



KAREN ARMSTRONG:

TWELVE STEPS TO A COMPASSIONATE LIFE

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening, good evening. Oh my goodness, oh my God. Good evening, my name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. As all of you know by now, my goal here is to make the lions roar, to make a heavy institution dance, and if possible, when I'm successful, to make it levitate.

This program is part of a series of events related to the New York Public Library exhibition—and here forgive me, I have a lisp so it’s very hard for me to say this word— Three Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, on view in the Gottesman Exhibition Hall of this library until February the 27th of this year. If you have not visited this magnificent exhibition, please do it. It is free and open to the public, and it is truly magnificent. Our next program in this series is with Reza Aslan, Shirin Neshat, and others in a program entitled Three Faiths in the Form of a Fugue, and that’s on Friday January 28th. On February 18th, again in this series, Mark Salzman will deliver a lecture performance entitled An Atheist in Free Fall, all part, as I said, of this exhibition of related programs generously supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. So thank you very much to the Carnegie Corporation. **(applause)**

Coming up this spring, LIVE from the New York Public Library also presents other programs. We are copresenting thanks to Guy Walter from the Villa Gillet in Lyons and thanks to Marin Karmitz, the president of the Conseil de la Création artistique, a festival entitled Walls and Bridges, which gets its name from Isaac Newton’s quotation, “We build too many walls and not enough bridges.” From Thursday January 27th to Saturday January 29th you will be able to hear for instance Glenn Lowry, the director of MOMA talk with Jean-Pierre Dupuy about the Perils and Pleasures of Deception, Wayne Koestenbaum, Laura Kipnis, and Cécile Guilbert discuss a culture of celebrity, Jeffrey Rosen and Mirielle Delmas-Marty about the state of surveillance and the end of privacy. Philip Gourevitch and Scott Atran talk about the New Faces of the Enemy. Maira Kalman, Lemony Snicket, and Barbara Cassin discuss an all-important idea, concept,

probably as important as compassion—maybe Karen Armstrong will disagree—of happiness. Later in the season I will have the pleasure to speak with Colm Tóibín, Harold Bloom, Howard Jacobson, Chris Blackwell, the founder of Island Records, and Elizabeth Gilbert of *Eat, Pray, Love* fame.

Those are just some of the programs coming up at LIVE from the New York Public Library this spring, so I encourage you to all stay tuned and join our e-mail list so you may—which you may already have joined, and if you have not, please join it tonight. I would like to encourage you also all to become Friends of the New York Public Library, which is just—for forty dollars a year, you will get great discounts to these events and get more information about other events at the Library. Tonight’s program is again simulcast by fora.tv.

Karen Armstrong is the author of more than twenty books on faith and major religions, including *A History of God*, *The Battle for God*, *Holy War*, *Islam*, *Buddha*, *The Great Transformation*, *The Case for God*, and most recently and just out now *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. Karen Armstrong will be signing her new book after the event, and once again I would like to thank 192 Books for being our excellent independent bookseller. She will also be taking questions before the signing, and I encourage you very much to come up to the microphone, which will be put right in front of the audience here. She very much encourages questions and hopes that some of them will be good.

A former Roman Catholic nun, Karen Armstrong left the convent after seven years to pursue a degree in modern literature at Oxford, and she told me most recently that she was delighted to leave her literary studies to pursue her investigation of various religions. Today she's recognized as a leading scholar of religion and society whose work has been translated into forty-five languages. In 2008, Karen Armstrong was awarded the TED Prize, which prompted her to begin work on the Charter for Compassion, which is described as a cooperative effort to restore not only compassionate thinking but more importantly compassionate action to the center of religious, moral, and political life. Created online by the general public and crafted by leading thinkers in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the charter was signed in November 2009 by a thousand religious and secular leaders. I last spoke to Karen Armstrong at a TED Awards event when she was launching this extraordinary online charter for compassionate thinking and action. Tonight, unlike other nights, where LIVE mostly hosts interviews and conversations, I have asked Karen Armstrong to deliver a talk on the compassionate life and how we might get there. Please warmly welcome Karen Armstrong.

(applause)

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Thank you, Paul, and it's wonderful to be back in this wonderful library. Well, as you heard, in 2008, I won the TED Prize, and every year TED, the acronym for Technology, Entertainment, and Design, run wonderful conferences on ideas worth spreading. They give awards to people whom they think have

made a difference but who with their help could make more of an impact, and they give you some money, but most importantly they give you a wish for a better world, which TED promises to try to make true.

