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Fierce Self-Compassion

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When I am writing a sermon, I typically draw on books that have been published quite recently. Books that are more than a few years old too often have statistics that are out of date, or cite “current events” that no longer feel relevant. But occasionally I make exceptions for books that I just keep hearing about. An example from a few years ago is Dr. Kristen Neff’s book *How to Practice Self-Compassion*. It was published in 2011, a year before I came to UUCF as your minister, but I didn’t get around to reading it and preaching a sermon to you about it until 2018. I just kept hearing—from multiple people in different parts of my life—how great Neff’s work was and how helpful so many people had found it. So I checked it out, and they were right! That first sermon on self-compassion is available in our online sermon archive for those interested.

When I saw that Dr. Neff was publishing a new book this summer on *Fierce Self-Compassion*, I scheduled this Sunday Service in anticipation that her second book would also be of interest. And the good news is: it is an excellent book, and I look forward to sharing some highlights with you.

Before I dive into the details, let me give you a quick overview of how Neff’s pathbreaking work on self-compassion has evolved over the past two decades. Neff earned a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology (with a focus on human development) from the University of California at Berkeley in 1997. During that final year of graduate school, she became interested in Buddhism, and has been a regular meditator since then.

During her post-doctoral work and into her early years as a psychology professor at The University of Texas at Austin, she became curious about whether it might be possible to apply the rigorous social scientific methodology she had learned in the academy to the personal benefits she was experiencing from her meditation practice. As a result, in 2003, she “published the first theoretical paper defining self-compassion, and created the Self-Compassion Scale that same year to measure it” (6).

Part of the reason I’m bringing up this historical perspective is that it can sometimes be helpful to pause and reflect on how quickly things can change. Although it seems obvious to many of us today that self-compassion is important—psychologically, emotionally, physically, and spirituality—the value of self-compassion was much less clear to most people twenty years ago. (I can definitely think of self-critical messages I witnessed or received in my own life that: “You need to be tough!” or “You are being too easy on him,” etc.) The good news is that times have changed at least in part, and the value of compassion and kindness have much more robust scientific evidence behind them. Back in the early 2000s, Dr. Neff “was the primary person conducting research on self-compassion. Since then, the field has exploded and now includes well over three thousand scientific journal articles, with new studies being published daily” (6).

In 2011, she published the first accessible version of her work for a popular audience in a book titled *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. Now, a decade later, she has published a new book that takes into account additional insights since that time. This new book is titled *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power, and Thrive*. And while there is quite a bit in this book that is especially focused on women (all of which is of value to all), there are also lots of practices in the book beneficial to all regardless of gender identity.

To me, the title alone is worth the price of admission: *Fierce Self-Compassion*. There’s a powerful insight there: that the full spectrum of what compassion encompasses can include not only sensitivity, gentleness, warmth and the like, but also strength, power, forcefulness, and *heartfelt intensity*.

Along these lines, there's an important quote from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that outlines the strength and power of love which has important parallels to the way compassion can be both tender and fierce. In Dr. King's words:

Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

If we substitute the word "compassion" for the word "love" in Dr. King's quote, we can see the similar dynamic Dr. Neff is pointing to with her ideas around *Fierce Compassion*

Similarly, Dr. Cornel West has said that, "Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private." Neff's work on self-compassion, again traces a similar pattern. She points us toward the fullness of what compassion can do: it can help us *tenderly* take care of ourselves, and it can create a *fierce* commitment to do the work of justice, creating more compassionate systems and structures. I want to invite us to briefly explore each of these in turn.

Let's start with ourselves. When physical distancing restrictions started in March 2020 due to the pandemic, I started leading a weekly meditation class here at UUCF on Tuesday evenings. That class drew frequently from *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* co-authored by Kristin Neff and her colleague Christopher Germer. I recommend that workbook highly if you are interested in diving deeper into this work.

For now, I would like to invite us to experience two of the many practices from that book. The first one is called a *Tender Self-Compassion Break*.

I invite you to find a position in which you are relaxed, yet alert. Take a deep breath in, then let it go. Relax your shoulders. Put your feet flat on the floor. Rest your hands easily in your lap. If you feel comfortable doing so, close your eyes.

Think of a situation in your life that's difficult and unsatisfactory.

Something in the mild to moderate range, not something overwhelming.

Maybe you're feeling inadequate in some way, or you're really sad about something that's happening in your life...

As the problem comes to mind, give yourself permission to feel your way into it, noting any uneasiness you experience in your body. Where do you feel that discomfort the most?

And as we enter into this practice more fully, I'm going to invite you to experiment with saying three self-compassion phrases silently to yourself.

First, try saying silently to yourself, slowly and calmly, **"This is a moment of suffering."** Just acknowledging and being mindfully present to what you are experiencing. *"This is a moment of suffering."* With each of these phrases, if the language doesn't feel quite right, you can adapt it to what works better for you.

Second, try saying silently to yourself, **"Suffering is a part of life."** Here the idea is to remind ourselves that we are connected to a common humanity: *"Suffering is a part of life."* *"We all face challenges in our lives."*

Third, try saying, **"May I be kind to myself."** This phrase calls in the power of love and kindness. If you feel comfortable doing so, place one hand on your heart center and another hand on your gut (your solar plexus) or anywhere else that feels soothing. Say: *"May I be kind to myself."* You can even try saying simply, "I love you."

