, and probably most Unitarians could accept this, so this is the definition that I’m going to use.

And what about “Self Compassion” – what does this mean? I started by looking up the meaning of Compassion and again I found several definitions, but generally compassion is understood to mean that we share the feelings of the other, that we have empathy for them and that we want to do something to eliminate their pain and suffering.

So then **Self-Compassion** must be to feel our feelings, to have empathy with ourselves and to want to do something to eliminate our pain and suffering.

Sounds simple enough, but it’s not what most of us do.

In the example I gave earlier about being late, I was not being compassionate with myself. There was no empathy and no trying to eliminate my pain and suffering. I was actually doing the opposite, it seems like I was trying to give myself more pain and suffering.

When I did arrive at my meeting, no one shamed me the way I was shaming myself – they were actually just glad to see me. And I would actually never talk to anyone else the way I had been talking to myself.

So why are we so often so much harder on ourselves than on others? We seem to have a fear that if we don’t beat up on ourselves then we won’t change. But really, how helpful is criticizing and berating? Is that going to ensure that I am never late again? It might work for a while, but what if it does happen again. Now I feel even worse and in my embarrassment I might make excuses – “the traffic was really bad today, I had an important phone call just before I left” and so on ..... I might not go at all, then later call and say something came up .... Or I might try to make it someone else’s fault instead. “You told me we were meeting at 3:30, not 3:00 o’clock”. This is an attempt to alleviate my suffering, but it’s not usually

very successful, and will most likely create other problems – like losing other people’s trust, missing out on something I wanted to be part of and feeling guilty about lying.

So, what’s the alternative? Should I just tell myself that it’s okay to be late, that it’s no big deal and just continue to be late for everything?

No, I actually don’t want to be late – I don’t like it when I have to wait for others, and I want to treat people with the same respect that I’d like to receive from them. So I really do want to change and I believe that most of us do want to change those things that we beat up on ourselves about – that’s exactly why we beat up on ourselves about them – because we don’t like these things – but as we keep beating up on ourselves we rarely change and now we like ourselves even less and we feel bad because we are beating up on ourselves and shaming ourselves and therefore reinforcing how awful we really are.

And if spiritual practice means being on “a path of transformation and growth”, I want to be able to change and to grow.

We can do this by not judging and evaluating ourselves as bad, or even good but instead learning to accept ourselves – all of us, all our parts.

In her book: “Self Compassion” Kristine Neff, says that there are three fundamental elements to being self-compassionate.

1. Being kind to ourselves
2. Recognition of our common humanity
3. Mindfulness

Let’s look at each of these in more detail.

1. **Being kind to ourselves** - This is about treating ourselves with the same kind of understanding and respect that we would treat others. It is about replacing judgement and criticism with kindness and understanding. As Unitarians, our second principle is: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. This includes our relationship with ourselves. So instead of condemning our failings and foibles we start to understand them.

Marshall Rosenberg, the creator of Nonviolent Communication suggests that in our self-talk we have empathy for our own needs. Rather than being critical and judgemental start by just making an observation about what happened. In my case, I left my place at a time that did not ensure that I'd get to the meeting on time. And when I say it this way, I already feel a bit better, because I'm not judging myself for being late, I'm just stating the facts. Then recognize how you are feeling. I was feeling pretty anxious. Then ask, what you need right now. In this case, I had a need for integrity - to do what I said I would do, which is be at a meeting at a certain time. And then see if you have a request of either yourself or someone else. In this situation, my request could have been to pull over and call and let them know that I'm going to be late. And I might make a request that the next time I leave 15 minutes earlier.

**2. Kristen Neff's second fundamental element for self-compassion is: Recognition of our Common Humanity –**

We are all human, and humans aren't perfect. This is why when we are consoling others about some perceived failing of theirs we might say, "you're only human". By saying this, we are acknowledging that humans are not perfect and that we all make mistakes. And that includes all of us, you and you and me. So if we all make mistakes, why is it so hard to accept our own mistakes?

When something bad happens to us, we tend to see ourselves as the only ones who are in this situation and we also tend to blame ourselves for it rather than accepting that this just happened to us. When we lose a job or a relationship ends, we often spend much time trying to understand what we did wrong – what could we have done differently and so on. But in bad economic times (and even in good ones) people lose jobs and partners sometimes decide that they want something different. This is not our making and it can happen to anyone.

