

# Compassion by Numbers

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*"The human mind has evolved to become insensitive to the suffering of large numbers of people far from home."* That, in essence, is the conclusion of a study carried out by an American university. It would probably make some sense to most people, as we know how we tend to respond with sympathy to the suffering of one person or of a few but struggle to cope with or even imagine that suffering multiplied by hundreds or thousands. Part of the problem we each face is to see how we can respond effectively to the needs of large numbers, whereas ministering to a few is within our capabilities. But the authors of the study also see an evolutionary trait in our emotional responses; instinctive empathy would have developed with small numbers of people in family or tribal groups and the circumstances would have been tied in with mutual care and survival.

If there is any significant truth in the conclusions of that study, it must raise profound questions about human behaviour in a global context. Maybe that would explain why the world community often fails to act effectively – as in Rwanda, Darfur, Cambodia and other areas of outstanding suffering and injustice. Do we tell ourselves it is someone else's problem? Is it possible that we close ourselves off from mass suffering somewhere far off because it has less impact than the smaller problems of people close to us? The priorities given to news headlines in our country would often reflect that. Numbers affect our ability to relate. How do we cope emotionally in our modern cities where millions of people can be grouped together without feeling linked in any particular way? And, closer to home, do the hundreds of people in our schools, the competition and the production-line exam targets make caring for the problems of individuals more difficult? When we are actually confronted by people in need, the instinct to help usually makes itself felt. The question now is how can we motivate ourselves to the huge task of shaping a stable and wholesome future for human society on earth? A task that requires real generosity on our part towards those (mostly far off) whose needs are inadequately catered for, as well as consideration for unborn generations.



There are, nevertheless, some contradictions that we might point to as indications that the limits to compassion are not as restrictive as they might seem. Large institutions can manage to nurture a caring ethos: it is to be hoped that we know or belong to one. The tsunami of 2004 evoked a huge and active response in Britain. MakePovertyHistory was supported by hundreds of thousands across different countries. Famines, earthquakes and floods do have an emotional impact on people living on different continents and often result in concrete action. Lots of small groups working for constructive change do make an important contribution. Are there now enough signs that the human race will be able to act together to confront the global threats of climate change, widespread poverty and unsustainable consumption?

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the message of Jesus was that our neighbour is whoever is in need. It doesn't matter whether that person is a potential enemy, whether they are close by or far off, whether they speak, look, behave or worship like us or not. For Jesus, compassion was for all and he exemplified that by giving his own life for all. St. Paul preached the same message of sharing when he encouraged the wealthier Corinthians to help the struggling people in Judea, adding that 'God loves the one who gives gladly'. St. Francis prayed to be able 'to give and not to count the cost'. Julian of Norwich states: "In the eyes of God, one man is all men and all men are one man." Our Christian tradition inspires us to look outwards and to search for the people in need. Clearly Christianity is not content to go along with restrictive evolutionary traits and we have centuries of witness to encourage us. Humans have minds and hearts: we can respond instinctively and we can also make considered judgements and try to act accordingly. This may be our salvation as individuals - and also as a race.

The 'globalisation' of information, economies, trade, travel, migration, environmental problems and exploitation of resources means that if we limit our area of compassion to people close at hand we will fail to deal with the most pressing problems confronting our world today. If we are not prepared

to put ourselves out to work for a more balanced world for all, we can only expect the problems to grow. There is an increasing need for people to be able to work together for large and long-term goals that will benefit everyone. The bicentenary of the bill for the abolition of the slave trade occurs this year and the efforts of Wilberforce and many other dedicated individuals stand as proof that great things can be achieved, at the cost, admittedly, of years of effort and considerable personal sacrifice. In our time we have major national charities which work in the arena of international justice and which act to diminish poverty across the world. The recent Stern Report on the environment suggests (and hopes!) that we may be prepared to go beyond our own narrow self-interest and act now to save the future. The current 'Live Simply' campaign promoted by Cafod and others fits admirably into these global concerns by helping us to focus on the impact our everyday lives have on these issues. There are definite areas of hope.

But just as water flows along the easiest path, so human beings tend to live for the present, look after themselves, desire comfort and possessions and go with the flow. None of those attitudes is going to serve us very well if we put them ahead of caring for others and for our planet. What is required is an effort to go against the flow and to reverse some of the worse aspects of human society. We have proclaimed universal human rights but have not yet done enough to implement them. We have raised the standard of living in some regions by ignoring or exploiting people in others. We have invented and manufactured magnificent things without caring overmuch about the long-term costs. If we allow our 'compassion' to be small and self-serving and to be carried away by the enticing currents of global capitalism, we will not be on track to develop a fair, balanced, wholesome and peaceful world. Nor will we personally be comforted on hearing these words: "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink. ... Whenever you did this for the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me."

## **EARTHQUAKES**

Sure I am shaken  
by life  
forwards backwards side  
to side bounced in my box  
breathless failing uncertain  
clutching at soft wadding  
that tears into discarded  
fistfuls till respite  
arrives and I recuperate  
cushioned on the comfortable  
debris of living.  
But over there  
I can see that people  
have been penned in  
and rattled around  
in their enclosures  
where there is no cotton wool  
and they have  
bounced against  
rough stone walls and tin  
roofs which have split  
apart and now the people are  
spilled down the hillside  
like thrown brown dice  
that are not moving  
any more.

*John Deeney*