Introduction

Last Sunday, Rev. Jane delivered a beautiful sermon on Cultivating Compassion, our Soul Matters theme for the month of October. When we think of compassion, we typically think of it being extended outward, toward others. And yet, in this month's worship packet, the first topic was "Self-Compassion." Given our social justice-oriented faith, centered in Love, I found that a bit surprising. I wondered,

Where does this concept of self-compassion come from?

What does it mean?

Why is it important?

How does it work?

I think we owe it to ourselves to find out.

Possible Origins of Self-Compassion

"Self-Compassion"--

Is that some ego-centric by-product of the "me generation"?

Or did it arise from millennials or Gen Z, known for their emphasis on mental health?

"Self-compassion" does seem like a newer term that I've been hearing more and more over the past decade. Is it just some new-fangled psychobabble fad?

Or might it have deeper roots and more enduring spiritual qualities?

Metta/Loving-Kindness -- Buddhism

Surprise! There _is_ a longer history to the idea of having compassion toward oneself, and I'm not just talking about the 1970s. More like the 5th century BCE.

Last week, Rev. Jane's sermon titled "Through Loving Kindness" looked at compassion through the lens of Buddhism. In the Buddhist practice of metta (m-e-t-t-a), loving kindness is extended toward ever-widening circles to encompass all beings. In traditional metta meditation, loving kindness is directed _first_ toward the self, _then_ expanded out toward others.

Our prayer hymn, Filled with Loving Kindness, is based on this formula:

> May _I_ be filled with loving kindness.
>
> May _you_ be filled with loving kindness.

May _we_ be filled with loving kindness.

As Buddhist Jack Kornfield teaches,

“If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.”

Ahimsa -- Yoga Sutras

Another place in history where roots of self-compassion are found is in yoga philosophy. The Yoga Sutras were written 2000 years ago but are believed to have originated from much older teachings. The Sutras include the yamas, a set of rules for ethical living. The first and most foundational yama is *ahimsa*, or non-harming. Ahimsa is widely understood to encompass non-harming of the self. Upholding the yama of ahimsa, skilled yoga teachers prepare the body with a sequence of strengthening and stretching poses before leading a pinnacle pose like Eagle, which is balancing on one leg while wrapping the opposite leg around it and >intertwining the arms<.

Because yoga is much more than just poses, ahimsa is understood to include non-harming at a spiritual level. Yogis are encouraged to accept our bodies as they are on any given day, and to speak kindly to ourselves rather than berating ourselves:

Even if your eagle doesn't land gracefully.

Even if you’ve done the pose for ten years but today suddenly it's not happening.

Even if you never in your lifetime get your foot wrapped around your opposite calf.

And if you push yourself through a pose that gives you pain? That’s not yoga!

Like all of yoga, ahimsa to oneself is a practice to take off the mat, in a manner that’s right in line with psychologists’ current emphasis on self-compassion.

What is Self-Compassion? (A Modern Definition)

So, then, what _is _ the definition of the term “self-compassion” that has gained popularity over the past decade? From Dr. Kristin Neff, an expert in the field [quote]:

> Self-compassion involves
>
> being kind to oneself when confronting
>
> personal inadequacies or situational difficulties,
>
> framing the imperfections of life in terms of common humanity, and
>
> being mindful of negative emotions
>
> so that one neither suppresses nor ruminates on them.[1]

That’s a lot to take in, so let’s break it down.

1) **Being kind to oneself when confronting personal inadequacies or situational difficulties**

Let’s start with “situational difficulties.”

When I’m going through a tough time, I need to be kind to myself.

I can acknowledge that the situation is difficult.

I can take extra good care of myself so that I have the strength to handle it.

I can give myself grace and cut myself some slack as I make my way through it.

That makes sense.

“Being kind to oneself when confronting personal inadequacies.”--

That part seems a bit tougher! As Rev. Michelle Collins says,

> “our own mistakes echo endlessly in memory's courtroom.”

It's so easy to chastise myself when I see my unsavory qualities at work.

In today’s reading, Vanessa Rush Southern writes of all that we strive to do [quote]:

> “up against it the reality of all that falls short and the limits of today.”
>
> *(pause)*
>
> And yet, Southern writes, “We honor the limits,”

Following a litany of human frailties, she offers reassurance, concluding,

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[1] *Kristin Neff: The Three Components of Self-Compassion*

"Perhaps then you will feel in your bones,
in your weary heart,
the aching, healing sense that
this is enough—
even this."

That brings us to part two of the definition of self-compassion:

2) **Framing the imperfections of life in terms of common humanity**

We find this in our Story for All Ages [quote]:

"But being human means I am *not* perfect. I make mistakes.
I can hurt others with my words, my actions, and even my silence."[2]

That children's book, titled *I Am Human,* is aptly subtitled *A Book of Empathy.*
It serves as a reminder that I can extend empathy to myself by accepting my humanity and embracing it, as I strive to make better choices.

Part three of the definition of self-compassion is:

3) **Being mindful of negative emotions so that one neither suppresses nor ruminates on them**

This suggests a 3-step process:
First, I need to pay attention to my negative emotions. -- That is,
notice when I'm experiencing shame or fear, sadness or hurt.
Second, I need to allow negative emotions to play out -- not suppress them.
Third, I need to let go of the negative emotions -- not ruminate on them.

[2] *I Am Human: A Book of Empathy.* (2018). Verde, Susan. Art by Peter H. Reynolds.

Why Self-Compassion?

Now that we've established a basic understanding of _what_ self-compassion is, let's explore the question: Why? Why cultivate self-compassion?