I knew almost at once what I wanted, because it's long been a frustration to me as a historian of world religion that one of the basic and most important tasks of our time is surely to build a global community where people of all ideologies, all persuasions, can live together in mutual respect. If we cannot achieve that, with terrorism rising and discontent and polarization rising, I doubt that we'll have a viable world to hand on to the next generation. And the religions that should be making a major contribution to this effort are often seen, for very good reason, as part of the problem. Every single one of the major world faiths has evolved its own version of the Golden Rule: Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you. Often expressed in its positive form: Always treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. And they insist that you cannot confine your compassion to your own group. You must have what one of the Chinese sages called *jian ai*, concern for everybody. "Love your enemies," said Jesus. "Honor the stranger," says Leviticus. "Reach out," says the Qur'an, "to all tribes and all nations."

But sometimes you'd never know it. I've lost count of the number of times I've jumped into a London taxi and been informed quite categorically by the cabbie, when he finds out what I do for a living, that religion has been the cause of all the major wars of history. Now actually the cause of war is usually ambition, greed, envy, but these self-serving emotions have often been sanitized by being given a sort of religious or ideological

coloring. But we don't hear enough about compassion, it struck me. Very often when religious leaders come together, they'll be talking about some abstruse point of doctrine or a particular sexual ethic as though this rather than simply the Golden Rule was the criterion of faith.

And so I wanted to restore the Golden Rule and the ideal of compassion to where it belongs, to the heart of the religious life, and we now have—we've been launched a year, we now have 150 partners worldwide who are all incorporating the charter into their current programs. Next month I'm going to Pakistan, where there's a huge effort going on to bring the compassion to the fore of Islam. The team there is dedicated, for example, to starting compassion courses in schools, colleges, and universities, to bring the compassionate message of Islam to the fore, right from the front line, and there are many, many other initiatives that are going on. The idea is to find realistic, practical, and creative ways of implementing the Golden Rule in the difficult circumstances, the peculiar circumstances, of the twenty-first century.

Now, compassion has been at the center of every world faith. Now, it's not that I'm saying that all the world faiths are the same—they're not. My job as a historian of world religion would be a great deal easier if they were all the same, but they all say that there's something wrong with your spirituality if it doesn't issue in practical compassion. My favorite Golden Rule story comes from the great rabbi Hillel, the older contemporary of Jesus, who was one day approached by a pagan who promised to convert to Judaism on condition that the rabbi recited the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg.

And Hillel stood on one leg and said, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah, and everything else is only commentary. Go and study it.” Extraordinary comment. No mention of the existence of God, the creation of the world, the exodus from Egypt, the 613 commandments of the Torah, all this is commentary on the Golden Rule, a provocative way in which to point out the importance, the centrality, of compassion.

Confucius was asked by his disciples, “Master, which of your teachings can we put into practice all day and every day? All day and every day, not just when we happen to feel like it? What is the central thread that runs through all your teaching?” and Confucius said, “*shu*,” a word that is sometimes translated “consideration” but really means “likening to yourself.” Look into your own heart, discover what it is that gives you pain and then refuse under any circumstance whatsoever to inflict that pain on anybody else. “Never treat others,” said Confucius, “as you would not like to be treated yourself.” And he insisted that this was essential to political life.

These sages were not evolving this compassionate ethic on lonely mountaintops or desert fastnesses. They were living in societies not dissimilar to our own where violence had reached an unprecedented crescendo and where an infant market economy was becoming more ruthless and greedy and they evolved this compassionate ethos to counter the aggression of their times. They worked as hard to find a cure for their times, a spiritual cure for their times, as we do when we’re trying to find a cure for cancer. And they insisted that you have to work at it. Compassion is built in to the structure of our brains.

We know that certain hormones, like oxytocin, produce, help to produce the altruism in mammals that enables them to care for their young but, like—we human beings, we love to take a natural capacity, work at it, and make something extraordinary. We inherited the ability to run and to jump to get away from our predators, but now we have ballet and gymnastics. You don't on your first dancing lesson, it takes you years to learn to turn a perfect pirouette, but if you practice assiduously, in a dedicated way, you learn to use your body in a way that is absolutely impossible for an untrained person like me and lift movement to unearthly grace. And people have found, in the same way, that when they apply the Golden Rule all day and every day they acquire new capacities of mind and heart. In fact, they say they achieve what the Greeks called *extasis*, a stepping outside of the self, because you're constantly dethroning yourself from the center of your world and putting another person there.

