

Is It Helpful? The role of self-compassion in our search for inner peace

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan



October 16, 2022

"Self-compassion," my friend said. "I need to hear that sermon!" She went on to say, "I walk around sometimes wondering what is wrong with me. I seem to be the only person who doesn't seem to know how to handle life."

I assured her that she wasn't.

My friend's response validated for me the importance of talking about self-compassion. I used a quote from Charlie Mackesy's book, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*, to answer her question. "How is it that others seem to have it all together? What am I missing?" "Darling," I said, "all those people you ask about . . . There's a lot of frantic paddling going on beneath."¹

If you haven't yet read that book, I hope you will. As you got from a taste of our Time for All Ages this morning, it is sweet, simple, childlike, and profound, yet written for all ages. The words of the British author, Charlie Mackesy, are universal, timeless truths. He brings these truths to life through his characters: the young boy, the tiny but mighty mole, the scarred and shy fox, and the big, wise horse, who used to know how to fly. These are topped off with his touching illustrations. Mackesy's radio interviews are also a delight. His humility and honesty make the messages in his book all the more meaningful.

Mackesy had no intentions to write this book. It began as a series of posts on his Instagram account. He agreed to turn it into a book only after being approached by an editor. He had modest ambitions for the book, saying he would be happy if it reached four hundred people. The book, which came out right before the pandemic, has been a New York Times bestseller, selling more than 1.2 million copies.

In one interview, Mackesy talked about how vulnerable he felt after the book's publication and how he lies awake at night, disbelieving and anxious at how he opened his heart to the world.

He goes on to tell a story of how a man wrote him a thank-you letter that made it all worthwhile. The man's father has advanced dementia and no

longer knows who he is. Both the man and his father own a copy of the book. It is the one thing they can still talk about and bond over. Timeless and ageless truths.

Though it is somewhat of a story, it is more a collection of aphorisms, perhaps a condensed version of *The Little Prince* or an updated *Aesop's Fables*. Each page offers another truism with a beautiful illustration.

Each of you was given a card with a quote from the book on it when you came into church today. I hope yours spoke to you. Feel free to keep it where you can see it often or give it to someone you know who would appreciate it. If you're watching online, we would love to send you a card. Please put your name into the chat so we can mail one to you.

The success of *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* illustrates people's hunger and need for self-compassion. In fact, more people have given me this book than any other book.

Self-compassion, like conducting a regular self-review and making amends where possible, is a crucial component of inner peace, our ministry theme for this month.

Self-compassion is about how we relate to ourselves and especially to our suffering. I know that suffering can be a complicated concept. There was considerable debate about what constitutes suffering after I preached about it a couple of years ago. We talked about when do people have the *right* to say they are suffering as opposed to going through a difficult time. We learned that many people feel guilty admitting they are suffering when there are others who have it so much worse.

Yet suffering is a part of life. We all suffer. Yes, there are varying reasons for and degrees of suffering. And, as the Buddha said, suffering is universal. To suffer at times means we are human. We love in life, and we lose what we love as well, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. Sometimes our lives change with one fell swoop, and others they change bit by bit.

Compassion has to do with how we relate to suffering, our own and that of others. Self-

¹ Charlie Mackesy, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* (New York: HarperOne, 2019).

Is It Helpful? The role of self-compassion in our search for inner peace



October 16, 2022 page 2

compassion is not self-pity and is different from self-esteem. Whereas the quest for self-esteem is often contingent on things outside of us, self-compassion is not. Kristen Neff, one of the earliest and most well-regarded researchers on self-compassion, calls self-esteem a "fair weather friend."²

Self-esteem is generally based on comparing ourselves to others or to some standard. Often it is a pass-or-fail proposition, and the good feelings it brings are fleeting, as we watch the bar of success rise or become unable to do what we used to be able to do.

Researchers have plenty of evidence that self-compassion increases well-being.³ One says, "It doesn't require feeling better than others, it isn't contingent on other people liking you, and it doesn't require getting things right."⁴ Self-compassion allows us to remember that everyone is flawed. This allows us to stop pretending to be better than we are in any moment. We can perform honest self-reviews and admit when and where we fall short.⁵

Kristen Neff identifies two types of self-compassion: tender self-compassion and fierce self-compassion. Both are necessary. Tender expression is when we care for and comfort ourselves. Fierce self-compassion, like "momma bear energy," is when we stand up to protect ourselves or those we love and refuse to allow wrong things to continue. When tender and fierce self-compassion are balanced, like Ying and Yang, it is called "Care force." This is a recipe for inner peace.

Self-compassion is not feeling sorry for yourself. Genuine self-compassion allows us to stay present and to belong to the human race, no better or worse than our fellows. The alternative, living defensively or self-guarded, results in self-judgement, isolation, and excessive

r rumination or obsession.⁶

Self-compassion has three necessary ingredients: mindfulness, common humanity, and kindness.

Mindfulness, which is having the awareness that we are suffering, is the first and essential step. We've all seen people deny their suffering, whether through fear, anger, or grief. If we are not mindful, and self-reflective, we will blame others for our suffering or deny that it exists.

Once we are mindful and aware that we are suffering, we remember that suffering is part of the human condition. We connect our suffering to common humanity. Everyone suffers. Life is hard at times. You aren't feeling anything that someone else hasn't felt. In fact, some people are feeling exactly what you are feeling: here, now. Look around you. We all feel pain. We all love. We all deserve and need compassion.

The natural and necessary response to pain, our own included, is kindness, the third ingredient of self-compassion. Be mindful of our suffering, remember that we are not alone, and be kind to ourselves and to others.

*Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
...you know*

*how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness...*

*You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.*

*Then it is only kindness that makes sense any-
more...*

*only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.*

Naomi Shihab Nye

We can be kind to ourselves in many ways. We experienced several today. We let go of our burdens, just for a while at the start of the service. We savored a memory that turns on the caring systems in our bodies. We read beautiful quotations and remembered that we are all human together.

6 Neff, *Fierce Self-Compassion*, 26.

2 Kristin Neff, *Fierce Self-Compassion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021), 9.

3 Kristen Neff, *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, Reprint edition, 2015), Audiobook.

4 Neff, *Fierce Self-Compassion*, 9.

5 Neff, *Self-Compassion*, Audiobook.

Is It Helpful? The role of self-compassion in our search for inner peace



October 16, 2022 page 3

I want to offer one additional tool for self-compassion, and there are many more. This tool is affirmations. For the longest time, I claimed that affirmations didn't work for me. Then I learned one question to ask myself that made all the difference. First, I notice my thoughts, and then I ask myself, "*Is this helpful?*" If it's not, I change it to something that is. It's that simple, and it works for me.

If I claim to want to have inner peace, I must ask myself if my thoughts are leading to inner peace. If they're not, I change either the conditions or my thoughts or both. A friend of mine says, "If I don't have affirmations, I have defamations."

Affirmations can be simple reframes, like *It's okay* or *Nobody likes perfect people*. Affirmations can be wishes of compassion for yourself and others.

May we be happy. May we be peaceful.

Affirmations can be self-regulating. *I'm taking things one step at a time. I'm right here for myself.*

We can choose self-compassion, both tender and fierce. Perhaps our mandate is to find a way to hold both. I do believe it will help us walk ever closer on the path of love.

I'll close with words from Charlie Mackesy:
Sometimes all you hear about is the hate, but there is more love in this world than you could possibly imagine.

Amen and blessed be.