ANNUAL LECTURE 2014

'CULTIVATING THE POWER OF COMPASSION'

I would like to start this evening with a quotation by Karen Armstrong, a renowned author. She is one of the world's leading commentators on religious affairs and a passionate campaigner for religious liberty. In her most recent work she reflects:

"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 … a peaceful global community."

The Charter for Compassion (Armstrong, 2011, p. 5)

At the start of a recent philosophy lesson with the Sixth Form, an astute student said, "I saw that your forthcoming annual lecture was on the subject of compassion, could you explain why you chose that subject?" On reflection, the response might have been more interesting if I had asked her what *she* thought might have been my reasons for choosing the subject, but of course wisdom is a fine thing in hindsight. Nevertheless, my response triggered a profound conversation which touched on a wide range of global concerns as well as the need to forgive shortcomings not only in others, but also in ourselves. However, this evening I would like to explain more fully why, as I come to the end of nearly 20 years of headship at St James Senior Girls' School, this is the subject which I consider to be of supreme importance to the welfare of future generations and to society as a whole. Perhaps it can be summed up in the well-known words of Corinthians:

'And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.'

1 Corinthians 13:2 (AV)

I will begin with an examination of what compassion really means and why it is important. As the lecture evolves we will consider whether the capacity for compassion is being eroded and what may be done to help cultivate its power in our young people.

The word 'compassion' is derived from the Latin 'patiri' and the Greek 'pathein', meaning 'to suffer, undergo or experience.' *Com*passion therefore means to endure or experience something *with* another person, to put ourselves generously into their point of view and to experience it as though we were experiencing it ourselves. The word 'empathy' means virtually the same; to undergo or experience the experience of another, as it were, from *within* them. Sympathy, on the other hand, carries the sense of some distance; to stand *alongside* the other person and to *recognise* their experience, perhaps to feel sorrow for what they are going through. Compassion or empathy, on the other hand, is saying, "*I feel* your pain" or whatever it is that they may be experiencing.

One of the most potent demonstrations of compassion in our Christian tradition is reported in St John Chapter 11 when Jesus wept in response to the grief surrounding the death of Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary. It is said that when seeing their grief he 'groaned in the spirit' and wept.

33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled,
34 And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see.
35 Jesus wept.
36 Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him!

John 11:33-36 (AV)

The pure in heart, whose hearts are open, naturally empathise with the experience of the 'other'. Their hearts are like clear mirrors; there is nothing obscuring their vision or standing between themselves and the so-called 'other'. This is compassion. How could Jesus not have wept and 'groaned in the spirit' on witnessing the overwhelming grief of those who had lost their beloved Lazarus?

Compassion is natural to human beings. We may have observed that a very young infant will cry when he hears another baby crying. Neuroscientists explain that the infant's brain responds in two ways: the amygdala creates responses which feel the same sadness and upset whilst different circuits release oxytocin, the chemical for caring which triggers a sense of concern and goodwill. Furthermore, the neurological ability to resonate with another person's condition, be it joyful or painful, is said to function from the early age of six months. Scientists also tell us that the 'neural architecture' for parenting is designed to produce caring in the presence of a young one. We observe this response arise in adults when they encounter an adorable baby or toddler – even the sternest of us are seen to melt!

We admire compassion when we observe it in each other and place those who have exhibited unusual measures of it in their lives amongst our heroes and heroines. Every young person will list Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, Nelson Mandela, Florence Nightingale and the Dalai Lama amongst those magnanimous souls whose great power of compassion has acted like water in a desert to transform deprivation, hatred and division in order to alleviate human suffering.

Not only is compassion natural to our responses as human beings but we also have a primal need to receive it. Indeed, our welfare depends upon the empathy of others: without it we feel isolated, afraid and in pain. We are designed to live interdependently, turning to others for comfort and support in times of need. The comfort our body, heart and spirit crave may come to us through our human relationships and sometimes through our devotional relationship with the divine. Even the presence of one who loves us can help to bring comfort in time of need. It is a known scientific fact that the greater the empathy of a loving presence, the greater the quietening effect on the centres in the brain which register pain. Nature intends that we are born into the embrace of a mother's compassion and the extent to which we thrive

depends entirely upon its availability. At our end, we crave the same compassion in order to meet the ultimate challenge of our departure. We pray that we do not have to face our final moments alone and unloved. Even the heroic soldier, the embodiment of courage and strength, may cry out for mother as he faces his last moments on the battlefield. This is our nature.