But since I've been talking about compassion, you know, promoting the charter, people were—I found that people were confused about it. Compassion had so fallen out of our lexicon, that it survives in a very weakened term, it has a sort of fuzzy air to it, and people assume it's synonymous with "pity." I remember in Portugal a man getting up and saying, "the poor people of this world do not need compassion, they need justice," and of course he was thinking that I was just telling us to feel sorry for these people. When I was in Holland recently I specifically said in my lecture that compassion did *not* mean feeling sorry for people, but when my text was translated into Dutch in the Dutch newspaper, every time I said "compassion" it was translated "pity." This is ingrained in our thinking. And in fact some—one Dutch person has since told me that there isn't really a word for

“compassion” in Dutch. Not that that reflects at all on the Dutch people, **(laughter)** whom I love dearly.

So what is it? Compassion comes from of course Greek and Latin phrase, *com pathein*, *com passio*, which means to endure with another person, to put yourself in somebody else’s shoes. In Hebrew and Arabic, however, *rahman*, compassionate, *rahamanut* in Hebrew, post-Biblical Hebrew, it’s related etymologically to the word for “womb.” The icon of mother and child is a sort of an icon, an image, of compassion. But of course mother love is also hard. A mother has to get up night after night after her crying child even when she’s exhausted. She has to put her own needs to one side and to watch that child wherever he is as he’s growing up. She is always aware of him. She has to put her own needs on the back burner to ensure that he or she is all right. And of course that cute baby then grows up and can become an acute disappointment and mother love can be heartbreaking and yet a mother doesn’t give up on her child even when the child is hoary, unattractive, and perhaps not at all what she wanted. There’s a Buddhist prayer, very early prayer devoted to the Buddha, attributed to the Buddha, rather, which says Let us cherish all creatures as a mother her only child, so that all we care for all human beings, however disappointing and disreputable they may be as a mother her only child. In Buddhism, *karuna*, the word often translated compassion, means resolve. It’s a resolution to end the suffering that we see all around us in all creatures, human, nonhuman species too and to take responsibility for the suffering that we see, not to say this is not our business, to do all we can to assuage the suffering of the world, so compassion is a challenging—but it’s not very popular. Often people would prefer to be

right rather than compassionate. Often people use their religion not to lay the ego to one side, that clamorous ego that makes us so unhappy and is the cause of so much misery in the world, but to enhance the ego and to make one feel special. It's a natural human tendency, but we need to get back to that compassionate ethos, to apply, as I say, the Golden Rule globally so that we treat all peoples as we would wish to be treated ourselves, and if we'd done this in the past we probably wouldn't have had as many problems in the present.

But how do we do this? Well, I call my book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, and you'll immediately see the reference to Alcoholics Anonymous, and that's deliberate because we are really quite addicted to our likes and dislikes and prejudices. We depend upon them for our sense of self. We don't know quite what we'd do without them, and sometimes when we utter an unpleasant remark, a brilliantly wounding clever remark—I'm rather good at those myself—we get a kind of buzz, a sort of rather like the—you know, the first drink of the evening, but this also poisons us, it poisons us, it poisons our relations to other, and we need to be weaned from this and we can't do it all at once, so I've devised a twelve-step program. Well, you'll be relieved to know I'm not going to plod you through all twelve of these steps. But they are—it gives a sort of guide as to how, little by little, you can incorporate the compassionate ideal in your life, starting with learning about compassion and looking at your world, to see how you, in your profession, your line of business, your family, your workplace, your nation, can make a compassionate contribution to the world.

But the third step is compassion for yourself. And we cannot be compassionate to others if we are not compassionate to ourselves. We all have a dark side. Every single one of us is a deeply flawed human being. Even the great icons of compassion we've seen in our own time, Martin Luther King or even Gandhi, had personality flaws, and yet look at what those people could achieve by dint of trying to cultivate this compassionate ethos. But I was—the scripture says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And I always thought that I was concentrated on the first bit of that, “Love your neighbor,” but it was the late rabbi Albert Friedlander who told me that an extraordinary story. He grew up in Nazi Germany and was obviously as a small child horrified by the anti-Semitic propaganda that was put forth by the Nazi regime, and one night, he told me, he was about eight years old, he lay awake in bed and said, “I am not what they say. I have talents. I have good qualities. I have my faults, but I have good qualities,” and he made himself list these qualities one by one. And he was one of the kindest people I've ever met, and he must have helped hundreds of people, but he always said he could have done no good at all in the world if he had not that night had compassion for himself.

