

Darwin Meets Buddha:
Does Compassion Make Evolutionary Sense?
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Unitarian Universalists have embraced compassion as a fundamental good. We see it as the starting point of equity and justice and positive change in human society. Compassion—literally the ability to “feel with” another—is at the core of our sense of connection to other human beings and to other living things.

In holding up the quality of compassion, we might point to our Judeo-Christian ethical roots, which teach us to love our neighbor as our self, and to care for those who are vulnerable living on the ragged edges of our society.

For example, when Jesus was asked by one of his listeners, “Well, who is this neighbor of mine that I’m supposed to love as I love myself?” he responds by telling the story of the good Samaritan.

As a Jew speaking to other Jews, Jesus tells how a traveler is attacked by highway robbers and left for dead in the road. Members of his own social group, including a priest, skulk by and do not take the time or trouble to help him. But then a Samaritan, someone who was a member of another social group much despised and disparaged by the Jews at the time—the Samaritan stops to help him, loads him up on this donkey, takes him to a nearby inn, and pays to have him tended to until he recovers.

At the end of the story Jesus asks, “So, which one of the people was a neighbor to the man who fell at the hand of the thieves?” and his student answers, “The one who showed mercy.”

Jesus, in telling this story, was going against the conventional thinking about who constitutes my neighbor and who does not. The Jews and Samaritans were hostile toward each other for sectarian reasons. So he was confronting the issue of “us” and “them.” He was acknowledging that our instinct is to not feel connected to someone’s suffering if that person is not one of our kin or clan or can’t return us the favor. Jesus teaches, God’s love for us, and our love for God, call us to reach beyond this kind of instinctive, self-serving reciprocity. He was asking his listeners to strive beyond natural self-interest and to engage a spiritually motivated universal compassion.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition not only draws on Judeo-Christian roots but also recognizes the gifts of great wisdom that have come to humanity through other spiritual traditions as well. Because many folks who come to UUism feel ambivalent about Judeo-Christian language about God and Jesus, we have found a certain affinity with the more human-centered, down-to-earth language of Buddhism.

Buddhism, again, holds at its very center the value of compassion. It teaches the practice of compassion as the path to spiritual and social enlightenment. It also teaches that great feelings of compassion are the evidence of one's deepest, truest nature.

Well, Unitarian Universalism holds up compassion—the willingness to “feel with” the stranger, the other—as a goal and a central tenet of our faith.

AND YET, and yet, here's this other factor that our tradition asks us to come to terms with: Science. Unitarians were among the first religious seekers in Europe and America who really tried to hold together, in conversation and unity, scientific discovery and religious faith.

Our forebears believed, as we do, that Truth, Reality, and Nature as seen through the lens of science cannot be something totally different from Truth, Reality, and Nature seen through the lens of religion. The languages are obviously different, the ways of perceiving and understanding are different, but Reality itself must be one thing, a unity that can hold these differences within itself.

As contemporary seekers, staying in dialogue with science keeps us honest and grounded as religious people. It keeps us from floating off into a La-La Land of utopian thinking, where we can fool ourselves into believing that love and peace and goodness and compassion come easily to human beings.

Love and peace and goodness and compassion do not come easily to human beings.

I think Darwinian logic was summed up quite well in one of my favorite Calvin and Hobbes cartoons.

Calvin and his furry friend are bumping down a wooded path in their little red wagon, and Calvin is chattering on and on....

"Y'know, Hobbes, it's really true. Ignorance is bliss. 'Cause when you start learning things, you start seeing problems everywhere. And when you see problems, you feel like you ought to try and fix 'em. But fixing problems requires personal change, and change means doing things that aren't fun. I say phooey to that! But, if you're willfully stupid, you can keep doing whatever you like! ... I've got it, Hobbes! The secret to happiness! It's stupid, short-term self-interest!"

Hobbes suddenly shouts, "Look out, we're headed for that cliff!"

Calvin covers his eyes and shouts, "I don't want to know about it!"

They sail off the edge of the ravine and end up in a heap at the bottom with stars twittering around their heads.

Hobbes moans, "I don't know if I can handle this much bliss..."

Calvin says, "Careful, we don't want to learn anything from this...."

Scientific theory and investigation make it clear that whatever spiritual natures we may have are yoked to a profoundly animal nature.

Some would say that our "spiritual nature"—our capacity for compassion, altruism, universal love—are simply extensions of our drive to survive and pass on our genes. We have come up out of the soupy sea, out of the harshness of the natural world. We have the vestiges of reptilian brain and mammalian fur and fang in us.

Those vestiges are in evidence everywhere in our tendency to tribalism—note the feverish pitch of Red Sox fans as we enter the World Series, note the tone of this election (the red states vs. blue states), note the terrible conflicts in the Middle East, in the Sudan, in the gang warfare in our American cities, or in the corporate struggle to dominate the economic market.

Note the persistence of racism in our society. Note the paranoia and homophobia that's so visible today as our nation considers same-sex marriage—that intense, inexplicable sense of threat that many communities feel at the prospect of gays and lesbians marrying.

The tendency to demonize or ostracize or attack those who are different comes out of our primal insecurities. The drive to hoard and plunder what we don't need, at the expense of others, comes out of our primal insecurities. If you are Robert Wright, evolutionary psychologist, your perspective would be that most social behavior comes out of our primal insecurities.

And yet here we hopeful Unitarians are, affirming compassion, justice, love, peace! Why can't we all just get along?

Robert Wright says that, as a species, we are at an evolutionary crossroads. As there are more and more of us, and as resources become scarcer, anxiety intensifies. The self-interested instinct to protect oneself and one's own people will become acute. How will we meet this crossroads?

We each have this tremendous force for survival at work in us. Though we often feel it as something that pits us against each other, our primal self is actually what links us to the earth and makes us kin with every other person and every other living thing.

We also each have within us the capacities for self-observation, self-reflection, discernment, choice, reason, altruistic love.

We have also developed the cultural resources of the great philosophical and spiritual traditions, which can help us to strengthen not only rational self-observation but also compassion for others.

Instinct, self-reflection, culture—all three make us human.

We are at a crossroads. We are animal-creatures who have eaten the fruit of knowledge and are now morally responsible. We can't go back to the Eden of unconscious animalness. We're banished forever from that garden. And we can't keep acting out of our animal instincts while calling it other things, like politics, nationalism, foreign policy, economics, progress, or holy war.

Somehow our human task must be to recognize and honor nature at work in us—to see it, observe it, to know how its energies move and sustain us—and, at the same time, we must develop the faculty of moral choice. We must use everything at our disposal to strengthen our capacity to make healing, sustainable, compassionate choices that consider the well-being of others.

We are at an evolutionary crossroads, and it can often seem that humanity is in a downward spiral. But all across the nation, all across the planet, something new is being born in us. Everywhere there are countless people who recognize the challenge of this crossroads.

There is extraordinary work being done in every corner of the globe that is based upon lifting human interaction out of its instinctual patterns and opening up new ways of communicating, new ways of peaceful problem solving, new ways of meeting survival needs that are sustainable and respectful to our interdependence.

As Unitarian Universalists, holding together the truth of science and the truth of the spirit, we are not naïve to believe in compassion. We are taking a stand for the fullness of humanity that is now beginning to be born.