

From Tolerance to Appreciation by Meghana Anand

MARILYN TURKOVICH is the current Executive Director of the Charter for Compassion, which provides an umbrella for people to engage in collaborative partnerships worldwide. In December 2019, she spoke with MEGHANA ANAND about the organization, its partners, and the work done through the Charter in different countries. Marilyn is an educationist-author and writes about world religions and cultures, bringing out their diverse and uniting threads.

MA: How did it all begin, your work with the Charter for Compassion?

MT: Well, I think it all started when I was a child from a hyphenated American family, in this case Croatian-American. I grew up in an immigrant neighborhood and experienced diversity first hand, through friendships and neighbors, and that kind of sparked how I felt about the world and the people in it. And that look of diversity continued, even when I went to college. The beginning part of my life was in Pennsylvania, in the eastern, middle Atlantic region of the US, and then I went to college in the South and experienced a whole other group of people. And to a certain extent I marched into a new part of history, because Martin Luther King at that time was really centered on his work in the South and was involved in programs in the Kentucky area where I too was involved. So, that's how it all started.

I went into education and went to Chicago, which was the hotbed of the Civil Rights Movement in the in the north at the time. As a matter of fact, MLK moved to Chicago for a while, so I got very involved with that. Maybe it was serendipitous, but there was also a bit of madness and planning attached to it as well.

MA: You have written a lot of educational content, books, curricula. Would you like to talk about that part of your work?

MT: I feel that I have two homes other than the United States. One is India, because I received a Fulbright-Hayes Scholarship early in my teaching career and found myself traveling through India and working on a book with two colleagues. We looked at the creations of India, so I got an incredible exposure to the people, the languages, the religions, certainly the arts and crafts, and the history. Somewhere along the line, I wrote another book with a colleague on the cotton industry in India, as kind of a supplement to education, to make the US Civil War understandable from a whole new perspective.

That was very important to me, and I've been back to India almost every year since, with different projects. I feel very much at home and certainly love the people and the vibrancy of India, and the phrase, "It's no problem." It permeates you when you hear it so much and you begin to see the way people interact with one another; in trying situations they can overcome problems.

And the other place I call home is Mexico. When you see the textiles in Mexico and those in India, you see the similarities, the colors, the vibrancy, the large number of indigenous people in both countries, and the ingenuity. It's just remarkable. In terms of curriculum writing, my students would laugh at me when they saw me carrying all these books, and they would warn me that I would get "curriculum elbow," like people get tennis elbow. But I feel that part of our responsibility is to understand the different perspectives that people hold and why they hold them. Understanding time, and space, and culture, is extremely important to really delve into the perspectives that other people hold, to begin a dialogue, and to understand people who are different from yourself.

MA: Beautiful! And that is pretty much what compassion is all about, isn't it?

MT: Yes, it is. I've not heard anyone say this, but I'm sure it's been said that compassion is acting in solidarity with other people. And when you act in solidarity with others, you take the lead from them, don't you? You don't come in and say, "I have the solution!" Rather, you explore collectively what that solution might be. Oftentimes, I feel that our own personal wisdom gets in the way of really being effective.

MA: How did your work in the field of compassion begin?

MT: That's a really wonderful question, and one that each person needs to reflect on throughout their life. I had incredible role models, primarily my grandparents. I was fortunate to be graced by them. Although I didn't live with them, my family lived very close by, and I think it was my grandmother who really taught us how to interact with others. And, as an immigrant family, my grandparents set the stage for being part of the community. Now that I look at it, I'm quite certain that they felt responsible for their community, and that there were always exchanges.

I remember that a close friend of the family died, and there were young children left behind without parents, because the other parent had already died. So my grandparents took them in. They added three new children to their family. I don't think there was any question of it happening. Another thing, here in the US after World War II, the importance of the unions was very predominant in our history, and so many of our families who worked in industry were in the unions. There was a shared responsibility for taking care of one another; health care was extremely important because we didn't have such stringent safety laws, and people often got seriously injured.