We have to acknowledge our pain. Each one of us has a history of pain, and of course the pain that many of us suffer in a privileged country like this, is small, it's almost—it's embarrassing to name it when you look at suffering on a global scale, but it matters to us, it hurts us. And while we're not encouraging a wallowing in pain or self-pity in any way, we have to acknowledge that pain because if we deny our own pain it's all too easy to dismiss the pain of others. So looking at yourself, seeing yourself warts and all and

accepting it, realizing every other person is also suffering, too; every other person has flaws.

And very often, you know, when people start inveighing vigorously or viciously about a certain vice or say a certain sexual practice or sexual orientation or the qualities they dislike intensely in another nation or another people, it's often a sign that they probably are troubled with similar tendencies themselves. We often inveigh furiously at the qualities we most dislike in ourselves, so to take all that into account. Jungians talk about "getting to know the shadow," visiting that shadow side of ourselves and owning it and using, and then using that insight of our own perplexity, our own distress, our own muddle, our own mystery. Every single one of us is a sort of a mystery. I'm a mystery to myself. I'm always doing things and I say to myself, "Why on earth did I do that?" Or you surprise yourself or you just cannot work out why you're so stupid about certain things or why you're so upset by certain things. We contain—we are each one of us a mystery, and if we can't—if we find ourselves mysterious, how much more should we feel the mystery of other people?

Now this leads directly into the seventh step, which is entitled How Little We know. We're a very omniscient culture. We—information is available at the click of a mouse, and we're encouraged to sort of air our opinions and the airways are clogged with talk shows and phone-ins. I've participated in several today on my book tour. And people often love to hold forth, and if you happen to know a little bit about what they're talking about, it's often clear that the amount of reliable knowledge they have could be

comfortably contained on a small postcard. **(laughter)** And we are often sort of very omniscient in the way we talk about one another or just in gossip—“oh, he’s always like that,” or “the trouble with him is . . . ,” and we do that too with other cultures, with other peoples.

People have extraordinarily strong opinions about certain countries or—based on a half-remembered op-ed piece here or a program they’ve seen on television there or something they happened to catch sight of on the Internet, and it is essential for the compassionate life that we realize how little we know. Remember the mystery we are to ourselves.

There’s a wonderful piece in *Hamlet* that always spoke directly to me. Hamlet, you’ll remember, was causing a great deal of trouble in the Danish court, and the king had sent two of his old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to spy upon him. And one evening, Hamlet, who realizes quite well what’s going on, approaches Guildenstern with a pipe, a recorder, and he says, “I pray you, play upon this pipe.” “My lord, I cannot,” says Guildenstern. “Oh, it’s as easy as lying,” says Hamlet caustically. “It’s simple, you just basically blow down and wiggle your fingers up and down and out comes the music.” “My lord, I cannot do it,” says Guildenstern. “Why, look you now,” says Hamlet, “what a poor thing you would make of me. You would pull out all my stops. You would play me to the top of my bent. You would pluck out the heart of my mystery.”

To pluck out the heart of our mystery. How often we do that of other people or other peoples, not realizing the complexity of the situation that somebody is in? We’ve all had, probably, the experience, of being really very annoyed when someone seems very out of

sorts or down in the dumps, and then we find out that perhaps her brother died last week or that she has just recently endured some kind of tragedy. And it is a useful exercise to think—to look behind the headlines. Our news is so full of sound bites, and we see these leaders of states, we either some of them are better than others, some of them seem appalling to us, but we must remember that behind these are millions of people, each one with his or her private history of pain. People who have not been—people have been born into a situation, a conflict area, that they didn't choose and are having to live out their lives in that conflict, so look beyond the headlines

And I think we ought to go back to Socrates, the founder of the Western rational tradition of which we're so rightly proud. When people came to talk to Socrates, they usually thought they knew what they were talking about, but after half an hour of Socrates' relentless questioning they realized that they didn't know the first thing about justice or courage, even though they might have been veterans of the battlefield and must have experienced courage, they could not define it. However ruthlessly and logically they argued or discussed, something always eluded them. At the end, the end of a Socratic dialogue as recorded by Plato, always ends in the experience of *aporia*, doubt. People realize suddenly that they didn't understand the foundations on which they based their lives, these basic concepts like goodness—what was it? And at that moment, Socrates said, you become a philosopher.

