

Talk on the Charter for Compassion

Claire Morgan, July 2010

Before the talk started, I handed out copies of the Charter for Compassion, which follows. The reference list at the bottom of this document lists the Charter for Compassion website and all the texts that I mention.

Charter for Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women ~ to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

charterforcompassion.org

Introduction	<p>To start off I might ask you how you would define compassion? One definition is that it is the use of empathy to put ourselves in the shoes of others. Or to put it another way, we could paraphrase the Golden Rule from the Talmud, and say 'act towards others the way you would want others to act towards you'. Very similar sentiments are expressed in many different holy texts from the world's religions.</p>
Background on the Charter	<p>The Charter for Compassion is an international multi-faith initiative supported by representatives of all the world's major faiths and spiritual traditions as well as many secular or social justice groups.</p> <p>The Charter stems from the efforts of Karen Armstrong, who is a religious historian. In her work, Karen has studied many of the world's religions after she herself had had a crisis of faith and left a former life as a Catholic nun. As a historian she has spent a lot of time looking at the way in which beliefs and religions evolve, and their social and historical context.</p> <p>More and more it dawned on Karen Armstrong that at the heart of all the worlds religions lay this common value of compassion. She became well known after Sept 11th 2001 when she was frequently interviewed by the media on the rise of fundamentalist Islam. At that time she worked hard to show that Islam in general wasn't a violent religion.</p> <p>So Karen realised that not only was compassion at the heart of the world's faiths but that there was an urgent need for this shared focus to be nurtured, supported, promoted in order for there to be peace. As a result of her work over the years, she won a prize at TED 2008 in the US to help her promote this idea and thus the Charter for Compassion was born.</p> <p>The words you have in front of you that make up the Charter for Compassion were the result of a consultative process.</p>
Central question	<p>I doubt that many of us would disagree with Karen Armstrong that it is good to act compassionately. I guess there would be some differences of opinion around the wording of this Charter, but probably not with its overall sentiment.</p> <p>So today I would like to ask you 'How we can cultivate or nurture compassion in ourselves and in the world?'</p>
My thoughts	<p>Before I invite your comments I will mention a few thoughts of my own. They come under three main headings: being compassionate towards oneself, being true to oneself, and choosing to act.</p> <p>Self as starting point</p> <p>The relationship between self and other is important in determining one's capacity for compassion. I read some lines by the poet Alexander Pope in a book by Stephanie Dowrick. Pope envisioned compassion as a series of concentric circles rippling outwards:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake, As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake</p>

Friend, parent, neighbour first it will embrace
His country next, and next all human race.

Stephanie Dowrick says 'Until you are at home in your inner world and self-aware enough to trust that you can generally behave with reasonable consideration toward yourself and others (building self-esteem and self-acceptance) it is difficult to love others except in fairly limited or self-seeking ways' (1991, p.198). Similarly, Thomas Moore affirms in his excellent book *Care of the Soul* that one needs to nourish one's own soul in order to feel a deep attachment to the rest of the world.

Writer Marc Barasch's book *The Compassionate Life* is an exploration of compassion in practice and I really enjoyed reading it. This excerpt, which opens with a reflection on the Christian saint Francis of Assisi, relates to this idea of the interconnectedness of self and other.

Saint Francis went beyond mere charity. The son of a rich clothier, he gave up wealth and privilege to dress in rags and hang out with lepers. This was taking kindness to an extreme few of us would find attainable, let alone remotely appealing. Bu compassion has a certain down-and-dirty quality and a more than casual familiarity with the soul's darker, draftier labyrinths.

At its root meaning of 'to suffer with', compassion challenges our tendency to flinch away from life's too-tender parts, whether those parts belong to us or to others. I know this much: when I acknowledge my own pain, I am much less squeamish about drawing nearer to yours. After a bad sprain and tie spent on crutches, I became more sympathetic to those who hobble with canes and walkers.

Perhaps Saint Thomas Aquinas was not so far off when he claimed that no one becomes compassionate unless he suffers. I take this less as a mandate for medieval masochism than a call to embrace our own actual experience. (2009, p.7).

So how does this relate to the Charter for Compassion? I would suggest that we need to be compassionate to ourselves first, in order that we may then be compassionate towards others. If compassion is 'to suffer with', we need to be aware of our own pain and hurt, spend time with it, accept it and then seek both wholeness (whether through reconciliation, acceptance, healing, forgiveness) but also the chance to learn from it. To me the wording of the Charter could perhaps reflect this need for 'self-compassion' more strongly, and I feel it certainly should be taken into account by those who promote the Charter as a basis for action in the world.

To thine own self be true

So now I come to my second point, that in order to act compassionately it is necessary to be true to oneself.

On a personal level, I feel like I have learnt this, if not the hard way, then maybe the long way. When I was growing up I felt a strong desire to help others, to make the world a better place. So I tried my best to do this in various ways around the world, and although I found much of this absorbing and fulfilling to a point, I never felt completely 'right' about any of my efforts, or that I had found my vocation. I now see that my desire to help others

was pretty disconnected from any kind of self-awareness. As a young adult I never spent any time thinking about what would nurture me, or what I really wanted deep down. In fact, it seemed to me that my feelings didn't matter, my hard times didn't matter because they were nothing compared to the sufferings of all those millions with insufficient food or dirty water or war around them. So I see now that I wasn't really at home in my inner world. I was outward focused and wasn't watching my inner compass. These days I feel more in touch with the truth of myself, but no doubt have much to learn.

