

**The Charter for Compassion
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“Now the Master was new to the Temple, having lately come to be the Master. And each Sabbath he looked and beheld a woman, small of stature, and of many years. And she was dressed in black raiment and did sit near the front of the Great Congregation. And the soul of the Master did greatly rejoice in her because of her faithfulness.

And it happened on a certain day that the woman spake unto him, saying, Sir, all my ancestors worshipped in this Temple and my fathers hath been its pillars, and the strength of its beams: therefore am I found here as often as the gates are opened, and it shall be thus as long as the Lord giveth me life: yet hear I not a word that thou speakest to the Great Congregation, for upon me is laid a great affliction; my ears hear not.

Then did the Master answer her as if with a humble heart, yet in a manner to hide his vanity, and speaking in a loud voice that the deaf woman might hear him, saith, Peradventure thou missest little when thou hearest not that which I speak to the Great Congregation. And the woman answered him, saying, Even so hath it been told me by them that hear thee.”¹ ;)

So it has ever been for the person who has something to say. Whether clergyperson or lay person, it is rarely possible to maintain an inflated ego too long if one is committed to congregational life. In a tiny, delightful book entitled *Parish Parables*, the Rev. Clinton Lee Scott plays with the role of ego in congregational life. He was a Universalist minister who died in 1985 at the age of 98.² Clinton Lee Scott played a major role in the revitalization of the Universalist denomination during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950's, and also in the process leading to its merger in 1961 with the American Unitarian Association.

¹ *Parish Parables*, Clinton Lee Scott, The Murray Press, Boston, 1946 (reprinted 1950), p. 7

² See <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/clintonleescott.html>.

It is easy to “bad mouth” the ego. Yet without an ego, there is little motivation to speak. Finding one’s voice is a central religious task, so we must nurture the motivation to speak. One person who has found her voice is Karen Armstrong, a former Roman Catholic nun and the author of more than 20 books on faith and the major world religions. In *The Great Transformation*, she traces the spiritual development of humanity in four distinct regions from about 900 BCE to 200 BCE. In a nut shell, the “Great Transformation” is about booting the ego off center stage and consequently empathizing with people who are not part of our own “tribe.”

German philosopher Karl Jaspers called this period “the Axial Age.” The influence of the sages of the Axial Age was so great that it was as if the very axis of the earth had shifted. Before the Axial Age, the “state of the art” in religion was externally oriented compliance with violent rituals (often animal sacrifice) intended to benefit a “tribe” of one kind or another. The Axial Age exemplars such as Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, Jeremiah, the mystics of the Upanishads, Mencius in China and Euripides in Greece opened new horizons of interiority and inclusivity in religion.

No longer was compliance with rituals the “state of the art” in religion. No longer was it good enough to be a loyal member of one’s own “tribe.” Compassion could not be contained within the “tribe.” The golden Axial Age gave us the Golden Rule. Armstrong notes that the Pharisees in Palestine developed some of the most inclusive and advanced spiritualities of the Jewish Axial Age. “Perhaps the greatest of the Pharisees was Rabbi Hillel (c. 80 BCE – 30 CE), who migrated to Palestine from Babylonia. In his view, the essence of the Torah was not the letter of the law but its spirit, which he summed up in the Golden Rule. In a famous Talmudic story, it was said that one day a pagan approached Hillel and promised to convert to Judaism if the rabbi could teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one leg. Hillel replied simply: “What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. Go learn [the commentary].”³

³ *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, Karen Armstrong, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2006, p. 379.

Karen Armstrong makes the case that all major religions have compassion at their liquid, living core, regardless of the crusty mess often visible on their surface. Doug Hogue will talk about “The Charter for Compassion” in a moment. Armstrong frequently uses the Greek term “kenosis” in writing about the Great Transformation. It is a term that means “emptying.” In spirituality, it is used to describe the emptying of self, the dismantling of egotism.⁴

This week, my mother called up and reported that she has a mouse in her basement. I can picture mom’s basement. It is well organized. There is a place for everything, and everything is in its place. “How do you know there’s a mouse?” I asked, knowing that a mouse in mom’s basement would be like one of us in Times Square on New Year’s Eve: No one could ever find us! Indeed, it was not easy for her to realize that something was amiss in the basement. This took careful sleuthing. “Remember the bean bag frog sitting on the old Victrola?” she asked. “Well, it went limp and flat!” Beanless bag as smoking gun. ;)

Kenosis is not that kind of emptying. It does not count as kenosis if someone sucks the life force out of you. That is why I prefer to speak of “de-centering” the ego rather than losing the ego. It is a mistake for spiritually inclined people to demonize the ego. Enmeshment with others is as toxic as dominating others. A few years ago, *What is Enlightenment?* magazine devoted an issue to the ego. I rarely compose letters to the editor, but I was sufficiently disgruntled by the tenor of that issue to write this to the editor, “The ego provides traction for transcendence and an infrastructure for immanence. The ego is not chopped liver.”

To live wisely and to live well, we need traction for transcendence, and we need infrastructure for immanence. The good news is that we are living in an ideal environment for developing our capacity transcendence and our capacity for immanence. By “ideal,” I mean scary, uncertain, and violent. One of the most heartening points made by Karen Armstrong is that the giant steps forward made by the sages of the Axial Age took place in scary, uncertain, and violent times.

“The sages were all living in violent societies like our own. What they created was a spiritual technology that utilized natural human energies to counter this aggression . . . It was not a

⁴ Page 430.

question of discovering your belief in ‘God’ first and then living a compassionate life. The practice of disciplined sympathy would itself yield intimations of transcendence . . . They concentrated on what people were supposed to transcend *from* – their greed, egotism, hatred, and violence. What they were going to transcend *to* was not an easily defined place or person, but a state of beatitude that was inconceivable to the unenlightened.”⁵

Desperate times call for desperate measures. We live in desperate times, with video and other details available 24/7, thanks to the media. Further enlightenment is needed. Further elaboration of Axial Age insights is needed. What does Unitarian Universalism have to contribute toward humanity’s further enlightenment? My free and responsible search for truth and meaning has led me to this answer: Unitarian Universalists can speak to secular people more effectively than most other religious traditions. Unitarian Universalists are called by the deepest longing of our hearts and by the rigor of our minds to urge secular people to become more compassionate.

Karen Armstrong says, “We cannot hope to reform others until we have reformed ourselves. Secularists, who reject religion, should also look for signs of secular fundamentalism, which is often as stridently bigoted about religion as some forms of religion are about secularism. In its own brief history, secularism has also had its disasters: Hitler, Stalin, and Saddam Hussein show us that a militant exclusion of religion from public policy can be as lethal as any pious crusade .”⁶ Unitarian Universalists are uniquely positioned to speak *to* and speak *for* the ever-increasing number of people in this country who describe themselves as “not religious.” That is not true! They just do not know about this religion, Unitarian Universalism.

Religion is not the enemy. Secularism is not the enemy. Ego is not the enemy. The enemies are bad religion, bad secularism, and *egotism*. Our allies in bringing about a new “Axial Age” are good religion, good secularism, and a healthy ego. With these allies, we can help to shift the axis of the earth once more. In the blessed cauldron of the congregation, may we help each other discern good from bad and to discern better from worse. May we help each other to discern a healthy ego from egotism. May it be so!

⁵ Pages 391 and 392.

⁶ Page 395.