It has become increasingly clear over time that everything in which we engage in the world flourishes or withers depending upon the quality of attention which is given to it. This is extremely practical and can be seen easily in the physical domain. The quality of a physical product reflects the quality of attention it has received in the process of its creation. This is obvious, yet the principle also applies to intellectual and creative pursuits as well as to the quality of human relationships.

What exactly is attention? The meaning of the word is helpful: it is derived from the Latin *attendere* which means 'to reach towards'. It is the conscious force which connects us with the world, shaping and defining our experience. In his fascinating new book entitled *'Focus'*, Daniel Goleman examines the central part which attention plays in the expression of empathy in human dealings. He argues that due entirely to an increasingly distracted state of attention we are losing the ability to demonstrate compassion in our personal and professional relationships.

"One cost of the frenetic stream of distractions we face today, some fear, is an erosion of empathy and compassion. The more distracted we are, the less we can exhibit attunement and caring."

(Goleman, 2013, p. 107)

At a most basic level, if we do not use our senses to connect with the other, thereby benefitting from the information conveyed, we miss the most primary and essential information which informs us of their condition and welfare. There is an increasingly common tendency to fail to see and hear each other in face to face encounters. This is either because our attention is simply elsewhere or because we are increasingly unable to sustain our attention for long enough; we have become addicted to the habit of flitting from one object to another. These fundamental conundrums need further consideration before we can explore the greater subtleties of empathy. The following observations described by Daniel Goleman will be all too familiar to us:

'The little girl's head came only up to her mother's waist as she hugged her mom and held on fiercely as they rode a ferry to a vacation island. The mother, though, didn't respond to her, or even seem to notice: she was absorbed in her iPad all the while.

There was a reprise a few minutes later, as I was getting into a shared taxi van with nine sorority sisters who that night were journeying to a weekend getaway. Within a minute of taking their seats in the dark van, dim lights flicked on as every one of the sisters checked

an iPhone or tablet. Desultory conversations sputtered along while they texted or scrolled through Facebook. But mostly there was silence.

The indifference of that mother and the silence among the sisters are symptoms of how technology captures our attention and disrupts our connections.

... A friend reports, "I visited some cousins in New Jersey recently and their kids had every electronic gadget known to man. All I ever saw were the tops of their heads. They were constantly checking their iPhones for who had texted them, what had updated on Facebook, or they were lost in some video game. They're totally unaware of what's happening around them and clueless about how to interact with someone for any length of time."

Today's children are growing up in a new reality, one where they are attuning more to machines and less to people than has ever been true in human history.

Goleman goes on to describe the increasing tendency for people to feel utterly isolated in the midst of the most advanced technological communication we have ever known:

... A college student observes the loneliness and isolation that go along with living in a virtual world of tweets, status updates, and "posting pictures of my dinner." He notes that his classmates are losing their ability for conversation, let alone the soul-searching discussions that can enrich the college years.'

(Goleman, 2013, pp. 5-6)

The cost of this 'new reality' is that it is depriving us of the ability to give deep and sustained attention to each other: our communications media push us into a continual stream of quick responses which are by nature trivial, superficial and often ill-considered. A 'reflective' response is born of deeper intelligence, finer perception and greater sensitivity; it is properly named, 'careful'. This frenetic stream of so-called communication is giving rise to social behaviour which is careless, insensitive and harsh. What does it matter when we do not have to see, hear or feel the impact of our actions on another? When people lose empathy in this way, we start to hurt each without knowing or even recognising the pain we inflict. This is dangerous.