So the union was there, and probably personal responsibility and civic responsibility weren't much different. Now we live in a different age. We went through an age of individualism, and now I hope that we go back to one of participation, so that our voices are heard. In the US, the Person of the Year in Time magazine is a big thing. And today they announced it was Greta Thunberg. Hopefully, that's an introduction to a whole new era.

MA: How did the Charter for Compassion come about for you?

MT: In the early '90s, there was a documentary made called "Voices in Wartime," and I was asked to contribute by putting together a curriculum. The film was something of an archive in the arts for writing about war. So, I got involved with that, and the Charter had been going on simultaneously, and I was asked to be the Education Director in 2013. So, I thought I'd give it a try and started to do some work, and it just seemed like a perfect place for pulling together a lot of what I had been doing during my lifetime. That included

education and community organizing, having spent most of my adult life in Chicago, which was always a city very involved in this because of an individual named Saul Alinsky who ran an institute. People from all over would come to Chicago to learn about grassroots organizing, community organizing, and I was very much affected by the work that the institute was doing.

MA: What exactly is your role with the Charter? Now, you are the Program Director.

MT: Yes. I was the Executive Director for a number of years, and I decided that I wanted to step back into the role that I started with, because with the Executive Director's role you have a lot of fiscal responsibility, raising money, and keeping the whole operation going can be rather trying. I really love education and the work I have been doing with cities.

If you look at the front page of the Charter, there are three areas of emphasis. The first emphasis is the cities, to help them come up with a viable action plan to address some of their most severe and grave issues. The second is education, and so we've been trying to create education options that deal with compassion, working with very young children; also embracing the work of the legacy program of the Dalai Lama, SEE Learning. So, we're committed to introducing it to all our compassionate cities and beyond, because here's an opportunity for children to learn about values such as compassion and kindness, the value of responsibility towards others, secular ethics, socioemotional learning and emotional intelligence. We're also working in conjunction with Life University, Georgia, USA, to offer an online course in compassionate integrity training, and we're doing more of that face to face.

Those are of high interest, and then the next level is the projects and programs that address fulfilling our responsibility to future generations in terms of our climate and nuclear disarmament, as these are all important issues that we base our work on.

MA: How has the Charter been received since its inception in 2008?

MT: It was written in 2008, then launched in 2009 at the UN, so this is its 10th year. As an historical document, which it certainly is, it took some time for the creators to figure out what the direction was going to be. How would this document become a movement? It kicked into gear around 2013, when it went from being in the incubation of TED.com, which really embraced it, to an organization called the Fetzer Institute, and then to the Compassion Action Network, which was based here in Seattle. At the end of 2013 it became its own 501C3, but fiscally didn't turn over until 2014.

MA: So, how does the Charter work? How does it go about achieving its purpose at inception?

MT: It is very much a grassroots organization at the city level. For example, in India we have a small movement in Bangalore, and a much bigger movement in Pune, in Mumbai and Delhi, in the larger cities that are growing in leaps and bounds. It's almost always a concern for people who want to make a significant change, so in Pune, Delhi and Mumbai education is at the forefront of interest, and last year I went to India twice offering workshops and programs in schools and universities with business curricula. I did some work at the Management Development Institute outside Delhi, and SOIL, the School of Inspired Leadership, which has a master's program in business and community development.

So, it's different every time, wherever it might spring up. For example, yesterday, we

were at the Seattle Mayor's office because they were among the first to sign the Charter for Compassion in April 2010. There is an effort to reaffirm it, and come up with new points that they want to work on. Here in Seattle, it's homelessness and youth empowerment, and because this is a real mecca for technology and business, we want to really see what can be done to come up with compassionate business strategies - so that business becomes a responsible force in society. In Karachi, it's water sanitation, the empowerment of women, starting businesses, and of course education. So, it differs from community to city, wherever it might be in the world. We don't advertise. People contact us. It's very much about spending time talking and figuring things out. We use Zoom, and I'm on it from morning until late at night. We really rely on this platform daily.

MA: Can you tell us something about the Golden Rule?

