

## Salt Ideas Essay #3: Leading from the Heart by Karen Armstrong

Syndicated from Salt, what follows is one of the Salt Ideas Essays: 15 pieces of expert thought leadership on the innovations and ideas that will change the world for the better. The golden rule of compassion is the key to a better, safer world for all, writes Karen Armstrong, OBE, inventor of the Charter for Compassion.

How can we respond creatively and realistically to the pain that we see everywhere in our world? We have been deluged with images of suffering from Paris, Pakistan, Nigeria, New York, and Palestine. We have witnessed thousands of migrants literally dying in their desperation to get into Europe. It is difficult not to feel helpless as we witness the widespread cruelty, poverty and injustice that human beings inflict upon one another. It is tempting to harden our hearts or to dwell only upon the suffering that we have endured. But this can no longer be an option.

Compassion is not emotional feeling of goodwill; it does not mean pity; it is rather the principled determination to put ourselves into the place of the other. One of the most urgent tasks of our generation is to build a global community, where men and women of all races, nations and ideologies can live together in peace. Sadly, religion, which should be making a major contribution to this endeavour, is often seen as part of the problem. Yet the founders of all the great traditions recoiled from the violence of their time and tried to replace it with an ethic of empathy and compassion.

Each world tradition has developed its own version of what has been called the Golden Rule – always treat all others as you would wish to be treated yourself – and insisted that this is the core of faith and the test of true religion, taking precedence over all other beliefs and practices; they have also insisted that we cannot confine our benevolence to those we find congenial. We must have what one of the Chinese sages called *jian ai*, “concern for everybody.” We are to honour the stranger, love even our enemies, and reach out to all tribes and nations. If practised assiduously – “all day and every day”, as Confucius said – we begin to appreciate our profound interdependence and become fully humane. We also learn to transcend the egotism and self-preoccupation that often causes us to injure others or to ignore their pain.

The Golden Rule calls us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain upon anybody else. If we wish to create a viable world order, we must try to implement the Golden Rule globally, ensuring that all peoples – even those who seem far removed from us – are treated as we wish to be treated ourselves. We must strive for a global democracy, in which everybody – not only the rich and powerful – has a voice and in which everybody’s needs, sufferings and aspirations are considered with the utmost seriousness and respect.

The great sages who promoted the Golden Rule were nearly all living during periods of history like our own, when violence had reached a terrifying crescendo. When the Bible commands that we “love” the foreigner, it was not speaking of emotional tenderness: in the legal terminology of Leviticus, “love” is meant to be helpful, loyal, and give our neighbour practical support. Today we are all bound together - electronically, economically and politically - as never before. Everybody has become our neighbour. Our financial markets are inextricably connected: when one falls, there is a ripple effect worldwide. What happens in Syria or Iraq today will have repercussions tomorrow in New York, Paris or London.

Yet we still find it difficult to live according to this reality. After the terrorist activities on the 13 November in Paris, Europe was - naturally - plunged into mourning. Yet the day before the Paris atrocities, some forty people had been killed by IS in Beirut and the Lebanese noted wryly how quickly their tragedy was forgotten. Nobody thought to fly the Lebanese flag alongside the tricolour. Some two weeks before the Paris shootings in January this year, 145 Pakistani children were killed by the Taliban; shortly afterwards, 2,000 men, women, children and the elderly were slaughtered by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Yet compared with the Charlie Hebdo tragedy, these atrocities received meagre coverage. Compassion is not an emotional feeling of goodwill; it does not mean pity; it is rather the principled determination to put ourselves into the place of the other. For many of the Syrian refugees who are desperately seeking asylum in Europe, the horrors of 13 November would have been an almost daily occurrence - yet the talk focuses all too often about how we can keep them out.

This myopia does not go unnoticed in the Muslim world. If we live according to the Golden Rule and pride ourselves on our humanity in the West, we cannot confine our sympathies to our own compatriots. If we want a peaceful world and to win the battle for hearts and minds, we have to learn that we are not the only people who suffer at the hands of extremism and reach out to our global neighbours with true empathy - and not just with bombs.

## LOVE NOTES

One of the most urgent tasks of our generation is to build a global community.

Practising compassion helps us to appreciate our profound interdependence.

What happens in Syria or Iraq today will have repercussions tomorrow in New York, Paris or London.

\*\*\*\*\*

Photo Credit: Ikhlasul Amal on Flickr.