

Building a Compassionate Community Vol. 36 n 9 James Bacik

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Recently the mayor of Toledo, Ohio, along with the Toledo City Council and the Lucas County Commissioners, signed the international Charter for Compassion, making our region part of a growing movement, initiated by the religious historian Karen Armstrong in 2008, to make the world a more compassionate place. In conjunction with the signing of the charter, the Multi-Faith Council of Northwest Ohio, led by Woody and Judy Trautman, recognized the charitable work of around ninety local organizations and honored a number of “heroes of compassion,” who are already living out the ideals of the Charter for Compassion. The challenge ahead is to coordinate and multiply these efforts during the next decade so the greater Toledo area will become a more compassionate place to live. In short: We are a compassionate community in order to become one.

The path to a more compassionate community is obstructed by various difficulties. We have to deal with our own egos that seek center stage and have trouble recognizing the needs of others. There are those who think compassion is weak and ineffective in the real world. Our region has its share of turf wars and interest groups that hinder collaborative efforts. Bias and prejudice are all too prevalent and corrosive. In striving to be a more compassionate region, disappointments and failures are inevitable. Our challenge is to sustain the effort over the long haul despite all the obstacles. Let me suggest four principles of sustainability gathered around the key words: motivation, solidarity, virtue and collaboration.

Motivation. We need strong and deep motives to sustain the journey to a more compassionate community. Long ago, Aristotle taught that the best guide to an ethical life is the good example of virtuous individuals. If we want to become a more compassionate community, we should raise up compassionate persons as role models. We can start with the woman who started the worldwide compassion movement, Karen Armstrong. Born into an Irish family in England in 1944, Karen spent seven years in a convent, during which she finished a degree at the University of Oxford. After leaving the convent, she continued her studies at Oxford, writing a dissertation on the poet Tennyson, only to have it rejected by an outside examiner. With her hopes for a career teaching English literature dashed, she did some work in television, including a stint as an adviser for Bill Moyer’s public television series on world religions. In 1993, she published an important book, *The History of God*, which earned her international recognition. After the terrorist attack of 9/11, she lectured widely on Islam, countering the erroneous perception that it is a violent religion.

In 2008 a private nonprofit organization known as TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) gave her its annual \$100,000 award as well as help to pursue her dream of a more compassionate world. With this valuable assistance, Armstrong set up a multilingual website that collected thousands of comments on compassion, which were presented to a Council of Conscience, composed of notable individuals representing various faith traditions. Meeting in Switzerland in 2009, they composed the Charter for Compassion that called for restoring compassion to the center of morality and religion. With this goal in mind, Armstrong has travelled around the world encouraging individuals and communities to adopt the Charter, now signed by over 100,000 people and thirty-five cities, including Seattle, Louisville, and Toledo. In 2010, Armstrong published *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, which contains the Charter and many practical suggestions for implementing it. Karen Armstrong, an Apostle for Compassion, encourages us to commit ourselves to a sustained effort on behalf of a worthy cause.

Some of the most revered individuals around the world have been great proponents of compassion: Mohandas Gandhi, who used non-violent strategies to free his country from colonial rule; Martin Luther King, who opposed the Vietnam war because his love of neighbor extended to Vietnamese peasants; Mother Teresa, who helped the poorest of the poor on the streets of Calcutta to die surrounded by loving care; Nelson Mandela, who invited his often cruel jailers to sit in the front rows for his inauguration as President of South Africa. In the lives of these luminaries, we find compelling examples of compassion, which can trigger our own idealism and strengthen our own commitment to serving others.

It also helps to notice and celebrate the compassionate deeds of our family, friends and neighbors, ordinary people, who, at times, set aside their own needs and interests in order to attend to others who are suffering. Sometimes the good example of ordinary people, who earn no public acclamation, can be a more powerful motivator than the mighty deeds of the giants.

The world religions have an inherent power to induce and support long term commitments. At their best, they reject violence and support compassion. They all have resources that foster compassionate practices: The Chinese Wisdom tradition embraces the Golden Rule first enunciated by Confucius, that we should not do to others what we do not want done to us; Hinduism celebrates the tradition of non-violence; Buddhism teaches the importance of both wisdom and compassion in living an enlightened life; Judaism recognizes the divine call to care for the widows, orphans and aliens; Christianity commands love of neighbor; and Islam enjoins almsgiving as an essential element in doing the will of Allah. To our list of motivating worldviews, we should add the secular Enlightenment ideal of benevolence for the less fortunate. All of us should look to our own tradition for enduring motivation. Christians, for example, can reflect on Jesus, who told us to be compassionate as our Heavenly Father is compassionate (Lk 6:36), and who lived this ideal by sharing meals with outcasts, healing the sick, and forgiving sinners.