MT: The whole thought about "Doing unto others as you would want them to do unto you" is the basis of every philosophy or religious premise. The language of the Golden Rule is emphasized in the Charter - you have to dethrone yourself and really pay attention to the needs of others. That, for us, is the Golden Rule.

MA: Would you mind elaborating on what you mentioned earlier on how our own wisdom can become a barrier? What do you mean by that?

MT: We all come to the table with our own personal history, our own likes and dislikes, and what we feel are ways to do something. I'm always quite amazed when I think I have a problem solved, and then when I open it up in our volunteer staff meeting and people give inputs I think, "Wow, those are incredibly good ideas, they expand things." I think what we have to do is to shelf our own declaration of what we think is the right way to do things and open it up so that there are inputs from others, and the most important input is grabbing hold of the concerns and ideas from people who are most closely associated with the problem.

Right now, in the US, we're going through a very long election process with debates; we have a number of people who are really very good candidates, and there are different nuances they have regarding some issues, healthcare being one. Sometimes, I think wouldn't it be great if a few top people who have different perspectives on the matter would get together and talk, and we could look at what are the most reliable plans that could help people. It's not going to happen, obviously, but you really do need to open yourself. You might want to say that it's compassionate listening and could lead to compassionate action. It's also compassionate questioning. Many people have lost the ability to formulate questions, and then, to listen to the responses to the questions.

MA: When I hear you sharing this, I feel the biggest thing that is separating one human being from the other, one race from the other, is this idea of looking at the same thing from different perspectives. As a representative of the Charter, how do you see these differences coming to an end in the future, a melding perhaps?

MT: Melding, yes, that's a good word for it. In a way, this question was raised yesterday by the city attorney in Seattle. You could tell that he's such a good man, who wants to do the right thing, and feels so criticized when he does what he believes is the right thing.

We have to begin the process of knowing ourselves a little bit better, and move from tolerating others to accepting others to acknowledging, and then appreciating other people.

In our very hectic society, I don't think we get much beyond tolerance, which is one of the lowest things we can offer to one another. That's why education is so important. It's education for the self, understanding how we operate, how we can be compassionate to ourselves, because if we have that experience then we can truly be compassionate towards others. We can learn a whole lot about the way of interaction with others.

And then to understand, and this is what Compassionate Integrity Training is all about. How do we operate in a system compassionately? For example, we can find that something happened within our school, our work place or an organization - somebody passed a rule, somebody put limitations on our environment, and we go into an immediate reaction. This would have been different 40 years back, but, in this day and age, we're not only confronting someone in a physical environment but also on every social media platform that we can think of, and this is just exacerbating the dilemma that we're in.

So, we need to step back from all of this, which seems almost impossible right now. But I think people are realizing that we're on a kind of tipping point and we do have to find some solutions to this dilemma we live in.

MA: And how would signing the Charter support this movement?

MT: Well, we can say, "Oh, we got another 10,000 to sign," and that's nice, but it doesn't mean anything unless people are committed to really following the words of the Charter, and seeing what they can do to make the world a better place in which to live. We have so many examples.

If we look at the UN's 17 goals for Sustainable Development, they are a very rough blueprint for us. They say this must be done, here's a situation, here are the reasons to do something, but they don't tell us and our communities to do this, this and this. That's for the community and the individual to decide. The water situation in India is so pressing, and certainly each person can do something, but it has to be millions of people doing these things and I do believe that we're capable of doing it. It takes us to fill in some of the side roads that need to be traveled.

MA: Is there something specific you would like to share with us at this stage?

MT: I wanted to find out about the Heartfulness organization. I think that one of the ways that the Charter works is to create a network, and to share, so, if we're in the same cities we can let our members know.

MA: So on your next trip to India, Marilyn, we would love to invite you to our center here in Hyderabad. It would be a very fulfilling collaboration.

MT: And I would love to introduce you to some of the key people in India with whom we work. I look forward to it. And I'll spend some time on your website to find out more. Thank you.

For more inspiration, join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Marilyn Turkovich, "A Teacher of Compassion and a Builder of Compassionate Communities." More details and RSVP info here.