

## The Cost of Compassion Book Extracts

### Extract 1: A compassionate life?

900 words

Looking back, I realise that the people I admired most, even as a kid, were the people who could be described as kind or compassionate. I aspired to be that kind of person.

My father, for example, could be a strict disciplinarian at home, and I often feared him. Yet there was another, surprising side to him. I knew he cared deeply about people. As a teacher, I remember him putting himself out for a widow, teaching her son in his own time. I saw the same quality in other men in our church, who would give up their Saturday to fix the gutters or fence for a neighbour who had suffered unemployment or separation. (The word my parents would darkly mutter was 'desertion'.) No fuss, no lofty words, just practical hands-on compassion. Financial generosity was unremarkable, disposed of with a 'don't you worry love, we'll fix up this bill.'

Sporting heroes aside, my childhood heroes were those who took risks to care for others. Often they were missionary doctors, nurses, and teachers who went to serve people in India or Africa and toil with the poor. They would come home on furlough and show their slides at our church, telling stories of helping people excluded from their communities because of leprosy or blindness or other disabilities. I heard stories of girls forced into early marriage and how education gave them a way out. I was riveted and inspired. Indeed, in my later teen years, when my school peers were aspiring to be businessmen or merchant bankers, deep down I wanted to be a missionary – not that I'd noisily announce that abroad at school.

I was drawn to ordinary Australians whose lives radiated compassion. They were on my radar. Something in their understated yet burning passion to serve the vulnerable struck me as the highest calling. I now recognise that their compassion left an indelible imprint on my life.

But I also understood intuitively that the whole business was complex. Within the religious circle that shaped me, compassion was the spiritual pinnacle, the highest prize – but it was not just natural and automatically there. It required formation and focus. Sunday sermons on the Good Samaritan or on Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew set a high bar: 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, naked and clothe you, or in prison and visit you? When you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.'

Looking beyond my own community, I could see that compassion was widely admired but also contested. Our experience of it is tricky. Who has not felt some inner conflict when walking past someone on our streets homeless and begging? Unless we have stifled all compassion, most of us wonder at times: do I make eye contact to acknowledge their humanity? But if I do, and I get drawn in, I'm faced with new dilemmas. Having seen a human face who has seen me, can I just walk on by? If I throw a few dollars, will it help or will it just feed an addiction? (And who carries cash these days anyway?) Should I stop and offer to buy them a coffee, or share a conversation that embraces our common humanity? After all, this is a fellow citizen, who as such has some claim on me.

These feelings are rarely resolved, and whatever decision we make there is no neat solution. Compassion is tricky!

And for me, this ambivalence has gone far beyond the local. I built a career on the hope that our universal esteem for the idea of compassion could translate into social and global renewal. But even when as CEO of World Vision Australia I was surfing the wave of the 'compassion industry', travelling to disaster zones in poor nations, I knew I would see both magnificent compassion pouring in and malicious malevolence

pouring out. Foreigners were moved by the plight of strangers and wanted to help them, yet locals could be untouched by their neighbours' pain and give in to corruption and self-interest.

I knew, too, the risk that the humanitarian cavalry riding in to fix things could often trample on dignity and local practices. We responded from compassion – but not pure compassion. We were also responding to our own needs and drives. Our need to be seen as compassionate; our need to be needed; our assumption that our systems of help were right and superior. An assertive 'take charge' mindset could displace being a humble presence. Relational compassion could easily be subsumed by professional competence.

Darkly, I often reflected that responding to a natural disaster is like an oil strike in our industry. The agile get there immediately and plant their brand flag, do some media to show that we're responding, mail out to supporters for help and start raising dollars. A disaster was the value proposition that attracted donations and kept the wheels turning. Compassion literally is the oil that greases the aid sector's wheels.

In short, compassion as a universal resource has remained an enigma. If compassion is so treasured, why is there still such conflict, inequality, and suffering in our world?

Why do the self-sufficient and well-off show such anaemic compassion levels? Why the compassion fatigue?

How deep do the roots of our compassion really go? How can we become more compassionate? And do we really want to?

