

*Self Love<sup>1</sup>*  
*Rev. Myke Johnson*  
*May 22, 2016*  
*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

Comedian Margaret Cho writes: “I am so beautiful, sometimes people weep when they see me. And it has nothing to do with what I look like really, it is just that I gave myself the power to say that I am beautiful, and if I could do that, maybe there is hope for them too. And the great divide between the beautiful and the ugly will cease to be. Because we are all what we choose.”<sup>2</sup>

Today we will be exploring the theme of self-love—how to respect and value and care for ourselves—and how to know the difference between selfishness and self-love.

*Readings: From bell hooks:* “One of the best guides to how to be self-loving is to give ourselves the love we are often dreaming about receiving from others. There was a time when I felt lousy about my over-forty body, saw myself as too fat, too this, or too that. Yet I fantasized about finding a lover who would give me the gift of being loved as I am. It is silly, isn't it, that I would dream of someone else offering to me the acceptance and affirmation I was withholding from myself. This was a moment when the maxim "You can never love anybody if you are unable to love yourself" made clear sense. And I add, "Do not expect to receive the love from someone else you do not give yourself.”<sup>3</sup>

*From Jamaica Kincaid:* “No one observed and beheld me, I observed and beheld myself; the invisible current went out and it came back to me. I came to love myself out of defiance, out of despair, because there was nothing else. Such a love will do, but it will only do, it is not the best kind; it has the taste of something left out on a shelf too long that has turned rancid, and when eaten makes the stomach turn. It will do, it will do, but only because there is nothing else to take its place; it is not to be recommended.”

*From James Baldwin:* “It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I'd been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on the earth as though I had a right to be here.”<sup>4</sup>

*From Fred Rogers:* “You are a very special person. There is only one like you in the whole world. There's never been anyone exactly like you before, and there will never be again. Only you. And people can like you exactly as you are.”<sup>5</sup> “We all have different gifts, so we all have different ways of saying to the world who we are.”

*And he says it in poetic form:*

“I can put on a hat, or put on a coat,  
Or wear a pair of glasses or sail a boat.  
I can change all my names and find a place to hide.  
I can do most anything, but I'm still myself inside.  
I can go far away, or dream of anything,  
Or wear a scary costume or act like a king.  
I can change all my names and find a place to hide.  
I can do almost anything, but I'm still myself. I'm still myself. I'm still myself inside.”

---

1 Copyright 2016 by Rev. Myke Johnson. Permission must be requested to reprint for other than personal use.

2 Margaret Cho's weblog, 03-23-06

3 From *All About Love: New Visions*

4 From *Collected Essays*

5 From *Life's Journeys According to Mister Rogers: Things to Remember Along the Way*

*Sermon:*

When I first thought to preach about self love, I was imagining something like “why is it important?” and “how can we practice self love in our lives?” But then I read about a troubling rise in selfishness in our culture, or more specifically, a rise in narcissism. That led me to wonder, What is real “self-love,” as opposed to selfishness or narcissism? How can we tell the difference in our own lives and relationships?

But first let me tell you about the research. Over the last thirty years, social scientists have been studying empathy and narcissism by administering test questionnaires to college students. Empathy is defined as “a capacity and tendency to experience life not just from one’s own point of view but also from that of others, to feel others’ joy and sorrow, and to care about others’ wellbeing.”<sup>6</sup> Narcissism is defined as “an inflated view of the self, coupled with relative indifference to others.”<sup>7</sup> Their tests have shown a decrease in empathy, along with a rise in narcissism among their average test subjects. “70 percent of students today score higher on narcissism and lower on empathy than did the average student thirty years ago.”

Some have speculated that this change correlates to the “self-esteem” movement of the 1980’s, in which parents were encouraged to praise their children, and tell them how special they were. According to Joanna M. Ashmun, an often-published writer on narcissism: “It has ...been suggested that self-help literature about bolstering self-esteem and getting what you want out of life or that encourages the feeling of victimization has aggravating effects on [Narcissistic] thinking and behavior.”<sup>8</sup> That gave me pause, because I know that encouraging self-esteem has been very important for liberal education, and even our own religious education programs.

But others wonder if the rise in narcissism has more to do with the increased competition in children’s lives. Achievement has been defined as getting the best grades, winning in sports, and getting into the best schools; even volunteering for a good cause is related to how it appears on a resume. In this scenario, other children become opponents or obstacles to success, and one is always trying to be better than everyone else. One psychologist, Peter Gray, thinks the problem has more to do with the decline in children’s opportunities for free play with other children.<sup>9</sup> He looks at how play develops children’s ability to listen, to understand what others feel and want, to negotiate, and to cooperate. He believes play has evolved in our nature to develop our capacity to be social beings on an equal footing with others.