This distracted and weak state of attention is causing further trouble in relation to young people's ability to engage with more sophisticated literature. College lecturers and school teachers find that there has been a gradual erosion in students' ability to tackle more subtle and complex concepts. Challenging literature which used to be intrinsic to GCSE and A level syllabi has gradually disappeared; a token amount has remained but given in bite-sized pieces with reams of annotated notes to make the material 'more accessible'. Young people simply do not have the same powers of sustained attention to remain focussed on subtle ideas in order to penetrate and understand them. Great literature opens the door of understanding to human nature and the deeper questions concerning it, but pupils are becoming increasingly less able to muster the emotional and subtle intelligence required to engage in any meaningful or sustained enquiry. As in all things, if the muscles of the higher intelligence are not employed, they will wither. This leaves a generation of human beings bereft of the insights and inspiration of the great minds of their forefathers thus subjecting them to an

impoverished, materialistic and superficial existence. The result of this on a large scale is worrying indeed: as humanity becomes more superficial it loses the capacity for deeper understanding; this must inevitably translate, yet again, into action which lacks the sensitivity of deeper perception and therefore, compassion.

The same issues manifest in the adult world where the ability to give sustained attention is becoming increasingly weak. Daniel Goleman reports the comments of an advertising rep in Mexico:

"A few years ago you could make a five-minute video for your presentation at an ad agency. Today you have to keep it to a minute and a half. If you don't grab them by then, everyone starts checking for messages."

(Goleman, 2013, p. 7)

And a college professor who teaches film studies tells Goleman that

'... he's reading a biography of one of his heroes, the legendary French director Francois Truffaut; but, he reports, "I can't read more than two pages at a stretch. I get this overwhelming urge to go online and see if I have a new email. I think I'm losing my ability to sustain concentration on anything serious."'

(Goleman, 2013, p. 8)

There has been mounting criticism for the lack of empathic attention and compassion exhibited by our medical practitioners. It is ironic that in a profession which should, by nature, be rooted in a compassionate response to human suffering, there should be such vociferous complaint about its absence. Yet there has been such an outcry of complaint regarding the lack of care, attention and kindness in the nursing profession that its professional bodies have taken the step of placing the word 'compassion' at the centre of the principles for nurses training. It is indeed pitiable and surely very surprising that it should be necessary to formalise what ought to be natural for anyone wishing to engage in the healing of their fellow human beings. However, we know only too well that apart from other general factors which have served to diminish the gift of empathy, this vocation has been compromised by the egotistic appetite for status and profit, all but stifling the vision of compassionate service which should inspire the heart of a trainee nurse.

A physician's readiness to give a patient his attention lies at the heart of the doctor-patient relationship. It is through his attention that a doctor makes an empathic connection thereby reducing the patient's anxiety. However, not listening is at the top of the list of complaints patients have about their doctors. Fortunately, there are enough exceptions to this to allow us to remain hopeful but the situation clearly needs to be addressed.

Interestingly, research on the degree of empathy demonstrated by doctors in the United States has shown that those doctors who are sued, generally make no more medical errors than those who are not sued. The difference lay in the degree of emotional rapport the doctors gave to

their patients. Those who gave scantily of their time, concern and attention were more likely to be sued for malpractice. Another interesting discovery in this regard relates to whether or not patients actually follow their doctors' advice and take their prescriptions. Apparently about half of prescriptions are never taken. Those patients who do so feel that their doctors genuinely care. With regard to medical training in general, Daniel Goleman reports that two deans of major medical schools independently told him in the same week, of the difficulties they faced in finding applicants who would have empathic concern for their patients.

A common obstacle which diminishes the ability to empathise is our tendency to be habitually preoccupied with ourselves. Our attention is all too often consumed with thoughts about 'me': our feelings, anxieties, opinions and judgements. This world of thought is usually filled with fragments of past experience and future projections upon which the imagination feeds. Consumed by the shadowlands of the imagination we become increasingly cut off from the reality of the present moment and from each other. To complicate matters even more, the contents of our imaginings are superimposed upon actual experience; in this way, we fail to connect with what is really there and what is really happening. Our experience is, 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought', as Shakespeare's Hamlet so eloquently describes.