Solidarity. Genuine compassion is rooted in the conviction that we are all members of one human family. What binds us together is more important than what divides us. We all share a common human nature that has an intrinsic value and worth. As inhabitants of spaceship earth, our lives intersect and our fate is common. When one person suffers, we all suffer; when some human beings thrive, we all flourish. Since we live in solidarity with all humans, we have a responsibility to treat one another compassionately.

In his book *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, Robert Coles, a Harvard professor of psychiatry, describes his meeting in the early 1950s with Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement. Arriving at the Catholic Worker house of hospitality in lower Manhattan, Coles waited nearby while Dorothy was engaged in a lengthy conversation with a poor woman who was obviously drunk. During a lull in the conversation, Dorothy came over to him and asked: "Are you waiting to see one of us?" For Coles, the phrase "one of us" epitomized Dorothy Day's solidarity with the poor. This most interesting and influential American Catholic, who lived in close contact with the poor for over thirty years, invites us to speak in inclusive language of those who are suffering. For example, some of us in this community are living below the poverty line. Some of us are suffering from addictions. Some of us are unemployed and cannot find a job. Some of us are financially comfortable, but are suffering from spiritual deprivation. The language of solidarity is inclusive, reflecting the deepest truth that we are all equal members of one human family. A healthy sense of solidarity grounds an ongoing commitment to act compassionately toward those of us who are hurting and needy.

Virtue. A traditional approach to living a good life is through the cultivation of virtues, which are habits or assured capacities to act in life-giving ways in changing circumstances. Virtues are like a second nature that enables us to do good with greater spontaneity and less internal resistance. We develop a virtue by practicing it consistently over a period of time and in various situations, until it becomes part of us, our normal way of acting, our spontaneous reaction to ethical challenges.

Our community becomes more compassionate as individuals develop the virtue of compassion. In turn, shared perceptions of the nature of compassion, typically inspired by religious traditions, influences the practice of compassion by individuals. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word depicting God's compassionate love has connections with the word for womb, suggesting that maternal love is a model for compassionate care for others. The Latin word for compassion means to suffer with, directing our attention to the empathetic character of compassion. Genuine compassion is not equivalent to pity, sympathy, mercy or tenderness. It is not benevolent or paternalistic charity, nor a sentimental feeling that romanticizes human suffering. Compassion is a richer notion, a higher ideal than the Golden Rule. In examining our conscience at night it is possible to say I did no harm to anyone today, but it is never possible to say I did all I could to make my world more compassionate. This high idealism rules out self-righteousness and complacency while encouraging us to value even small contributions to a more compassionate world.

Positively, the virtue of compassion inclines us to act in constructive ways: to be moved by the suffering of others; to take risks to help those in need; to participate in the struggles of those suffering from injustice and oppression; to live in solidarity with those of us who are less fortunate; to remain vulnerable to the immense pain in the world; and to empower victims of social sin to take hold of their own lives.

Compassion is a renewable energy source. We are not diminished by acts of compassion, but are enriched by them. The community becomes more vibrant when its members practice compassion. A compassionate community encourages more members to cultivate the virtue of compassion, building a sustainable momentum for the long haul.

Collaboration. In our region, many generous individuals already give time, talent and treasure to help the less fortunate. Numerous groups carry out specific compassionate activities: feeding the hungry, clothing the needy, visiting the homebound, liberating the addicted, supporting single mothers; tutoring students; building houses; providing legal assistance to the poor; counseling the distraught; and so many more. The community clearly benefits from all these compassionate efforts, but greater collaboration could multiply the positive results.

Dr. Dan Johnson, former president of the University of Toledo, has written an insightful book, *Toledo Vision*, which offers compelling arguments for greater collaboration as the key to economic, cultural and educational development in northwest Ohio. He points to the value of “meta-planning,” which takes into account the strategic plans of local groups, identifies common goals and strategies, and develops an encompassing plan. An effective plan fosters collaborative efforts that benefit the whole region while respecting the proper autonomy of local groups. Some type of meta-planning is crucial to the whole project of becoming a more compassionate region.

A compassionate community looking for ways to help the needy must be concerned with providing jobs and meaningful work. In his book *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, the Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle, describes his work with gangs in Los Angeles. With the help of generous people, he established Homeboys Industries, which provides jobs and training for young persons trying to escape from the hopelessness of gang life. Fr. Boyle summarizes his successful strategy in the aphorism: “The best defense against a bullet is a job.”

Creating jobs requires collaborative planning by various agents: city and county governments; corporations and labor unions; public and private schools; elected officials and civic leaders; affluent people and poor persons. We need wise and compassionate people working together to create jobs, especially for unemployed youth. Good ideas are floating around our community that need collaborative action: for example, building a vocational school in the inner city that offers job training as well as an advanced certificate, with job opportunities after graduation supported by an endowment fund created by public and private sources. A community committed to compassion can surely find creative ways of providing jobs that give hope to the poor.

We are a compassionate community in order to become one. We can sustain the effort to move in a positive direction by finding effective motivation, developing a sense of solidarity, cultivating the virtue of compassion and collaborating on practical solutions.