The Golden Rule

*All religions preach it, we’re all taught it, but how many of us live it? In this adaptation of her 2010 Meng-Wu Lecture at Stanford University, religious historian and compassion activist Karen Armstrong argues that living the Golden Rule is the key to our future.*

I love the endeavor taking place to encourage a scientific way of thinking about compassion, happening in places like the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education here at Stanford University. I also want to talk about a different kind of science of compassion. Years ago, when I was a young writer, I read a quote from the great Islamist scholar Louis Massignon, who said that a historian of religion should not approach the great spiritualities of the past solely from the standpoint of post-Enlightenment rationalism. Instead, he said, you should reproduce, in a scholarly fashion, the spiritual, social, intellectual, political, and economic ambience of the time until you had so broadened your perspective that you could imagine yourself in a similar circumstance, feeling the same way as people did then.

This is what Massignon called the science of compassion. It is science not in the modern sense, but science from the point of view of the Latin *sciencia*, the form of knowledge that is acquired through compassion. By putting yourself in the other’s place, he said, by putting yourself in their shoes, you “make place” for the other in your mind.

When I read that, I was immediately struck by this phrase—to make place for the other. It seemed to be the only authentic way to approach the study of religion. It transformed both my view of religion, and, essentially, my life. I noticed how seldom we make place for the other; how instead of entering into somebody else’s perspective, we tend to approach other cultures or peoples from a position of omniscience, imposing our own thoughts, feelings, and prejudices on them. I began putting my over-educated modern self on the back burner and entering into the minds and hearts of people living in the hell of seventh-century Arabia, or in India two thousand years before the birth of Christ.

What I have discovered through this approach, which is really a kind of mind training, is that every single one of the major world religions that I’ve studied—whether it is the Eastern traditions or the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—keep coming back to compassion. It’s not that all the religions are the same—they all have significant, interesting, and revealing differences—but they do agree on this: there’s something wrong with your spirituality if it doesn’t manifest in practical compassion.

Confucius was the first, as far as we know, to enunciate the Golden Rule. This was some five hundred years before Christ. His disciples asked Confucius, “Master, which of your teachings can we put into practice all day and every day? What is the central thread that runs through all your teachings?” And Confucius said *tsu*, “likening to the self.” You look into your own heart, discover what gives you pain, and then refuse under any circumstances to inflict that pain on anybody else. Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you. Confucius believed that if we did that consistently—all day, every day—then we would gradually leave ourselves behind, because compassion requires you to dethrone yourself from the center of your world and to put another there.

In one of my favorite Golden Rule stories from the Judaic tradition, the great Rabbi Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus, was approached by a pagan who promised to convert to Judaism on the condition that Hillel recite the whole of Jewish teaching while standing on one leg. Hillel stood on one leg and said, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah; everything else is only commentary. Go and study it.” Many of the things that we think essential to Judaism, such as the unity of God, the creation of the world, the exodus from Egypt, the 613 commandments, they’re all commentary on the Golden Rule. Go study it, said Rabbi Hillel; make it your reality.
Why do we find it so difficult to make compassion our reality? I did some reading on the neuroscience of compassion, and what I understood the science to say made a lot of sense to me, because I recognized it in myself. We’ve inherited a sort of reptilian brain from our distant ancestors, which still contains a lot of ferocious drives that helped our species survive. Often these drives are called the four Fs: fighting, fleeing, feeding, and… reproduction (laughter).

These drives are automatic, and they are powerful. If a lion suddenly ran into this theater, we’d be right to immediately abandon our high-minded deliberations and run for our lives. These drives are about survival, and they are all about “me.” When people were freed from the desperate struggle for daily survival that dominated the species for thousands of years and had the leisure to reflect upon their experience, they began to explore ways to enhance the more positive emotions of the so-called mammalian brain and put the four Fs in their place, to keep them under control. Because we have a duty to each other from our destructive impulses, whether that involves killing somebody or uttering an unkind word that remains lodged like a piece of ice in the heart for years to come.

These primitive drives can infiltrate anything, including religion. So how did people learn to train their minds to control these destructive impulses and promote positive emotions? The people of India were always in the vanguard of religious change, and in the seventh century before Christ, the Upanishads inspired a lifestyle that developed the more positive emotions. Yoga, a technique that the sages of the day were gradually devising, was a way of systematically taking the ego out of your thinking, so that you no longer saw things just from the perspective of “me.” These sages found that when you’re no longer seeing the world through the filter of your own fears and desires, people and objects reveal unexpected qualities.