The word “philosopher,” of course, means a lover of wisdom, someone who seeks wisdom and longs for it because they know they don't have it, and no one could win a

Socratic dialogue, because it ended up in the realization of the profundity of human ignorance, and that is the foundation of the Western rational experience. “The unexamined life is not worth living,” Socrates said on his deathbed, and he would urge people to question every single one of their received opinions. So to realize, in this step, to listen to human discourse, to listen to the omniscience with which we speak and try to realize the limits of human knowledge and the limits of what we know about the other, and that leads on to Step 8, how should we speak to one another?

The Socratic dialogue, Socrates said, was a spiritual exercise. A way you often use the word “dialogue” today—it’s one of the buzzwords of our time. People often seem to think that if only we’d all engage in dialogue, peace would break out. Dialogues this, dialogues here, but there’s very little Socratic dialogue going on, because often in our media, in our—in the academy, in the literary columns of the newspapers, in politics certainly, it’s not enough for us to seek the truth; we also have to defeat and humiliate our opponents. Often when we enter into dialogue the object of it seems to be to bludgeon the other person into accepting our point of view. But that’s forgetting the Socratic element, which means that nobody could win a Socratic dialogue and at each point, Socrates said, and Plato said the same, the dialogue must be conducted with gentleness and courtesy. You offered your opinion to your dialogue partner, and he allowed it to enter his mind and change and unsettle his opinions and then he would give something back to you.

It’s no good entering into dialogue if you’re not prepared to be changed by it. Sometimes when you see debates on television, or a panel discussion on a platform like this, people

are not really listening to their opponent but thinking of the next brilliant remark that they can make, or how to twist the words that he has used to make another point of their own—it's aggressive. We ought to cultivate the habit of listening, to listen to, say fundamentalist discourse and analyze it as carefully as we would analyze a poem or an important political speech. When I was making my study of fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, I found that every single one of these movements had been rooted—was rooted in a profound fear, a profound fear of annihilation. And that—when you've learned to listen to that you can hear that fear. Learn to listen to the subtext, because unless we listen to the other, we are not making space for them in our minds.

I used to absolutely hate religion. When I limped away from my convent, I wanted nothing to do with religion ever again, and my first books were very much sort of in the line of the Dawkinsesque. I didn't know much, and I bashed religion with, you know, acumen and cleverness, egged on—I was in television at the time—egged on by the crew to be as outrageous as possible. Then my television career folded, as all the previous careers I'd attempted in my early life folded, and I found myself alone. And, in silence, the texts suddenly started to mean something different, there was no one to egg me on in that way, and I came across a phrase very, very early in a footnote that has been a sort of watchword to me. It was a phrase used by Louis Massignon, the great Islamist scholar. And he said that a historian of religion must not look at the spiritualities of the past from the vantage point of post-Enlightenment rationalism. These spiritualities may seem bizarre, but what you must do is re-create the context in which this spirituality developed—its economic, political, sociological, intellectual—and not leave the study of

this spirituality until having broadened, he said, your understanding to a point where you could imagine yourself feeling the same. This, he said, was the science of compassion, a way of knowledge, *scientia*, that comes from feeling or experiencing with the other, and I found that when I was—in this way, he said, you will make place for the other in your mind.

And I think that's our task, to make a place for the other. Not to say, to push the other to the purlieu, and it's enriching. I found it enriching myself because at my desk every day I had to put clever, overeducated Karen on the back burner and enter into the minds of people who like, say, like the Prophet Muhammad living in the hell of seventh-century Arabia and sincerely believing that he'd been touched by God, and I knew that if I couldn't enter into that with empathy, I would miss the essence of Muhammad, and this changed my view of religion and I started to notice then how little—when you're doing this all day at your desk, you start to notice how little of that science of compassion goes on in ordinary social conversation and how little we make place for the other in our minds.

Well, what about the twelfth step, then, loving your enemies? Now, this is the ultimate test, and I have to say this book is, I suppose a kind of how-to book, but it's a bit different from those sort of how-to books that help you to lose weight immediately or get a flat stomach in a week or your makeover when you get a new face in the course of the program, because this is a struggle with ourselves that lasts until our dying day, it's a

continuous process, and loving your enemies, we probably very rarely get to that point, but we should be trying for it.

But what did Jesus mean when he said, “Love your enemies?” Well, Jesus was in the Sermon on the Mount as given by Matthew in his gospel, he is presented as doing a piece of good rabbinic *midrash*, an inventive interpretation of Torah, and he’s commenting on Leviticus, “love your neighbor as yourself,” but this time, in a rabbinic way, he’s saying, “now take that further and love your enemies.” Now, Leviticus is a legal text. It’s not talking about feeling. Talking about your emotions would be as out of place in Leviticus as it would be in a Supreme Court ruling. No one is expecting you to be filled with tenderness for Osama bin Laden.

