

Overview of 12 Steps to a Compassionate Life

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In 2007, Karen Armstrong won a prize from the Technology, Entertainment, Design organization. This organization awards prizes to people they feel have made a difference in the world, but could have an even greater impact with their help. Armstrong was awarded \$100,000 for this purpose. She determined that the impact she decided to make was to build a world community, where people would live together in harmony, with mutual respect for one another. She felt religion should theoretically be a major contributor toward this goal, but instead appeared to be seen as part of the problem. All faiths state that compassion is the true test of spirituality, and all have some version of what we have come to know as the Golden Rule: to treat others the way you wish to be treated. Her concern is about the polarization so prevalent today. To further her goal, she brought together thousands of people from throughout the world to draft a charter on a multilingual website. Their comments were then submitted to a Council of Conscience, made up of well-known leaders from six faith traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The group met in February, 2009 in Switzerland and composed a final version as follows:

“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 compels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center 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 empathetically 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 center 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.”

This charter was commenced November 12, 2009, in sixty different locations throughout the world and was enshrined in synagogues, mosques, temples, and churches as well as a number of secular institutions.

The book, *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life*, was written by Karen Armstrong to further this purpose. What follows is based on that book.

The first step is to learn about compassion. This involves learning to retrain our responses and form mental habits that are kinder, gentler and more compassionate. It is important to explore your own religious background to discover what teachings are about compassion. That way, the whole idea of compassion will be more familiar to you.

The second step is to look at your own world. Confucius believed that everyone should behave away from home as though you were in the presence of an important guest. Deal with the common people as though you were officiating at an important sacrifice. Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no feelings of opposition to you, whether it is the affairs of a State that you are handling or the affairs of a family. There would be no destructive wars if a ruler behaved toward other princes and states in this way; the Golden Rule would make it impossible to invade somebody else’s territory because nobody would like this to happen to his own state. Confucius saw each person at the center of a constantly expanding series of concentric circles of compassion. The lessons he had learned from taking care of his parents, his wife, and his siblings would educate and enlarge his heart so that he felt empathy with more and more people: first with his city or village, then with his state, and finally with the entire world. We must look at our community with compassion, estimate its strengths as well as its weaknesses, and access the potential for change. Creating a compassionate family life is one of the ways in which we can all make a constructive contribution to a more empathetic society in the future.

The third step is having compassion for yourself. Compassion is essential to humanity. We have a biological need to be cared for and to care for others. But it is not always easy to love ourselves. The golden rule requires self-knowledge; it asks that we use our own feelings as a guide to our behavior with others. If we treat ourselves harshly, this is the way we are likely to treat other people. So we need to acquire a healthier and more balanced knowledge of our strengths as well as our weaknesses. Before we can make friends with others, we have to make a friend of our own self. We need to recognize that we all have a dark side. If we are unable to accept our shadow, we are likely to take a harsh view of the darker side of others.

Suffering is a law of life, and it is essential to acknowledge our own pain or we shall find it impossible to have compassion for the distress of others. The vivid memory of painful times past is a reservoir on which you can draw when you try to live according to the Golden Rule. By remembering your own sorrow vividly, you will make it possible for yourself to feel empathy with others.

The fourth step is empathy. Aristotle believed that tragedy educated the emotions and taught people to experience them appropriately. As he watched the drama unfold, a small-minded person would see his own troubles in perspective and an arrogant person would learn to feel compassion for the unfortunate. Purified, drained of their dangerous potential, the emotions could thus become beneficial to the community. The art of the dramatist enabled the audience to achieve an expansion of sympathy, so that they had a taste of the immeasurable power of compassion. Tragic drama reminds us of the role that art can play in expanding our sympathies. Plays, films, and novels all enable us to enter imaginatively into other lives and make an empathetic identification with people whose experiences are entirely different from our own. Imagination is crucial to the compassionate life. A uniquely human quality, it enables the artist to create entirely new worlds and give a strong semblance of reality to events that never happened and people who never existed. Compassion and the abandonment of ego are both essential to art: it is easy to spot a poem, a novel, or a film that is self-indulgent or brittle with cruel cleverness. When a film makes us weep, it is often because it has touched a buried memory or unacknowledged yearning of our own. Art calls us to recognize our pain and aspirations and to open our minds to others. Art helps us—as it helped the Greeks—to realize that we are not alone; everybody else is suffering too.

Our pain can become an education in compassion. Some people deliberately steel their hearts against involvement with other people's suffering. During this step, we should be aware of our initial reluctance to engage. We don't want to listen to the sad story that a colleague is telling us. We feel that we have enough to deal with and push her troubles from our mind. We can be irritated by somebody's bad mood instead of asking ourselves why she is depressed. We hurry past the homeless man outside the supermarket, refusing to allow his plight to disturb our equanimity. But when this happens, it is time to draw upon everything you learned in the last step and recall your own past distress. Remember the things that help you when you are having a bad day—a kind word, a smile, and a joke—and try to give that gift to a testy colleague. Remember what it is like to feel alone with sadness and take the trouble to listen to your friend's tale of woe.