But before you could even begin to sit in a yogic posture, you had to undergo a five-point program that was sort of an assault on the four Fs. Nonviolence was point one. That didn’t just mean that you couldn’t kill; you had to express affability and friendliness to all, even the most annoying monkey in the compound. Point two was feeding. Instead of just grabbing food and eating as much as you could, the aspiring yogi had to take whatever food was offered. He was not allowed to be avaricious. We’re not good at saying “enough”—our brains evolved for scarcity, and we’re not good at plenty. A lot of the economic problems we’re having now are because people can’t say “enough.” The aspiring yogi also forswore intoxicants and sex. He did this not because these are bad, but because they cloud the mind and would vitiate yogic progress. And until your guru was satisfied that all this was second nature, the yogi couldn’t begin even the simplest yogic exercise.

The Buddha, of course, was a past master of these practices who had studied energetically with all the leading yoga teachers of his day. He put himself through dreadful penances and nearly destroyed his health. Finally, just as he reached the end of his tether, a memory occurred to him—how when he was a small child his father had taken him to watch the ritual ploughing of the first field before the sowing of the harvest. His nursemaid had put him under a rose apple tree while she went off to watch the ceremony. The little boy saw that shoots of young grass had been ploughed up and the little insects clinging to these blades of grass had died. A pang of pure grief filled him, as if these insects were his own relatives. Then that feeling of sorrow and empathy was succeeded by a moment of joy, and even though he had never had a yogic lesson in his life, the little boy entered a state of trance.

Remembering this experience, the Buddha thought, “If I can reproduce those positive emotions—that moment of empathy, that pure joy in life that has nothing to do with my own needs and desires—if I can cultivate these positive emotions and gently put to one side the negative impulses that erupt within us all the time, then I will be working with my human nature to achieve nirvana.” And that’s what he did.

One of the practices that the Buddha taught was the meditation on love known as the four immeasurables. In this practice, you send out feelings of goodwill, loving-kindness, compassion, and unbiased love to all the corners of the farthest reaches of the world, not omitting a single creature
from your radius of concern. If you do this consistently, you make room for the other in your mind, and gradually the barriers you erect between yourself and the outside world come down. You experience, the Buddha taught, an expansive feeling of love, a release of the mind, and, ultimately, enlightenment.

Not omitting a single creature from our radius of concern—Chinese sages of this period also taught this principle, but were less interested in the psychological aspects of compassion and more interested in its social and political implications. In the fifth century BCE, Mo Tse said that everybody had to have jian ai, concern for everybody. That is sometimes translated as “universal love,” but that’s a bit emotive for the practical, pragmatic Mo Tse. He was living at the beginning of the era known as the warring states, when for a period of two hundred years or so the various states and principalities of China fought each other to the death until only one remained. Mo Tse said the only way to stop the Chinese from killing each other was to practice jian ai, concern for everybody. If you applied the Golden Rule, you would not invade another’s state because you wouldn’t like that done to you and your state. In war, harvests are destroyed, expensive horses and weapons ruined, and there are thousands of casualties, so there is no one to look after the fields. How, Mo Tse asked, could this benefit anybody? Today, with all our modern weapons, we also have to ask ourselves: How can war really benefit us?

Jesus, of course, took it so far as to say, “Love your enemies.” That teaching needs some context. Jesus was commenting on a text in Leviticus that said, “Love your neighbour,” and he extended that to “Love your enemy.” Leviticus was a legal text, and it was not talking about love as feeling or sentiment. Love was a technical term used in the ancient Near East in international treaties, in which two kings would promise to love each other. That meant they would look out for each other’s best interests, even if it went against their own immediate short-term interests, and be loyal and faithful to each other.

This is something we can all do with our enemies. Because, as Mo Tse said, if we don’t love our enemies in this way it will eventually rebound upon us. That’s what we’re seeing in our world today—bad karma has been sown in the past and some of it is coming back to haunt us. We are interconnected as never before, so that what happens today in Afghanistan or Gaza is likely to have repercussions tomorrow in Washington or London. Because we are not sealed off in a separate, privileged enclave, we have to consider the theme of others’ suffering, which all religions place right at the top of their agendas.

