



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Walk a Mile in My Shoes”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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### Centering Thoughts

*Don't judge someone until you have walked a mile in their shoes.* Cherokee Proverb

*The first duty of love is to listen.* Paul Tillich

*When empathy is extended, it satisfies our needs and wish for intimacy,  
it rescues us from our feelings of aloneness.* Carl Rogers

*Connection is the energy that is created between people when they feel seen, heard,  
and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment.* Brené Brown

### Sermon

President Bill Clinton has made two oft-repeated remarks I'm sure you're familiar with. One concerns the nature of his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. The second remark was uttered during the 1992 Presidential campaign. Do you know it?

That's right. “I feel your pain.”

Clinton said this to an activist screaming at him for what he believed was insufficient governmental support and funding for AIDs. [<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/28/us/1992-campaign-verbatim-heckler-stirs-clinton-anger-excerpts-exchange.html>] To emphasize his ‘pain’ remark Clinton added, “I’m listening. You can talk. I know how it hurts. I’ve got friends who’ve died of AIDS.”

It's easy to question Clinton's true sincerity with the activist during what was a highly-charged political moment. But at least superficially he attempted to show empathy with the activist. Listening and feeling another's pain is an act of empathy.

Empathy means “seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another,” according to Dr. Brené Brown, popular author and research professor in the College of Social Work at the University of Houston. She adds, “Empathy is communicating that incredibly healing message of, “You're not alone.” [*The Power of Vulnerability* RSA talk (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and

Commerce at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXSjc-pbXk4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXSjc-pbXk4)], Clinton was expressing that the activist was not alone in his concern for those suffering from AIDs.

When we try to understand and imaginatively enter into another person's feelings, we're walking in their shoes. We're imagining ourselves in their place. And when we do that, we begin to make meaningful connections with another person.

Some people are so sensitive to another's feelings they may actually share the same physiological manifestations of the other person. For example, a non-pregnant person may feel just like their pregnant partner, both becoming bloated or nauseous. Similarly, when a batter gets hit by a wild 90-mile-an-hour baseball pitch we may involuntarily react with an "Ow!" We may even double over as if we were actually hit.

Sympathy and empathy are often confused. Sympathy is feeling *for* someone, while empathy is feeling *with* someone. A sympathetic response to the batter's injury might be, "Gee. That must really hurt." There's no personal identity with the other person's pain. Whereas an empathetic response would be Clintonesque, "I feel your pain," or "I know how that hurts."

Both sympathy and empathy can be valuable responses in certain circumstances. But Brené Brown believes empathy fuels connections among us, while sympathy drives disconnection. She says, "Sympathy gets in the way and is how we respond when we don't want to be vulnerable. Empathy is a choice, and it's a vulnerable choice because in order to connect with you, I have to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling." [RSA talk on Empathy, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw)] With sympathy, we can keep a safe distance from the emotion. And too often we try to make the person feel better because we don't want to feel what they're feeling.

When someone is grieving a loss, I sometimes fall into sympathy mode. I want the person to feel better. I feel the need to *do something* to help, maybe even solve whatever's troubling the person. But that makes my response *about me* and not the person I'm with. It doesn't allow the person to be seen and heard for where *they* are in that moment. Instead, what may be most helpful is for me to simply be there with the person, acknowledging their feelings, and perhaps simply holding their hand, communicating, "I'm with you."

Brown suggests that it's not what we say or do that makes someone feel better. Our *connection* with the person makes it better. And even when we can't imagine what the person is feeling, we can respond empathetically, such as, "I don't know what to say, but I'm glad you told me."

Sometimes when we have Joys and Sorrows in our service, someone may share something incredibly painful. And then there's silence. We don't always know how to respond in this public venue, while privately we may know exactly what to do. During a service, we do thank you for sharing and our hearts go out to you, but we're better at communicating that one-on-one. During Joys and Sorrows we assign that role to me and the worship assistant standing beside you.