The fifth step is mindfulness. The purpose of mindfulness is to help us detach ourselves from the ego by observing the way our minds work. Mindfulness is a form of meditation that we perform as we go about our daily lives and is designed to give us more control over our minds so we can reverse ingrained tendencies and cultivate new ones. A calm, dispassionate appraisal of our behavior helps us to become aware that our judgments are often biased and dependent on a passing mood, and our endless self-preoccupation brings us into conflict with people who seem to get in our way.

The sixth step is action. One small act of kindness can turn a life around. We can all create small acts for others. Try to think of spots of time in your own life, moments when somebody went out of his or her way to help you. Also consider the effects of unkind remarks that have been a corrosive presence in your mind over the years. We need to become aware that our impulsive words and actions have consequences. Apply the insights you gain in the practice of mindfulness in your daily dealings with others, shielding them from your destructive tendencies and trying to lighten their lives with acts of friendship.

The seventh step is to recognize how little we know. All too often people impose their own experience and beliefs on acquaintances and events, making hurtful, inaccurate, and dismissive snap judgments, not only about individuals but also about whole cultures. It often becomes clear, when questioned more closely, that their actual knowledge of the topic under discussion could comfortably be contained on a small postcard.

The pursuit of knowledge is exhilarating, and science, medicine, and technology have dramatically improved the lives of millions of people. But unknowing remains an essential part of the human condition. Religion is at its best when it helps us to ask questions and holds us in a state of wonder—and arguably at its worst when it tries to answer them authoritatively and dogmatically. When we cling to our certainties, likes, and dislikes, deeming them essential to our sense of self, we alienate ourselves from the great transformation of the Way, as Confucius put it, because the reality is that we are all in continual flux, moving from one state to another.

The aim of this step is threefold: (1) to recognize and appreciate the unknown and unknowable, (2) to become sensitive to overconfident assertions of certainty in ourselves and other people, and (3) to make ourselves aware of the numinous mystery of each human being we encounter during the day.

The eighth step is “How should we speak to one another?” Dialogue is one of the buzzwords of our time. There is widespread conviction that if only people would enter into dialogue, peace would break out. But there is very little Socratic dialogue in the world today. Plato described the dialogue as a communal meditation that was hard work requiring a great expense of time and trouble, but he insisted that it be conducted in a kindly, compassionate manner. It would not bring transcendent insight unless questions and answers are exchanged in good faith and without malice.

We should make a point of asking ourselves whether we want to win the argument or seek the truth, whether we are ready to change our views if the evidence is sufficiently compelling, and whether we are making place for the other in our minds in the Socratic manner. Above all, we need to listen. All too often in an argument or debate, we simply listen to others in order to twist their words and use them as grist for our own mill. True listening means more than simply hearing the words that are spoken. We have to become alert to the underlying message too, and hear what is not uttered aloud. Angry speech in particular requires careful decoding. We should make an effort to hear the pain or fear that surfaces in body language, tone of voice, and the choice of imagery.

The principle of charity and the science of compassion are both crucial to any attempt to understand discourse and ideas that initially seem baffling, distressing, and alien; we have to recreate the entire context to which such words are spoken—historical, cultural, political, intellectual—question them deeply, and, as the footnote on the science of compassion advised, drive our understanding to the point where we have an immediate human grasp of what a given position meant. With this new empathetic understanding of the context, we will find that we can imagine ourselves, in similar circumstances, feeling the same. In other words, we have to see where people are coming from. In this way, we can broaden our perspective and make place for the other. We can ignore this compassionate imperative only if we do *not* wish to understand other people—an ethically problematic position.

During this step, we try to make ourselves mindful of the way we speak to others. When you argue, do you get carried away by your cleverness and deliberately inflict pain on your opponent? Do you get personal? Will the points you make further the cause of understanding or are they exacerbating an already inflammatory situation? Are you really listening to your opponent? What would happen if—while debating a trivial matter that would have no serious consequences—you allowed yourself to lose the argument? After a contentious discussion, conduct a post-mortem with yourself. Can you really back up everything you said in the heat of the moment? Did you want to inflict pain? Did you really know what you were talking about, or were you depending on hearsay? And before you embark on an argument or a debate, ask yourself honestly if you are ready to change your mind.

The ninth step is a concern for everybody. We have a duty to get to know one another, and to cultivate a concern and responsibility for *all* our neighbors in the global village. Understanding different, national, cultural, and religious traditions is no longer a luxury; it is now a necessity and must become a priority. The stranger fills many of us with alarm. However, the process of globalization seems irreversible, and this means that whether we like it or not, our societies will become more multicultural. Like any major political or social transformation, this will be painful. Now that we are living side by side with people who may be at a different stage of the modernization process, there will inevitably be tensions as we seek to accommodate one another.

Listen critically to the voices in your own society that preach hatred or disdain of other national, religious, and cultural traditions. Is there not something disturbingly familiar about it? Do you hear the hauteur of the colonialist or the bigotry of the fascist in some of their arguments? A dehumanizing discourse that seeks to dominate a group often uses the language of disgust and contempt: this kind of thinking led to the enslavement and oppression of African and Native Americans, the Armenian genocide, the Shoah, apartheid in South Africa, the tribal wars in Rwanda, and the mass killings in Bosnia.