The central place of suffering is taught in the Buddha’s life story, in his determination to leave home, become a monk, and find a cure for the pain of the world. It is said that when he was born, his father the king held a feast and invited all the priests to come and tell the little boy’s fortune. One of these priests predicted that the young man would see four disturbing sights that would inspire him to leave the comforts of home and become a monk. This didn’t exactly fit his father’s career ambitions for his son, so he immured the little boy in a beautiful garden in a pleasure palace, and around it he planted guards to keep any disturbing sight at bay. Buddhism is a psychologically acute religion and this is a brilliant image of the mind in denial. We all want to keep pain at bay, to deny the pain in our own lives and endlessly put on a brave, cheery face.

But if we do that, it’s likely that we’ll dismiss the pain of other people too, and the Golden Rule requires us to recognize our own pain so that we will not inflict such pain on other people. Of course it’s futile to try to keep suffering out of our lives, and indeed it proved futile for the Buddha too. When he was twenty-nine, the gods decided he had lived in his fool’s paradise long enough. Four gods, disguised as a corpse, a sick man, a poor man, and a monk, slipped past the guards into the garden. The young man was so appalled by these sights that he left home that very night, determined to find an end to the world’s pain.

The purpose of this story, as in any mythos, is not simply to tell a charming tale. This story tells Buddhists what each one of them must do to achieve his or her own enlightenment. Your quest
cannot begin until you have allowed the pain that surrounds us on all sides to invade your heart and mind. In our modern world, we are deluged with images of pain—every night they are beamed into our homes on the evening news. Sometimes we just want to switch it off, but we should see this as a spiritual opportunity—this is the pain of the world entering our privileged enclave and breaking our hearts open.

Awareness of pain is an important part of the way that we develop a compassionate mind and heart. We need to recognize our own pain and to allow the pain of others to affect us—to enter into our lives and disturb our thoughts. The Greeks knew this. The Athenians were a warlike people but they had a uniquely tragic vision. In the fifth century before Christ, they annually performed tragedies in honor of Dionysus, the god of transformation, as part of a religious festival. Every citizen had to attend. The plays usually took one of the ancient myths and recast it to mirror the predicaments that Athens was then experiencing. The plays became a civic meditation on the plight of the city, of the polis, and periodically the leader of the chorus would turn to the audience and say, “Now weep.” And people would weep, because they felt that weeping together created a bond between human beings. They realized that they were not alone in their sorrow. It was jian ai—their sympathies were extended toward people whom they would normally not have given any room in their mind to.

It’s when we begin to equate our pain to the pain of others, particularly to the pain of the enemy, that we have the potential to override the selfishness, the prejudice, and the rage so prevalent in our world, and to see the divine spark that lies in every single one of us. We have a choice. We can emphasize those aspects in our religious traditions that speak of exclusion, dislike, disdain, contempt, and hatred, or we can emphasize the teachings that speak of compassion and making place for the other in order to make a better world.

Very often when religious leaders come together, they talk about some abstruse point of doctrine that everybody must believe, or condemn a specific sexual practice, or have a lengthy and often acrimonious debate over who can be ordained as a priest or bishop. I’m not saying that these are not important issues, but why don’t we hear more from religious leaders about compassion? With their teachings on the Golden Rule, it seems to me that religions should be playing a major role in one of the chief tasks of our times, which is to build a global community in which people of all persuasions can live together in peace, harmony, and respect. If we don’t achieve that, it’s unlikely in this age of global terror that we’ll have a viable world to hand on to the next generation.

It is vital to restore compassion and the Golden Rule to the center of religious and moral life. When I won the TED prize in 2008, I asked TED to help me create, launch, and propagate a Charter for Compassion* that would be composed by leading thinkers and activists in a range of major faiths. Hundreds of thousands of people contributed their ideas to a draft charter online, and with the aid of a council representing six of the major world religions, together we crafted the charter. It’s short, sharp, and essentially a call to action. Nonetheless, the work of compassion has to begin with ourselves. We cannot seriously ask our church leaders, our political leaders, or indeed our enemies to behave more tolerantly and compassionately if we ourselves give way to unexamined prejudice. The great Confucian sage Sunzi said that every single man and woman in the street has the power to become a sage—a compassionate, fully mature human being. It can be done; it must be done. Join us to work for a more compassionate world. Thank you.

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THE CHARTER FOR COMPASSION

THE CALL TO ACTION THAT IS INSPIRING PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD TO CAMPAIGN FOR A MORE COMPASSIONATE GLOBAL COMMUNITY.

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 center of our world and put another there, and to honor 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 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; and 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.

MORE INFO: The Charter for Compassion