If we encourage self love, will we be contributing to an increase in narcissism? Can we better articulate the difference between narcissism and self love? Narcissism is an inflated obsession with the self, in which the self is seen as better than other people, and others are seen as lesser. In narcissism, other people are used to serve the needs and desires of the self. On the other hand, true self love is built on compassion toward the self *and* toward the other, an ability to listen to both the self and the other. One indicator of the difference is that someone who has self love is able to see their own faults and take responsibility for mistakes, and make amends. A narcissist, on the other hand, is quick to blame others for their problems, and cannot admit wrong-doing.

---

6 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201401/why-is-narcissism-increasing-among-young-americans>

7 Ibid.

8 <http://www.halcyon.com/jmashmun/npd/dsm-iv.html>

9 Ibid.

Psychologist Brad Bushman writes: "I've been studying aggression for about 30 years, and I've seen that the most harmful belief that a person can have is that they're superior to others," He goes on with a litany of those beliefs: "Men are better than women, my race is better than your race, my religion is superior to your religion. When people believe they're better than other people, they act accordingly."<sup>10</sup>

So an indicator of true self-love is that it is not dependent on comparing ourselves to anyone else. If we love our selves, we don't have to be better than someone else. We recognize that every person is inherently lovable and worthy. The song sung by the choir today expresses this sentiment. Translated into English, it says: "All that sing have the right to be called the children of God."<sup>11</sup>

Now for most of us, it is hard to avoid comparing ourselves to others. We live in a competitive society and we are judged on scales of 1 to 10. We are paid wages based on society's estimation of our value. We log on to Facebook and see that someone else's post got 57 likes, while ours got two. Or maybe it is the reverse. What we can afford to buy will be more than or less than what someone else can afford to buy. Advertising plays into this by telling us, as they try to sell us the newest gizmo, "You are worth it!" It is a radical idea to believe that our worth is not dependent on being better or worse than someone else. We often speak about our first UU principle—we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person. But it is not always easy to put it into practice for others or for ourselves.

Self love is not the same as self-esteem. It is not about assessing our value or worth. It starts from the core belief that all people, including ourselves, have equal and inherent worth and dignity. Dr. Kristin Neff speaks about self love as self-compassion.<sup>12</sup> She writes:

Self-compassion involves being kind to ourselves when life goes awry or we notice something about ourselves we don't like, rather than being cold or harshly self-critical. It recognizes that the human condition is imperfect, so that we feel connected to others when we fail or suffer rather than feeling separate or isolated. It also involves mindfulness — the recognition and non-judgmental acceptance of painful emotions as they arise in the present moment. Rather than suppressing our pain or else making it into an exaggerated personal soap opera, we see ourselves and our situation clearly.

If we think of self-love as self-compassion, then it becomes easier to identify how we can practice it. I believe the first step for practicing self-love is to listen to what is happening in our own heart and soul. Listening is the best way to express compassion to others, and it is the same in relation to ourselves. By listening to ourselves, we notice what we are feeling: Am I sad? Am I afraid? Am I confused? Am I angry? To be able to hear ourselves, we need to get quiet with ourselves, to tune inward rather than outward, to accept with kindness what emerges.

Brené Brown writes:

Practicing self-love means learning how to trust ourselves, to treat ourselves with respect, and to be kind and affectionate toward ourselves. This is a tall order give how hard most of us are on ourselves. I know I can talk to myself in ways that I would never consider talking to another person. How many of us are quick to think, "God, I am so stupid" and "Man, I'm such an Idiot."? Just like calling someone we love stupid or an

---

10 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2014/08/05/you-only-need-a-one-question-test-to-identify-a-narcissist/>

11 Bonse Aba, a traditional Zambian song

12 <http://self-compassion.org/why-self-compassion-is-healthier-than-self-esteem/>

idiot would be incongruent with practicing love, talking like that to ourselves takes a serious toll on our self-love.<sup>13</sup>

The second step of self love is to respond with kindness to our feelings and whatever else emerges from within us. Now, just to clarify: to notice with kindness what I am feeling doesn't give me permission to take out my feelings on someone else. For example, if I notice that I feel angry because once again my child has left their clothes all over the house, and it's time to go to school and we're late—noticing the anger doesn't mean it is okay to yell at the child or put them down.