But we use—and I rather shy off the word “love” when I’m talking about compassion, because we use it in such a loose way in our society. You know, we love ice cream, or we love a certain television program, and in this country, too, you often end telephone conversations—we don’t do that in Britain, we’re far too buttoned-up—by saying things like “Love ya,” and really you hardly know the person a lot of the time, **(laughter)** but so Jesus isn’t talking about this kind of “love.”

In love—the word love was a technical legal term used in international treaties in the ancient Middle East. Two kings, probably former enemies, promised to love each other, which didn’t mean that they fell into one another’s arms, but that they promised to look out for one another. It meant they would be loyal. It meant loyalty, fealty. They would

look out for each other's best interests. They would come to his aid in time of trouble. They would give him practical support and help at all times even if this went against their short-term interests. This kind of love is within our capacities. And, basically, if we don't give that kind of support to people we'll have more September the 11ths. We wouldn't be having some of these problems today if we had loved these colonized people that we British people were exploiting largely for our own economies. If we had approached them in a different spirit.

So love your enemies. That's the spirit we need for our world. We need to get to know one another, as the Qur'an says. There's a point in the Qur'an where God says, "Oh people, we have formed you from a male and a female, and have formed you into tribes and nations so that you may get to know one another." Not so that you may conquer or kill or terrorize or occupy or dispossess, but so that you may get to know one another. Living in your own tribe and nation, you have occasionally to rub up against rebarbative people, and this is a sort of dress rehearsal for the infinitely difficult task of loving, of reaching out to the other, the more distant other. But it can and should be done.

There's a biblical story that shows that from a very early point this could become—this effort to reach out to the stranger could become a spiritual experience. It concerns Abraham in Genesis chapter 18, who is sitting under his tree in the hottest part of the day, and he sees three strangers on the horizon. Now, strangers in the ancient world were dangerous people. They were not bound by the local laws of vendetta, and indeed very few of us would bring three total strangers off the street into our own home. But

Abraham rushes out in the heat of the Middle Eastern afternoon and bows before them as though they were kings or gods and then brings these total strangers into his own encampment and gives them an elaborate meal. He has made place for the other. That's the whole point of the ethic of what we call hospitality, to make a room for the other. And in the course of the ensuing conversation it transpires quite naturally without any vulgar fanfare that God is somehow taking part in that conversation. The act of compassion has led to a divine encounter.

Whatever we mean by God, we mean it is, we're talking really, when we say God we're talking about something transcendent, and often in our Western, target-driven world we talk about what lies at the end of the spiritual quest. What is God? What is it? The Chinese had a different way of looking at things. Confucius never was interested in what lay at the end of a life. The highest reality, the ultimate reality in the Chinese world was the Tao, the Way, it was the path that gave you transcendence by putting ego to one side. All day and every day in the exercise of compassion you were constantly going beyond the self and that introduced you to the transcendence that you call God. So it can be a rewarding thing.

And I'd just like to end with another biblical story which I think speaks so much to our time, because, whether we like it or not, we are bound to each other now worldwide as never before. We're bound electronically on the Web, economically—when one market goes down there's a domino ripple effect throughout stocks throughout the world. What happens in Afghanistan or Iraq today is likely to have repercussions tomorrow in London

or New York. We are connected with each other and therefore we have for our own sanity—it's only rational to make a space for them in our minds.

It's the story of Jacob and Esau. You know the story where Jacob wrestles all night long with a mysterious stranger. And realizes that, in some sense, this has been a divine encounter and this wrestling match, of course, reminds us in the text of another wrestling match he had when he was in his mother's womb with his brother, Esau. In our mythology, twins are often seen as two halves of a single whole. Your twin is often your shadow self, and Jacob and Esau are bound together. They are fighting, and God tells their unfortunate mother that you are carrying two nations in your womb—Israel, that's Jacob, and Esau, which is Edom, a neighboring country with whom Israel was in conflict at the time this story was committed to writing. We are—Jacob and Esau are twins, they're shadows. Each is the shadow of the other. They can't live with each other. They can't live without each other, either. But when the enemy, our enemy is ourselves, when we meditate, it's a perverse sort of meditation. We love to meditate on his bad qualities. So that they become kind of in the core of our national consciousness. If you take say India and Pakistan and they'll tell you if you go there, "we are one people." And yet it helps—we are formed, our national consciousness or cultural consciousness is often formed by the enemy that we have within us.