As the years pass I find that I am more and more sympathetic to the idea that in the end, we are all one, part of a complex but interconnected life system. Various scientists, environmentalists and religious teachers have put forward this concept over the years, and we don't have time to delve into it in detail here here.

However I mention this idea now, because if we are all one, this has implications for the way I as a compassionate being try to enact this compassion in the world. As a contrast to my rather self-absorbed teenage self, I don't have to in an egotistical sense take it upon myself to save the world. Instead, I can think of myself as being able to contribute to this one organism or system, bringing my own unique gifts. Perhaps there's a paradox here; we are all the same, but we are all different with unique strengths, passions and perspectives.

If we relate this to the Charter, we can affirm that there's one no right way to be compassionate, but that our approach should be attuned to our gifts, or our passions. There's an intrinsic diversity about life on Earth which I love. So in that sense, I think that a Charter which calls us under one banner to support compassionate action, needs to bend around the edges and be welcoming of many different perspectives.

It is important then to tread a path of discernment or a sensing of our vocation. Of course there's a whole personal development or self help movement in the world today focused around helping people find fulfilment, happiness or love. It may have become decoupled the self with the other. I do believe that as St Francis said, it is in giving that you receive. There is much potential for fulfilment in doing what you love in a spirit of service.

Choosing to act

We live in a world of light and shade, where each day terrible things happen, and wonderful things happen. People abuse each other, steal, cheat. People fall in love, teach their children to swim, take food to a sick neighbour. To be compassionate we need to live reflectively and make a positive choice to act, knowing that there are many many things beyond our control, but also many things that we can influence for the better.

Theologian Richard Holloway's book *Between the Monster and the Saint* focuses around the idea of the forces that shape the world and us and our lives. Drawing on the writing of Simon Weil, Holloway differentiates between the forces that have shaped our lives that are totally beyond our control and those forces that we can influence and impact. This excerpt comes at the end of the book and as well as being a beautiful piece of writing, it reminds us that each action has a consequence, that we can choose to act positively or negatively.

The day after the assassination of Robert Kennedy I took the train from Los Angeles,

	<p>where he had been shot, to Flagstaff in Arizona. The summer of 1968 was a turbulent and violent episode in American history. The Vietnam war was at its height and the mood in the country was jagged and angry. Like everyone else that day, I was in a pensive mood as I gazed out the window of the speeding train. I picked up the book on my lap, Arthur Koestler's <i>Darkness at Noon</i>. The epigraph came as a gift that calmed my spirit. It was from Dostoevsky: 'Man, man, one cannot live quite without pity.' If my book has one single message this is it: though I prefer the stronger word empathy, the ability not only to feel <i>for</i> the afflicted, but to feel <i>with</i> them. It is the only possibly remedy for the knowing and unknowing cruelty we do against ourselves and the other creatures with whom we briefly share the earth. One cannot live quite without pity. However I do not want it to be my last word. My last word has to be gratitude, gratitude for being, gratitude for the fact of a street corner at all. It shows ingratitude and a lack of imagination to spend the life we've been given stamping literally or metaphorically on the lives of others, or sneering contemptuously at how they have chosen to make sense of theirs. It is a harsh world, indescribably cruel. It is a gentle world, unbelievably beautiful. It is a world that can make us bitter, hateful, rabid, destroyers of joy. It is a world that can draw forth tenderness from us, as we lean towards one another over broken gates. It is a world of monsters and saints, a mutilated world, but it is the only one we have been given. We should let it shock us not into hatred or anxiety but into unconditional love. (2008, pp.169-170)</p> <p>I find Holloway's words extremely powerful as well as true to my life experience so far. On a similar note, there is a Buddhist teacher in Velcrow Ripper's documentary <i>Fierce Light</i> who asks 'Are you able to say "This is a beautiful day and thousands of kids died today of preventable diseases"? We need to hold both of those certainties at the same time.' I find this a powerful challenge that has stayed with me since I saw the film, in ways I can't quite explain it has helped me remain engaged when news of tragedies round the world makes me feel useless.</p>
Conclusion	<p>So at this point I'd like to ask for any thoughts you have. How we can cultivate or nurture compassion in ourselves and in the world?</p> <p>I suggest that we can nurture compassion by balancing paying attention to the balance and interplay between self and other. We need to nurture ourselves, to know ourselves, to really feel our own pain in order to empathise with others.</p> <p>It seems to me that we need to be true to ourselves use our gifts and our strengths and we need to undertake certain discipline to choose to be compassionate. Being compassionate is to see the beauty and the ugliness of life, to not shrink from the difficulty and the pain but to choose again and again to act out of love rather than fear.</p>

Reference List

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Australian Charter for Compassion site: charterforcompassion.wordpress.com

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(To see a great animate which summarises Rifkin's thesis go to YouTube and search for 'RSA animate empathic civilisation'.)