If these phrases we've been using don't feel quite right, imagine that a dear friend is having the same problem as you. What would you say to that person, heart to heart, to soothe and comfort them? Now, can you offer the same message to yourself? (Neff 121-122, freely adapted in a few places)

Now, as you feel ready, I invite you to gently open your eyes and return your attention to the room.

That Tender Self-Compassion practice may have seemed simple:

- acknowledging when suffering is arising (“This is a moment of suffering”),
- reminding ourselves that all humans suffer (“Suffering is a part of life”), and
- setting an intention to be compassionate to ourselves (“May I be kind to myself.”
“May I be peaceful and at ease”).

Yet, this simple self-compassion practice can create a significant shift to both health and healing in our experience of ourselves, others, and the world (24).

Now, what we’ve been exploring so far is the *tender* side of the self-compassion spectrum, the side that directs our caring, kindness, and friendliness toward ourselves. So—holding that *tender* self-compassion as a point of reference, let’s begin to shift from tender self-compassion toward *fierce* self-compassion. One of the most common examples of what the shift from tender to fierce looks like might be the drawing up of some personal boundaries to help protect yourself from burnout:

- “I really appreciate your asking me, but I can’t take on any more commitments at this time,” or
- “I’m going to say no for now. I’ll let you know if something changes”
or
- “I would really like to help, but I need to take care of myself by saying no.”

One advantage of the open-hearted transparency in that last example is that being compassionate toward yourself can give others permission to be kind to themselves about the reality of their own needs and limits (151).

In that light, let’s take a *Fierce Self-Compassion Break*:

As before, I invite you to find a position in which you are relaxed, yet alert. Take a deep breath in, then let it go. Relax your shoulders. Put your feet flat on the floor. Rest your hands easily in your lap. If you feel comfortable

doing so, close your eyes. (As always, feel free to adapt these instructions to what feels right and possible for you.)

Think of a situation in your life where you feel your needs aren't being met. Maybe you aren't taking enough time for yourself, or maybe there's a part of your job you really dislike, or maybe you are spending your free time doing things that don't make you happy. Calling up the unsatisfactory situation in your mind's eye, allow yourself to feel whatever emotions are arising. Do you notice exhaustion, boredom, resentment, hopelessness? What are you feeling?

Note as well any uneasiness in your body. Where do you feel it most?

Now, keeping this situation in which your needs aren't being met in mind, what specifically is that unmet need? Perhaps it is a need for rest, for peace, for learning, or for more fun and excitement? Perhaps it is a need for acceptance, validation, boundaries, greater fulfillment—or whatever else you may have identified.

Once you've named your unmet need, let go of that difficult situation and just focus on your unmet need. Now we're going to experiment with another set of phrases.

First, say to yourself, "**This is what I need.**" Give yourself permission to really own that this is really important to you, and that your needs matter. *"This is what I need."*

Second, try saying, "**I will honor my needs as well as the needs of others.**" *Both* are important. "All humans have important needs," and life includes receiving as well as giving. *"I will honor my needs as well as the needs of others."*

If you feel comfortable doing so, please place one hand on your heart center and another hand on your gut (your solar plexus) or anywhere else that feels soothing. Then try saying to yourself, **“I will commit to fulfilling my needs as best I can.”** **Everyone, including me,** deserves kindness, care, and compassion.

If you're having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that someone you really cared about was feeling unfulfilled. What would you say to this person to help them put in the time and effort to meet unmet needs? Now, can you offer the same message to yourself?

As we prepare to end this meditation, bring your attention again to the feeling of your hands resting on your heart and your solar plexus. Can you feel, at the deepest level, that your desire to balance both your own needs and the needs of others comes not from a place of deficiency, but from an abundant heart? (Neff 177, 257-258, *freely adapted in a few places*)

May all be filled with loving kindness.

May all be peaceful and at ease.

May all live with an open heart.

At each point that all includes each of us. *May we each honor our own needs as well as the needs of others.*

Now, as you feel ready, I invite you to gently open your eyes and return your attention to the room.

I am grateful that Dr. Neff has continued to explore the full spectrum of compassion. If we had more time, we could explore the many other practices in her book designed for motivating our work for social justice—and more. If you are curious to learn more, everything we've explored and more are in her book *Fierce Self-*

Compassion. There are also many free guided meditations online at her website, self-compassion.org.

For now, as I move toward my conclusion, let me address the most frequent criticism of self-compassion: that it is self-indulgent, narcissistic, or liable to undercut one's edge, thus creating complacency. Of course, anything can be abused or taken to an extreme, but the good news is that this question is not theoretical. We have two decades of scientific research demonstrating that, for the vast majority of people, practicing self-compassion is much more likely to incline you toward health and healing than practicing the opposite (189). Or to phrase it in a *fiercer* way, Audre Lorde wrote that, **“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare”** (247). Self-compassion is one among many practices that can help us resist being exploited by systems of oppression.

Ultimately, as our UU Seventh Principle affirms, we are all part of an interdependent, interconnected web. Compassion and care for our self is part of what gives us the capacity to care for others. Compassion and care for others can get us out of our limited sense of self. And acting together with others can help us create systems, structures, and institutions that are more compassionate, and that can give us all the time and space to meet our needs.