## **Extract 2: Compassion fatigue**

*922 words*

The first time I was confronted by what I call utter human evil was in Darfur in 2004, in the desert areas of Sudan. World Vision flew me in and, driving through the bleakest landscape imaginable, I saw a horizon of tents emerge. Barely a tree remained in sight. The earth was flat, the sun bore down mercilessly. There were clumps of blown bush debris but little else.

I was taken to the registration area and introduced to the people in charge. Then I was able to talk via translator with several of the women (it was nearly all women and children). Their husbands and fathers had either been killed or had disappeared in the night to try to escape being rounded up. Many of the women had been raped and injured. I spoke with some who had lost children to malnutrition on the long walk to the camp. All the work of an Arab militia armed by Khartoum and known as the Janjaweed. It was human evil writ large.

I was only there for about four days. So many asked me to help them, to save their children. I felt utterly helpless. I knew that soon I would be escorted back onto a plane, and back in the comfort of my own home within a day or two. I could escape. I felt gutted by guilt at leaving people who saw me as their one forlorn hope.

By the time I got back to Melbourne, I had also contracted a bowel illness, so when the media contacted me I was not in a good state. Still, the burden of what I had seen, heard, and smelled weighed too heavily. I dutifully went off to front the waiting media. Somehow, a question cracked my professional veneer, and I felt tears down my cheek. It was all too much. Usually I could talk and cover my emotions – I can talk anywhere – but now I couldn't keep it all from overflowing. There I was, on national television, sobbing, unable to control my tears as I spoke of the horror unfolding in Darfur.

My illness lifted, but the emotion associated with that experience remained. I carried those memories with me, and at various times in the years since I have been unexpectedly overtaken by the same emotion – even on happy occasions, when what I am saying and doing is not at all congruent with my tears. It is as though there is a reservoir of guilt and impotence that remains within me from those days, and the walls I have built up around it spring a leak. It takes very little to trigger the stories I heard then, to make me wonder how those women are now and whether their children are alive.

Is this compassion fatigue or burnout? I don't think it is. Compassion fatigue has been called the negative cost of caring, and is common for those who work on the front lines of healthcare, child protection, or emergency response over a protracted period, as well as for those being a friend or carer to someone with a chronic illness. Symptoms that the emotional resources to continue engaging with such suffering have run dry include an inability to function in one's usual way, insomnia, anger flare-ups, and loss of concentration. This is a serious issue, and I know how important it is to build in respite for carers so that their reserves can be replenished.

What I experienced after Darfur, though, does not map onto this. I did not tire of going to places of need. I could absorb fresh traumas, organise assistance, do the work necessary to encourage others to respond. I still felt able to function in the face of the distress I witnessed. I think it was not compassion burnout but compassion 'burn in'. What I was seeing and hearing took me to a deeper level. Encounters like this both deepened the wells of compassion and moderated my expectations about what could be done to truly help.

I have found that the trick in life is managing expectations. Too high and you burn out, disillusioned; too low and you do not try hard enough. In Darfur, I learned the difference between what I think of as the hardware and the software of helping. For those women, there was no safe place. There was no village or home safe from the pillaging of the Janjaweed; forced out, there was no reliable water or food supply; there were few police and those were poorly paid and generally corrupt; and so here they were, stuck in a refugee camp in a desert. All of these wrongs needed fixing, but I could do so little.

But I could do something. People want solutions, but even more, they want to know that they are seen and heard. If technical relief programs are the hardware of compassion, the software is relationship – giving people dignity in the opportunity to tell their story. Having the patience to be there, to listen and to recognise that deep humanity and hope is birthed only in relationship. My faith tells me that simple presence is as important as aid solutions. I must look into someone's eyes and say: God knows your name and so do I. I know your story and I will tell others. You are not alone, whatever the intractability of this terrible situation.

I carry the grief and the lingering guilt from these encounters and many others. Compassion is costly. It cannot leave us where we were before.