Dismissing others with our preconceived judgements suffocates empathy. Over the last ten to twenty years I have noticed a growing tendency amongst young people to judge and dismiss other people on the basis of their physical appearance alone. These are swift, harsh and often rigid opinions based upon fashion, body shape, hair style and social 'type'. What is perhaps of even more concern is the readiness with which they are prepared to voice these opinions, publicise them and to convey them to the 'accused' with no consideration for the hurt they inflict. So, we are either disconnected from each other through general preoccupation with 'me' or, even worse, we dismiss each other on the basis of our prejudice.

The word 'respect' is extremely valuable here: it means literally to 'look again'. There is a charming description of this in Alexander McCall Smith's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Scones*. Antonia is visiting her long-time friend Angus and finds herself 'awakening' to him for the first time:

"…she had been strangely moved by what she had witnessed in the studio, and she did not want to compromise the almost mystical moment of insight that had been vouchsafed her.

And what precisely was that? It was difficult to be too specific – the whole point about a moment of insight is that it defies quotidian description – but she had suddenly appreciated the sheer otherness of Angus. Most of us go through life so absorbed in the cocoon of ourselves that we rarely stop to consider the other. Of course we think we do; indeed we may pride ourselves on our capacity for empathy; we may be considerate and thoughtful in our dealings with others, but how often do we stand before them, so to speak, and experience what it is to be them? She asked herself this, and remembered, vaguely, something she had read somewhere, about the I-Thou encounter. Martin Buber? That sounded right, but now, in the kitchen of Angus Lordie's flat, the recollection was vague, and the moment, already, was passing.

She looked at Angus, at his paint-bespattered corduroy trousers; at his somewhat battered Harris Tweed jacket; at the Paisley handkerchief-cum-cravat that he had tied round his throat; at his shoes, old brown brogues which he obviously tended with care, for they were polished to a high shine. How often have I looked at him in this way? she asked herself. How often have I noticed or, indeed, listened to him? We talk, but do I actually listen, or is our conversation mainly a question of my waiting for him to stop and for it to be my turn to say something? For how many of us is that what conversation means – the setting up of our lines?

She looked at him as he moved over to the sink and filled his ancient kettle with water. She looked at the sink itself, at the tottering pile of pots that surely could not be added to any further without collapse. She looked beyond the sink at the window behind it, in need of a clean on both sides. She looked at the notice-board he had created for himself from a large square of dark cork; at the photographs tacked onto it; the notes to self; the bills paid and unpaid. This was Angus. This was another. This was another life.'

(McCall Smith, 2008, pp. 217-218)

Having examined the nature of compassion and at how its expression may be compromised by an increasingly distracted state of attention as well as a tendency to be absorbed in our own world of thought, we can now turn to the final question: What can we, as guardians of the next generation, do to enhance their powers of compassion? I would like to begin from the premise that compassion is natural to us as human beings. However, in order for it to grow and find expression, it needs to be nurtured and 'watered' by the environment we encounter. We learn most from example. The parenting we receive is enormously influential in this respect. If we have been reared in an atmosphere of kindness and observed our parents behaving compassionately towards each other, this will be the first and most powerful element in shaping our own responses to the world. Much depends upon how we have been taught by our parents: if we have been fortunate enough to witness them restrain impulses to hurt another in speech or action; if they have insisted upon the importance of making an apology where we have wronged another; if they have urged us to restore harmony when we have contributed to disruption, then this will inform our adult behaviour.

Education means to draw out: it is undoubtedly the case that the education we receive from our parents and teachers, beginning with their example, and supported by the material with which they feed our minds and hearts, has the power to cultivate the power of compassion which resides in our very humanity. It is not surprising that whenever a great man or woman is asked what had been the most formative influence in contributing to their achievements, they invariably cite the love and inspiration of their parents or teachers. This awakens the love in our hearts which, in turn, serves as a guide and companion for life.