We humans live in community, we're social creatures. We in this UU community desire healthy connections, even when it isn't easy. Our sometimes awkward response to Joys and

Sorrows reveals our struggle. But we keep at it because we know it matters. We covenant to be with one another as members of this Fellowship. Therefore it behooves us to build up our capacity for empathy. The more we try to walk in another's shoes, the more easily empathy becomes.

As in any community, we may not like everyone we encounter here. Personalities clash, even when we share the same goals. Sometimes we offend or hurt another by an unthinking or unkind remark. Sometimes we make categorical statements that dare anyone to disagree with us, and therefore do not encourage an equal exchange of experience or understanding that could build a connection. But if we use our imaginations to consider the feelings of another, we might become more thoughtful and considerate in our relationships here, or with our families, our workplaces, our schools, and elsewhere.

Relationships lie at the center of what creates a civil society. Today, our world seems more focused on people's differences than our similarities. Our world seems more concerned with declaring our viewpoints and beliefs and shutting down respectful sharing of feelings and experiences. Civil discourse could be improved if we tried to put ourselves in another's shoes more often.

I'm trying to walk in the shoes of an urban, young black man in America today. I'm trying to walk in the shoes of a person whose drug addiction has led him to lose everything and live out on the streets. I'm trying to walk in the shoes of a person whose parents came to America without proper documentation, making their children fugitives in the only country they've ever called home. I'm trying to walk in the shoes of a policeman who fires at an unarmed man running away after being stopped for a traffic violation. I'm trying to understand and feel what these people's lives must be like. But I don't think I can fully walk in any of their shoes if I stay at a distance from their lives.

As I watched the rioting that took place in Ferguson or Baltimore, I realized how different my white middle-class life has been from theirs. That knowledge compels me to listen to their experiences, feelings, and stories. I have to be with them so I can understand how our country arrived at this particular place of distrust and disconnection and so I can help build trust and connection. Empathy is not just for friends in pain; it's for a country in pain, too.

Greater empathy might end our political stalemate by encouraging compromise. Collaboration and civility could be rise as aggression and bullying falls. When we know what it feels like to be frightened, bullied or hurt, we can stand up and stop it when we see it happening to others.

The summer before I moved to Athens I enrolled in an Interim Ministry training workshop in Boston. In one particular exercise the instructor asked us to think of a person we don't particularly like or get along with. I imagine within this congregation or in some other aspect of your life, there's someone who rubs you the wrong way. Maybe you can identify why, but often it's hard to know just what it is about that person that sets you off. We all know someone like this, right?

Although she never used the word empathy, the instructor asked each of us to create a new

connection with this person by taking the time to meet and ask the person to tell a story about their life. Our job was to actively listen and get to know the person. And that empathetic listening to another person's story creates a connection that changes how you or I relate to that person. When we open the door to another person's heart and listen with our full heart, we will never see them the same again. Try this with a loved one, as well as the one you struggle to like.

Before I close, I should say that empathy is not just for the sad or painful times. Happy, joyful feelings can be shared and experienced by others just as meaningfully. And if you know someone has particularly struggled to get to that point of celebration, it makes a shared joy even greater.

And that's why, though I'm happily married to the man of my choice, I will celebrate with profound joy if the Supreme Court rules that all people may marry the person of their choice, no matter what their gender or identity and no matter what state they live in. The equality struggle for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer folks has been too long and too filled with pain and disrespect. Too many have refused to understand or empathize with people whose life stories differ from their own. So, whether you identify as gay or straight or something else, I hope you'll join me here on June 30<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 pm to "Celebrate Love!" And if the Supreme Court decision is not what we hope, we'll join in community to recommit ourselves once more to this justice work.

May we see with the eyes of another, listen with the ears of another, and feel with the heart of another. And may our feet always be ready to walk in another's shoes.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Share a time you wished someone understood how you felt, such as when your feelings were hurt or during a disagreement with a friend.
2. Do you easily feel empathy for different people in different situations from your own? Is it really possible to 'walk in another's shoes'? Why or why not?
3. What are some things you do (or could do) to listen better or understand another more fully?