We are all part of the same human race, but as humans we have a tendency to separate ourselves into groups – Canadian, North American, or Unitarian, Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, or

whatever. We want to feel that we belong and we often do that by trying to show how our group is better than the other groups, or how the other groups are lesser than. But doing this can lead to discrimination and oppression. And it leads to separation, separation from our own humanness. And this separation causes pain. But if instead, we can see ourselves as members of the human race we create connection and compassion. As Kristen Neff says: “ the recognition of common humanity embedded in self-compassion is such a powerful healing force. When our sense of self-worth and belonging is grounded in simply being human, we can’t be rejected or cast out by others.”

So I know that I’m not the only human being who has a tendency to be late. And although many don’t have this trait, they have others and in that way I can recognize my failings as part of being human.

- 3. And the third fundamental element of self-compassion is: Mindfulness** – if we don’t notice what we are feeling, we can’t accept it. And so often we don’t notice. We react rather than respond. When something happens to us that we don’t enjoy, we tend to get caught up in our reaction. It can even be a healthy reaction. If I lock myself out of my car while the motor is running (yes, I’ve done that) then I immediately jump to problem solving – do I have the number for the roadside assistance program? Is there someone who can help? Can I break into my car? These might be helpful in trying to solve the problem, but in doing that, I don’t take the time to notice my feelings and to be self-compassionate. This situation is stressful and scary. Once I acknowledge that, I can actually think more clearly and am more likely to find a good solution.

And am I criticizing myself for being so stupid that I locked myself out – with my purse and cell phone in the car? I have to first notice that I’m criticizing myself and then I can be compassionate with myself both for the criticizing and for the fact that I’m locked out of my car. I will never be able to stop some of the negative thoughts that just run through my head, but when I stop and

notice I can choose how I respond and which thoughts to focus on, because I also have positive thoughts that run through my head.

The example I gave about being late, happened a several years ago and I've been practicing being self compassionate for a while now. So now when I'm late (yup, it still happens) first I notice my feelings. If I notice that I'm feeling pretty anxious I say things like: "This doesn't feel good. You're late and you really wanted to be on time. Respect is important to you and so is using your time well." I'm more accepting of myself and don't feel the need to hide it, so I pull over call or text someone else who will be at the meeting and let them know that I'm running late. Now I can relax more. And I notice how much better it feels when I'm not anxious. And because of that, now I sometimes do manage to leave early and to get to places on time.

So as I practice self-compassion I start feeling better about myself. I'm not perfect but no one is. I continue to try to be better, but I also accept that I am who I am. I'll never be that person who is always at least 5 minutes early but by being self compassionate, I might at least be on time for the really important things.

I've been practicing this for a while and I notice that I'm more accepting of myself. I accept my self as someone who is often late, someone who is often messy, someone who doesn't always eat the foods that are best for me and so on. But then I notice there are other parts of me that are way harder to accept. What about my anger? When something happens that I find hurtful, my first response is so often anger. I hate that! Here I am someone who is studying Compassionate Communication and yet I lash out in anger. This is not who I want to be. How can I be compassionate with a part of myself that I hate? This is where it really becomes a spiritual practice. It's not about just accepting the small faults we have, it's about really accepting ourselves for who we are. It doesn't mean that I think it's okay for me to lash out when I'm angry, but it does mean accepting that I do get angry easily. How can I have compassion for that part of me?

Well, it's harder, but I can. First I have to notice my feelings. Oh, I'm feeling angry. And since I know that there are usually things hiding

under anger, I can look deeper. Actually I'm hurt and what I really want is some acknowledgement and some empathy for how much this hurts. So, I can give that to myself and as I do, there is more space. Now my thinking is no longer clouded with anger.

But none of this is easy and it takes practice. Noticing my feelings, noticing my self-talk – this is my spiritual practice. And as I learn to be more compassionate with myself, I am also more compassionate with others.

I'd like to end with two quotes. The first one by Thich Nhat Hanh “ Everyone knows that peace has to begin with oneself, but not many people know how to do it.” And the second quote is from the Buddha, “ If you truly loved yourself you could never hurt another”