Eknath Easwaran, a prolific author and world renowned teacher of meditation refers frequently in his twenty six books on spiritual living to the fact that his mother and grandmother were the formative influences on his spiritual flourishing later in life. He

explains that without realising it when he was young, the wisdom exemplified by his grandmother, was his spiritual teacher. He also stresses the point that their steadfast love and attention gave him deep emotional security and inner strength throughout his life. He touches on this in his book entitled *Take Your Time:*

'I grew up supported by intimate relationships. In my ancestral family, which is matrilineal, the day-to-day influences on my early life came from the women, and particularly, of course from my mother and grandmother. The three of us were always together. I spent every day with them and never grew tired of their company…I believe that our relationships with our children, like all our relationships, can be beautiful, though it takes a lot of time and patience. This is what my mother and grandmother taught me by their way of life. …let us take time for relationships and cultivate – and help our children to cultivate – the timeless values and fundamental virtues that make us human ... It is through personal relationships that we learn to function beautifully in life throughout its ups and downs.'

(Goleman, 2013, pp. 130-132)

As was said earlier, everything flourishes according to the quality of attention it is given. Because this is so, we need to consider how the power of attention may be strengthened. In his book *'Focus'* Daniel Goleman explains that neuroscientists confirm *'we can strengthen this vital muscle of the mind.'* He goes on to say that, *'Attention works much like a muscle – use it poorly and it can wither; work it well and it grows.'*

(Goleman, 2013, p. 4)

As has already been discussed, our quality of attention is being continually disrupted by the speed and volume of digital stimuli being fired at our senses from all directions. This has the effect of establishing habits of disrupted and short span attention – flitting from one thing to another in order both to keep up the pace and to follow the deluding promise of greater pleasure or excitement via the next stimulus. This habit of fragmented attention acts as a serious obstacle to the quality of young people's relationships and to their power of empathy.

So, given that the power of attention can be strengthened, like a muscle, with regular and appropriate use, let us turn to those means through which this may occur. The educational curriculum, from the beginning of the primary phase through to the end of secondary, should include disciplines of study which cultivate and enhance a pupil's powers of attention. Study and activity which require fine and sustained attention boost powers of concentration, self-discipline and social skills. In essence, all intellectual, creative, emotional and social skills flourish through the ability to hone the powers of attention. Years ago, a pupil's focussed attention in class was a 'given'. This was the expectation inherent in the concept of schooling and a matter of ordinary discipline for the classroom. Unfortunately, this simple and obvious point seems to have become lost for a number of reasons, not least of which is the idea that a pupil will give its attention if it is sufficiently well 'entertained' by the teacher. However, as an example of the power of a subject discipline to enhance the powers of attention, the

following is of interest. In 2012 Ofsted issued a report stating that the teaching of music in almost two thirds of primary and secondary schools was unsatisfactory. The main criticism was a lack of opportunity to listen to music, especially classical music. Following this, the Institute of Education undertook a study which showed that where children were regularly exposed to classical music and required to listen to it for sustained periods, their power of concentration increased considerably. This, in turn, served to enhance their performance in other areas of the curriculum as well as their self-esteem and aspirations.

There is, however, a greater cause which produces a distracted state of attention and this arises from the emotional turmoil of our lives. For our young people in particular, this is a very real issue and challenge, especially as such emotional turmoil often comes at a time in their lives when success in educational pursuits is so vital to their future happiness. Such emotional disturbance is often caused by loss or breakdown of relationships which are closest to them.

It is here that we turn to a powerful aid. Meditative and stillness practices offer the opportunity to meet these very real challenges. Properly practised, they strengthen the power of attention and bring freedom to direct it at will. Any meditative practice which requires concentration will strengthen the muscle of attention. This is an enormous strength in all respects and offers a higher level of efficiency and success to all actions. Naturally, it enhances the capacity to maintain attention for sustained periods providing the advantages that were discussed earlier.

