



Shrewsbury joins the Compassionate Revolution

The world news has been exceptionally bleak and bloody lately. We see people suffering, hurting each other, angry and afraid. Sometimes fear becomes anger, as refugees fleeing extreme horrors are rejected and brutalized even as they seek safety. But other times, such suffering triggers a compassionate response of care and support for those in need. This has happened in towns and cities across Europe and the Near East, and it has also happened in Shrewsbury, where an informal group set up on Facebook gathered together five vanloads of essential supplies to take to “the Jungle” camp in Calais, despite the government’s blockading policy against refugees and migrants. When things are falling apart the need for compassion has never been greater.

And another wonderful thing has happened in our town lately. On the first days of October, Theatre Severn hosted a diverse gathering of scholars, scientists, medics, artists, writers and practitioners from many fields to work towards a vision for the new International Institute for the Study of Compassion (IISC), which has just been established in Shrewsbury. According to the head of the institute, Professor Patrick Pietroni, the working conference aimed to explore what sustains compassion in individuals, organisations and society; he believes that now more than ever we need to relate to each other with compassion rather than conflict and competition in all spheres of life, and that is why people from diverse but interconnected fields - such as health and social care, governance and the arts - were invited to share their perspectives and ideas. Experts including James Doty (professor of neurosurgery at Stanford University and founder and director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education), Paul Gilbert (psychologist and founder of compassion focused therapy), Andrew Stone (former chair of Marks & Spencer), Ruth Padel (poet and great-great-granddaughter of Charles Darwin), Karen Armstrong (author on

religion, peace and conflict, and founder of the Charter for Compassion), and many others spoke at the conference and there were sessions and workshops focusing on the key concerns of the IISC. In Professor Pietroni's words, the working conference is "like a jigsaw puzzle with many, many pieces but no picture on the outside of the box"; the delegates all contributed some pieces and the conference was the process of finding out what the jigsaw would look like.

The trust, the institute and the conference have the support of the Darwin family, and his great-great-granddaughter, the poet Ruth Padel gave readings from her verse biography of Charles Darwin (Darwin, a Life in Poems) on Thursday. The Institute will also establish the Darwin Scholarship Programme, which will provide bursaries for PhD students to study the importance of compassion in their particular discipline. So far 11 universities around the world have expressed their interest in hosting a Darwin scholar and the students will gather in Shrewsbury each year for a summer school, to discuss their research into the nature and importance of compassion, cooperation and altruism in society. Along with the new University Centre, this is a great opportunity for Shrewsbury.

At the end of the conference, I spoke to author, scholar and TED Prize winner Karen Armstrong, who has been a key member of the IISC steering committee from the outset. Acting with compassion, she says, is now an "urgent global imperative". People are killing each other, often in the name of religion, despite their common humanity and intertwined histories. Karen asks us to focus on the universal meaning of Confucius' Golden Rule: "Never treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself".

This means looking into your own heart, discovering what it is that gives you pain and then refusing, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else. It's a core ethos that later developed independently in some form for all the world religions. And it is common to all the creeds "because it works, and it brings you closer to God, or to Nirvana". She emphasises how important it is to develop transcultural understanding, so that we can empathise and learn to "walk in each other's shoes". It may be easier to say than to put into practice, but Shrewsbury's new institute is a clear step in the right direction.

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