Perhaps the simplest answer is this one from Jack Kornfield:

> "You can search the tenfold universe as the Buddha and not find a single person more worthy of love and care than the one seated right here in your own body.".

Last week, Rev. Jane reflected on the question,
"Why show compassion for people who have caused me harm?"
This can be extended to,
"Why show compassion for the harmful parts of myself?"
Just as Buddhism suggests that people who cause harm today may have in another life been loving supporters, similarly: Internal Family Systems therapy suggests that dysfunctional parts of ourselves developed as a form of self-protection.
IFS further suggests that--at their core--these self-destructive parts have our best interests at heart. Moreover, showing those shadow parts compassion can be a pathway to personal growth. Poet and activist Andrea Gibson reflected in their blog:

> This I now know for certain: I do all of growing during the times in my life when I am offering compassion to the parts of myself that have not yet grown.

How to Cultivate Self-Compassion?

So, if we're on board with the _why_ of self-compassion, _ how_ can we cultivate it? Andrea Gibson offers:

> How did I change so much, and so quickly?
> I learned to love the me who hadn't changed at all. The me who worshiped worry.
> The me who made a complaint department of my mind.
> The me who turned my wounds into microscopes through which I saw the worst in people, especially myself. The me who got it all wrong…

We explored some other possible ways of cultivating self-compassion as we were fleshing out its definition. And additional guidance can be found in many sources.

The Buddha says,

> "Hold yourself as a mother holds her beloved child."

American motivational author Louise Hay offers,

> "You have been criticizing yourself for years, and it hasn't worked.
> Try approving of yourself and see what happens."

And from an unknown author but found in numerous inspirational images online:

> "Imagine if we obsessed about the things we loved about ourselves."

If you want to take a deep dive, Dr. Kristen Neff's book
Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind, [quote]
"offers expert advice on how to limit self-criticism and offset its negative effects, enabling you to achieve your highest potential and a more contented, fulfilled life."[3]

[3] https://www.harpercollins.com/products/self-compassion-kristin-neff?variant=32205936885794

Metta Meditation

One concrete way you can practice self-compassion is to offer yourself the blessings of metta meditation that I mentioned earlier. In a stroke of serendipity, our Story For All Ages includes an Author's Note with a suggestion to practice a loving-kindness meditation! Author Susan Verde offers a twist on the traditional pattern by
first calling to mind a beloved and imagining offering them the blessings,
then extending loving kindness to someone you find challenging,
then expanding to include all humans on the planet, and
finally "filling your own heart space with love for yourself."[4]

May I be healthy.
May I be happy.
May I be free from suffering.
May I be filled with peace.

If you find it challenging to direct loving kindness to yourself, perhaps this way is easier: to extend toward others first, then end with yourself--

a reminder that you're a worthy member of "all beings."

Or you might prefer to start with blessings for yourself, with an understanding that when you feel supported and whole, you're better able to give love to others.

You can also try out other phrases common to metta meditation that reinforce self-compassion:

May I be safe from inner and outer harm.
May I be a source of healing for myself and others.

[4] *I Am Human: A Book of Empathy.* (2018). Verde, Susan. Art by Peter H. Reynolds.

Compassion for All of Our Parts

There's another phrase common to metta meditation that leads me in a different direction. That is:

> May I be free from fear and anger, hate and jealousy.

This is a fine blessing.

However, from the lens of self-compassion, I might push back on this one a bit.

Heeding the reflections of Andrea Gibson, I might say instead,

"May I extend love to the parts of me that are fearful, angry, hateful, and jealous."

As, Jennifer Healey, creator of HealingBrave.com, asserts:

> Self-compassion isn't about escaping your darkness but learning to love yourself there. The willingness to accept painful truths about ourselves is a seed of self-compassion. Self-compassion is the seed of a deeper connection with the wonder of being alive.[5]

A Relationship with Yourself

Likewise, Dr. Kristin Neff suggests a practice of establishing a relationship with ourselves. She even recommends assessing it like we would a relationship with another person. Quoting here:

> "Is it a good relationship?"
>
> "Are you understanding, patient, accepting of yourself?"
>
> "Are you warm, kind, encouraging?"
>
> "Is it a committed relationship?"
>
> "Can you count on yourself to have your back when things are difficult?
>
> Or do you tend to abandon yourself?"

"Self-compassion involves caring for our own wellbeing in moments of suffering," says Neff, "supporting ourselves emotionally, physically, and psychologically when we're in need.[6]

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[5] https://www.facebook.com/healingbrave/posts/self-compassion-isnt-about-escaping-your-darkness-but-learning-to-love-yourself-/1454543248016564/

[6] https://self-compassion.org/blog/make-a-commitment-to-yourself/

Make a Commitment to Self-Compassion

Finally, Dr. Neff advises

> "We need to make a commitment to self-compassion because it doesn't come naturally for most of us. Our culture doesn't support it. Our brains have a negativity bias which means that we tend to see the bad rather than the good in ourself. So we need to really resolve to show up for ourselves in this good supportive way…"[7]

Conclusion

We've covered a lot of ground today about the **wheres**, **whats**, **whys**, and **hows** of self-compassion.

In closing, I want you to hear again--and really take in-- the words of Jack Kornfield:

> "You can search the tenfold universe as the Buddha and not find a single person more worthy of love and care than the one seated right here in your own body."
>
> *[pause]*

May you make the commitment to give that person the utmost compassion.

May it be so. And Amen

[7] https://self-compassion.org/blog/make-a-commitment-to-yourself/