When the mind or emotions are in turmoil, it is necessary to leave the beating waves on the surface of the ocean and dive deeper into the still waters below and beneath. In quietude, a greater space becomes available where the movements of the waves seem less ferocious and threatening. Awareness embraces the movement without conflict and gently the motion subsides into the deep waters from which it arose. This awareness is our 'being': it is in and through everything; from it everything is continually arising and returning – forms arising from the formless. When the soul comes to peace in this way, its pain and suffering meet a healing balm. In Eknath Easwaran's words:

'The Buddha says, "Not your parents, not your partner, not your best friends can bring you such peace as a well-trained mind". The Bible calls this "the peace that passes all understanding." You alone can find this peace for yourself, for it lies in the depths of your own consciousness. All of us are human enough to want to be comforted, and often feel we need consolation from others. But the Buddha reminds us that although others can wipe away our tears and comfort us, who can heal the wounds of the mind? How can anyone reach the pain inside? There we have to be our own healer; no one else can do this for us. We need the deep healing that comes from a mind at peace."

(Easwaran, 2006, p. 178)

In the deeper peace of our hearts the love which resides there breathes again and flows. This is the real healing which we all long for, within and without. Love is also rekindled when we encounter a touch of the divine, the beauty of its image. This may come to us in meditative silence, in the company of a loved one, through music, art or literature. We are nourished and inspired by that touch of the divine, the transcendent. Contemplation of this beauty may be approached differently but silent contemplation of sacred or prayerful words on a regular basis can enlighten our vision. Such inspiration can serve to inform and transform our daily life: there is a natural principle of life that what we meditate on becomes part of our nature. As Eknath Easwaran puts it:

"Eventually these ideals become an integral part of our personality, which means they will find constant expression in what we do, what we say, and what we think."

(Easwaran, 2006, p. 194)

If we introduce young people to the opportunity to engage, even for a short period every day, in meditation or contemplation of this kind, the power of compassion cannot fail to flow through their hearts.

When we engage in periods of quiet meditation or contemplation, awareness is enhanced. Once the noise and activity of the physical and mental worlds are let go, we become more aware of the subtle aspects of our existence. In this way, our awareness increases: we find that we notice more about ourselves and, in turn, about each other and the world about us. This obviously has practical benefits but it is also noticeable that this awareness lends itself to greater sensitivity: we become more perceptive and gentler in our dealings with each other. This greater awareness is a precondition for empathy and compassionate action.

Self-awareness also gives rise to a greater understanding of what is going on within ourselves. We cannot begin to understand others without self-knowledge. Then, if compassion is to arise, there is a further dimension; real understanding is naturally coupled with forgiveness. Forgiveness arises when deeper understanding has illuminated the causes of human behaviour. Our human nature is complex, highly sensitive and intrinsically vulnerable. When we come to understand the vulnerability which is intrinsic to our sense of separate existence, its fear and the existential suffering that flows from it, we begin to see that most human behaviour arises from this common cause. Forgiveness is essentially a compassionate understanding of the vulnerability of our shared human existence and a recognition that unless we have found the wisdom to transcend these existential causes, we cannot act differently. The words of Christ, as he meets the ultimate trial epitomise this: *'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.'*

In our common human condition, the transcendence of those troubles which flow from the conviction of being separate, isolated and lacking in goodness, comes when we find the wisdom to cease self-disgust for those features of the fragile ego such as fear envy, anger and greed, but rather embrace them with the compassionate smile of the Buddha who understands

that all of this is simply an expression of human nature; as such, it is forgiven. In the embrace is the transcendence.

The wise can see that the experience of separation is an illusion. In this vision love is unconditional and compassion its very nature. As Eknath Easwaran so clearly describes it:

'…the sense that you and I are separated, isolated creatures is no more than an illusion. Einstein called it "a kind of optical illusion of consciousness." To a great extent he had lost any sense of being separate from the rest of creation. This awareness of unity is the distinguishing mark of spiritual awareness. Such people will consider you as part of themselves and their welfare as part of your own…They will never think to harm you because they are a part of you …'

(Easwaran, 2006, p. 74)

And so we return to the truth that we are utterly dependent upon each other because we are one human family. Compassion is essential to all human relationships, to the world in which we live and, as we have seen, to our fulfilment.

In conclusion, the inventiveness of human kind appears to know no limits: this is wonderful. We would not wish to halt the advancements which continue to pour forth from our combined intelligence and awe inspiring creativity. However, unless we nurture the compassionate heart upon which our entire human existence depends for its real welfare, we will have gained nothing and lost everything.