And then, of course, you know the story that Jacob cheats his brother and has to flee for his life because Esau is so distressed and he comes back twenty years later and is terrified to meet Esau, he doesn't know what will happen, and when he crosses over home into the

land of the promise he sends ahead of him gifts, huge, lots of livestock to give to his brother and then he is left alone and in his dream, it's quite clear it's a dream, a stranger comes and wrestles with him all night, and his mind is full of Esau, and there's various wordplays throughout, especially the word "face." The word face is applied indiscriminately in this to Esau, to Jacob and then to God. Binding these three together in each other's minds. At the end of this match, where Jacob has been wounded in his thigh, he says, "Tell me your name!" And the stranger says to him, "Now, why do you ask my name?" And of course Jacob knows who he is—he's been fighting with himself, his brother, and in the struggle with himself and with his enemy he has encountered the divine. And he leaves the place and he calls it Peniel, face of God, because he said, "I have looked upon Your face, I've looked upon the face of God, and I have survived."

In our struggle with our enemy we have to struggle manfully with ourselves, and we can get intimations of the divine. A wonderful thing happens the next day. The two brothers come face-to-face, and Esau surprises us. He behaves like a young prince, and runs forward to—embraces his brother, and Jacob says to him, "Looking on your face is like looking on the face of God." And I'd like to leave you with this image of Jacob leaving the place of Peniel. He is limping because he's been wounded in his struggle but the text—and we are wounded by conflict. We are wounded by war, we are wounded by enmity, but the text tells us as he leaves the sun is rising, and he's walking into the new day and a new era. Thank you. **(applause)** Now I'm very delighted to answer some questions.

Q: I wonder if you have heard of the Compassionate Listening Project? It was founded by Quaker pacifists during the cold war to get enemies to sit down and listen to one another, it's actually a method of "how do you teach compassion?"

KAREN ARMSTRONG: That's a marvelous contribution. Yes, I have heard that. And I think the Quakers—you said it was a Quaker thing—

Q: It was Gene Knudsen Hoffman. She just died at ninety-three, this July. She was the founder. And it was founded based on the small groups and twelve steps. You know, it was a similar kind of thing.

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Fantastic. And the Quakers have a lot to teach us because of this listening, this quietness, which makes you receptive, makes you open to listen with full ears. Thank you very much.

I'm sorry, the sun, I'd like to look at your face—we were talking about faces, and I can't see you very well because of the light.

Q: I was very much interested by the essence of mystery in compassion, which it seems to me is hinted at in the various etymologies that you mentioned, so that the English word compassion may not even exist as such in a modern European language, or the word may have a translation in another language which goes to a completely different root. I

wonder if you could expand just a little bit on some of those ancient etymologies, because I found them very helpful.

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Thank you. I think let's just look at the word "mystery," for a moment because that's got really downgraded in our know-it-all culture. I remember Descartes, for example, said there will be no more mysteries, there will be no more need for wonder, because soon we're going to know everything, and Newton, who hated the idea of mystery—mumbo-jumbo, we think, you know, or just a laziness, abdication of finding out, but in the word *mysterion* in Greek was nothing to do with mumbo-jumbo, it was something that you did. The Eleusinian mysteries were a series of rituals, life-changing rituals that people put themselves through for three days and came out different, with a different outlook if they'd gone through this exercise carefully, and we've lost the habit of thinking of mystery as something that we have to do that will change us and that's the mystery of compassion. We won't get compassion.

People are always telling me, "I agree with the Golden Rule. I believe in it." I don't care whether you believe in it or not, you've got to do it. **(laughter)** Compassion isn't about, you know, just accepting something, it's a *mysterion*, it's something that you do, it's a process that will change and transform you.

And on that subject, you know, there's that idea of the mystery of each human being, this is very strong in most cultures. You have the way the Hindus will join hands and bow to one another to acknowledge the divinity they are encountering in the other person and the

great Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi of the twelfth, thirteenth century said that every single human being was one—a unique and unrepeatable incarnation of one of God’s hidden names, so each of us in an unrepeatable revelation of God to the world. That’s sort of something you have to do. You can’t say, “Oh, yeah? And how do you prove that?” It’s something that you have to put your mind to it. Look at us all here in this room, and each one of us is an unrepeatable revelation of the divine, how impossible it is to sum up God.