Self love is a process of stepping back a bit to observe the feelings, then to say to ourselves —“Oh, you're feeling angry.” We acknowledge it like a good friend might acknowledge it: Can't you just hear a friend saying, “Yep, parenting sure is frustrating sometimes. It sure can feel overwhelming.” When we acknowledge our own feelings with compassion, we are less likely to react or lash out at those around us.

In those moments when we have more time, paying attention to the feelings in us can help us go deeper with ourselves. Maybe underneath the anger, is tiredness or hunger. A third important part of self love is to respond with kindness to our very human needs. Our feelings can be signals that point to human needs. We all need food and water. We need rest and movement. We need solitude and connection. We need giving and receiving. We need beauty and meaning.

There are times, especially when parenting young children or caring for a sick loved one, that we set aside our own needs for a while to pay attention to the more immediate needs of others. But just as a mother cannot stop eating if she expects to be able to continue feeding her child, we need to nurture our own needs if we are going to be able to nurture the needs of others. So back to our example of anger—anger can be a sign that some human need in us is hungry for attention. If we can't respond to it right away, we can kindly tell ourselves that we see it, and will respond later.

But self love doesn't end there. Anne Lamott tells a story of getting angry at her son one morning, and grabbing him by the arm in a rough way. A few moments later, she was devastated that she had struck out at this tiny person she loved so much. My books aren't unpacked yet, so I can't read you the passage, but she goes on to realize something new about self-love. Perhaps the hardest part of self love is to forgive yourself when you really mess up. She came to understand that she had to forgive herself before she could be calm enough to reach out to her son and make amends for what had happened, and ask for his forgiveness too. And also make room for the feelings he was feeling about what had happened.

The fourth step of self love is forgiving ourselves for not being perfect. Margaret Moss Painter writes: “Did you make a mistake today? Did you do or say something that you're ashamed of? Congratulations. You are officially human. Love yourself, especially when you're aching with shame or regret. Make your amends, learn the lesson, and love your wondrous human self.”<sup>14</sup>

---

13 From *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*

14 [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/13781127.Margaret\\_Moss\\_Painter](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/13781127.Margaret_Moss_Painter)

This part of self love has been hard for me. I think I breathed in perfectionism from my own critical and perfectionist father who had learned it from his own critical and perfectionist mother, my grandmother. But we also learned it from our religious upbringing. There was so much focus on sins and faults, that we learned unconsciously to always look at ourselves in a critical way, rather than a loving way. And if we are critical with ourselves, we are critical with others around us. I am not saying that self love means we want to stop growing or we think that every way of being is just as good as every other way. Otherwise, we wouldn't be interested in the question of how to become more self loving. It is paradoxical.

But we are imperfect human beings and self love means to accept this reality with compassion and kindness. When we practice kindness to our selves, that practice radiates out to those close to us, to those we meet in our daily journeys, even to those who are strangers to us. There is no fixed amount of kindness that must be parceled out carefully—more for me means less for you. The more we practice kindness with ourselves, the more we are able to give kindness to others. The more we respect ourselves, the more also will we demand respect from others. M. Scott Peck has written, “Not only do self-love and love of others go hand in hand but ultimately they are indistinguishable.”<sup>15</sup>

So again, to summarize. Narcissism is an inflated obsession with the self, in which the self is seen as better than other people, and others are seen as lesser. In contrast, self love is not about comparing ourselves to others. Rather, self love is built upon compassion toward the self *and* toward the other, recognizing that each of us has equal and inherent worth and dignity. The first step in practicing self-love is to listen deeply to our own heart and soul. The second step is to respond with kindness to our feelings and whatever else emerges from within us. A third step is to honor and nurture our very human needs. The fourth step of self love is forgiveness when we mess up, accepting our imperfections and making amends to those we hurt.

The poet Walt Whitman wrote a great song of self love. In it, he says:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself...  
I exist as I am, that is enough,  
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,  
And if each and all be aware I sit content.<sup>16</sup>

During our meditation, I invite you to take time to listen to your own heart and soul and body, with compassion and kindness.

*Meditation*

*Closing Words*

In the words of Thich Nhat Hanh:  
To be beautiful means to be yourself.  
You don't need to be accepted by others.  
You need to accept yourself.

---

15 *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth*

16 From the poem “Song of Myself” (Part 1 and 20) which is a part of his longer work, *Leaves of Grass*