Make a habit of looking behind the headlines to the ordinary people who are affected by a crisis. Remember that they did not choose to be born into that part of the world. Like you, they simply found themselves in a particular situation and may have been forced to

conduct their whole lives in a context of violence, deprivation, and despair. We can no longer thrive at the expense of others. A practically expressed respect for the other is probably indispensable for a peaceful global society.

The tenth step is knowledge. The effort of getting to know one another demands sound information and a willingness to question received ideas. We need to make a serious effort to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge.

We begin with ourselves. We often have a myopic view of the history of our own country or religious tradition and criticize others for behavior of which we have been guilty in the past or even continue to be in the present. When we are about to criticize another nation or religious tradition, we should get into the habit of catching ourselves and asking whether our own country may have been responsible for a similar abuse in the past.

The eleventh step is recognition. During the previous steps, we have been developing a more sympathetic outlook, based on imagination rather than logic. Our work has revealed that we are not alone in our suffering, but that everybody is in pain. We have allowed our own unhappiness and the sorrow of other people to invade our consciousness. We have learned that we cannot put ourselves in a special, separate category. Instead, we have tried to cultivate a considerate attitude, reflexively relating our own pain to the distress of others. Instead of steeling ourselves against the intrusion of other people's pain, we should regard our exposure to global suffering as a spiritual opportunity to enter our consciousness and take up residence there. Extend your hospitality to them, and make place for the other in your life. It is a powerful way of developing concern for everybody. If a particular image speaks to you strongly, focus on it. There may be a special reason for this. Bring this image deliberately to mind at various times in the day. Summon it when you are feeling sorry for yourself—or during a moment of happiness, when you are filled with gratitude for your good fortune. Make a friend of the distressed person so that she becomes a presence in your life. Direct your thoughts of loving kindness and compassion to her.

If we hug the memory of our own grief to ourselves, we can close our minds to other people's wretchedness. The Golden Rule requires us to use our afflictions to make a difference in the lives of others. We cannot allow ourselves to feel paralyzed by the immensity of global misery.

Enmity shapes our consciousness and identity. The people we hate haunt us, they inhabit our minds in a negative way as we brood in a deviant form of meditation on their bad qualities. The enemy thus becomes our twin, a shadow self whom we come to resemble. Nations may also feel deep antagonism toward people they have wronged, and the enemy may become so central to national consciousness and identity that he becomes a second self. If we want to achieve reconciliation, not only do we have to struggle with the enemy, but we also have to wrestle with ourselves.

The twelfth step is to love your enemies. The Golden Rule teaches that “I” value my own self and my own tribe and nation as much as you do yours. The great sages who formulated it believed that if “I” made my personal and political identity and survival an absolute value, human society would be impossible, so they urged us all to yield to one another.

The Dalai Lama suggested that the concept of war has become outdated. Warfare is an integral part of human history, but it no longer makes sense in our global society. If we destroy our neighbors or ignore their interests, this will eventually rebound hideously back on ourselves.

Tyrants cause their own downfall because when a ruler tries to impose his will on other people, they automatically resist him, so a discerning ruler would resort to arms only with regret and as a last resort. There must be no triumphalism, chauvinism, or aggressive patriotism; he knows that he must bring hostilities to an end gently. Bring it to a conclusion, but do not boast; bring it to a conclusion but do not brag; bring it to a conclusion, but do not be arrogant; bring it to a conclusion, but only where there is no choice; bring it to a conclusion, but do not intimidate.

A wise ruler does not try to make the people what *he* wants them to be, but takes as his own mind the mind of the people. The only person who is fit to rule is the man who has overcome the habit of selfishness.

We can stop the vicious cycle of attack and counterattack, strike and counterstrike that we see in the world today only if we learn to appreciate the wisdom of restraint toward the enemy. We have witnessed the result of hard-line policies inspired by a righteousness that can see only the worst in the enemy. We have seen the danger of ruthless retaliation that drives people to despair, ignores their needs, and refuses to take their aspirations seriously. We have become aware that when people feel that they have nothing to lose, they resort to hopeless, self-destructive measures. Try to wish for your enemy’s well being and happiness; try to develop a sense of responsibility for your enemy’s pain. This is the supreme test of compassion. If you have the will and determination to overcome your own hatred, this can over time change your patterns of hostility, suspicion, and disgust. We are bound together with our enemies because we share the same predicament. Today some of the Israelis and Palestinians who have lost children in the conflict have come together, their suffering creating a bond that transcends political divisions, in order to work for peace. On the Indian subcontinent, Indians and Pakistanis, shocked by the terrorism they have both experienced, are campaigning together for peace between their countries.

When we feel cast down by our pain and by the misery that we see all around us, we should experience our dejection as a call to further effort. The mythos of compassion tells us what to do. Instead of becoming depressed by our repeated failures, we should remember that constant practice does indeed make perfect and that if we persevere, we too can become a force for good in the world.