### **Extract 3: Why compassion?**

*1057 words*

In 2006 I was in Mumbai, at the Taj Mahal Hotel (which two years later would become the focus of an attack by an extremist Islamist group in which at least 167 people were killed), giving a press conference with Adam Gilchrist, who was a World Vision Ambassador and was in Mumbai with the Australian Test cricket team. He had visited his sponsored child that day in a Mumbai slum.

I have never seen such an enormous press pack. Cricket seriously matters in India. But the main purpose was for Adam to explain why, for him, there are even bigger things in life than cricket, and to talk about

India's poor. He turned to me at one point to ask how many Indian children in poverty were sponsored by Australians. I said more than 4,000. He then asked World Vision India's National Director how many Indian children were sponsored by Indians. Awkwardly, he said it was less than 1,000. Adam was incredulous, saying to the press, 'I know how much wealth there is in this nation, and I see the poverty everywhere. This is surely not good enough.' Australians can be blunt! He added that he was going to speak to Sachin Tendulkar (an Indian cricket god) about why this was so.

He was right to ask the question. Part of the answer lies in the caste system which, while illegal under the Indian constitution, is religiously embedded in people's thinking. Karma, which is the law of cause and effect, looks at those from a lower caste who work in dirty jobs or as domestic servants and sees the explanation for their present suffering in the wrong choices they made in a past life. While a neat answer to the religious and philosophical challenge of suffering, the karmic picture of social fatedness is a serious block to compassion. It allows the Hindu rich to literally not see the beggar at the door of their mansion.

We all have a picture in our heads of what the world is like and how it works, even if it's an unconscious one. And this picture will tend to have either a nurturing effect or a withering one on our instincts of compassion toward others.

Albert Einstein, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, once wrote in a letter to a grieving father:

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the 'Universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

For Einstein, my sense of myself as separate from other people and objects is a 'delusion' – *actually*, if we could only realise it, everything and everyone is connected, and learning to feel and act in line with *that* reality is a moral imperative. Commitment to a picture like this one, whether it comes from a religious or a secular perspective, is necessarily a matter of faith. It cannot be proven.

This is clear too in one of the most influential modes of ethical thinking of our own time: utilitarianism. Not all utilitarian thinkers are atheists, and not all atheists are utilitarians. If, through the eyes of the atheist, the material universe is all there is and evolved human life is a kind of 'accident', then right and wrong are essentially human constructions. One option then could be to look at the natural world and see survival of the fittest and the dominance of the strong over the weak as the way things do and therefore should play out. But utilitarianism holds that, if we as humans experience pleasure as good and suffering as bad, the most ethical choice is the one that will produce the best outcomes for the greatest number of people.

The atheist and utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer is a leading exponent of the effective altruism movement, which is particularly concerned with applying rational measurement to the challenges of global poverty. It asks the question: How can we, individually and collectively, do the *most* good? Singer's book *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* sets a simple test: if you saw a child drowning in a pool, would you not plunge in – even if it meant ruining your nice clothes, for example – to save a life? If you would not hesitate to save the child in front of your eyes, why do we not see the life of the child living overseas in poverty and dying of preventable causes the same way? We can easily give out of our abundance to save the lives of others. Why would an ethical response extend only to those who are proximate and not to those who are distant?

Singer has certainly been one to live out his talk, giving away 30 per cent of his income each year to charities like Oxfam. His reasoning banks on that spontaneous instinct we all have to help the person

suffering right before our eyes, and then appeals to logic to extrapolate out to include more and more people in the circle of our compassion. Yet he accepts that his ethical notions of the good cannot arise from naturalism of 'what is'. A universe that lacks a compassionate God to impose order, meaning, and moral duty, has no purpose. 'What is' cannot lead to an ethical 'ought' and to values like compassion.

Singer believes that the good exists beyond science and naturalism – that there are objective values that exist outside of subjective feelings, just as mathematics is objective and exists apart from human emotion. Humans have evolved a consciousness and rationality that can choose ethical purposes for themselves, and human agency which opts not to reduce suffering when we have it within our power to do so is a moral failure. Whether for the effective altruist, the Neoplatonist, the Buddhist or Hindu, or for me as a Christian, the level of our moral commitment to compassion will flow from our understanding of what the world is really like.