It’s meant to lead us to that sense of the ineffable, and if you think of all the people who have ever lived and all the people in the world, in your mind you begin to realize that you cannot just sum up God in a single word. But he said that the name, the God that would be spoken in your being, would be different from everybody else’s similarly, and it would be deeply shaped by the faith religion into which you were born. The Sufis have an outstanding appreciation of other people’s faith. And he said that our job is to make that name a vibrant reality in the world, but we also have to look beneath the promising exterior of other people to see that epiphany, to create an epiphany for ourselves by means of the creative imagination.

Again, this is a *mysterion*, a mystery, something that you do that can transform you as you do it, as you go through that. I think that the word mystery is important. Another one is belief. I *believe* in compassion. The word “belief” has changed its meaning. It used to mean, *beleven* in Middle English meant “to love,” it was related to the German *Liebe* or the Latino *libido*. “Accept my *beleve*,” says one of Chaucer’s knights, and this means accept my loyalty, my fealty. It’s a sense of commitment, and so the King James people,

the translators, when they were translating the New Testament into English they translated the Greek word *pistis* by “belief,” which still retained this meaning of commitment, love, devotion. *Pistis* does not mean accepting a whole lot of doctrines. It means commitment, like *pisteo* means like, “I will” in the marriage service, and Jesus is not asking people to believe that he was the second person of the Trinity, an idea that would have been rather surprising to him, I think. He is asking people for commitment, for people to give away everything they have to the poor, to live rough, to live like the birds of the air and lilies of the field, and to follow him, and to work for the coming of the kingdom of God in which rich and poor will sit down together at the same table.

That’s *pistis*, and now we’ve in the late seventeenth century, belief changed its meaning and came to mean an acceptance of a rather dubious proposition, and that’s made the whole idea of faith, which you identify with this belief very difficult because none of these doctrines make sense unless you do them. And coming back to mystery again, the mystery of the Trinity is not just a piece of mumbo-jumbo. It was given to Greek Orthodox converts after their baptism, they were told about the Trinity and it was a meditation. They didn’t just chant a slogan like “three in one and one and three,” and I’ve got it. You were supposed to swing your mind from the ineffable, indescribable divine essence which lay beyond thought and which we could never know to the three manifestations of the divine that Christians had seen in the father, the word, and the spirit that lives within each one of us. And you swing your mind from one to the other, rather like a Buddhist mandala, where you go round and round in concentric circles to find your own center. But if you don’t do the meditation, you don’t get it. It’s like those theorems

that you learned—that we learned at school, and you end up with an algebraic formula, “pi equals something something,” and that means nothing unless you’ve gone through the steps—the reasoning steps that lead to that conclusion.

So no wonder Western people have such trouble with the Trinity. We’ve never done that meditation. One of the Greek Orthodox fathers who helped to formulate trinity said that when I when I tried to explain this, the effect of this meditation. He said, “When I think of the one,” that’s the indescribable, “I think of the three. And I think of the three and I’m led back to the one, going back and forth, and my eyes are filled with tears, and I lose all sense of where I am.” But you’re not going to do that if you don’t do the *mysterion*, if you don’t do it. Next question?

Q: Firstly, I just want to say how much I’ve enjoyed, as I’m sure many people have, reading your many books. I want to ask you a question that I don’t really know how to ask, but I’m sure many people want to ask, and that is about your own faith these days. I think in *The Spiral Staircase* I think you described yourself as being spiritual, and I think you actually said that people—

KAREN ARMSTRONG: No, I really—I would never say I was a spiritual person. I wouldn’t, but go on, anyway.

(laughter)

Q: But the question really is—we live in a world where people classify themselves, or are classified, according to the faiths to which they subscribe, which I always had great difficulty with and I sense that you have great difficulty with.

KAREN ARMSTRONG: I do. The quick answer, and this is not entirely flippant, is I'm convalescent. **(laughter)** I'm in recovery I think from a difficult religious experience as a young girl and still recovering. And it's my study as I explain in the last chapter of *Spiral Staircase* that has become for me a form of meditation and a form of prayer. It's a sort of an ongoing thing and it touches me deeply so that while I'm at my desk, trying to practice the science of compassion I can get moments of awe and wonder, and would I call them God? God knows. This is itself—this is my Tao, my Way. I don't recommend this course to everybody. I think if you can stick with the religion into which you were born and make it work for you in some way, it's probably best.

But I just can't quite do that. I have, you know, difficulty with the current Catholic regime, and when you're brought up English, an English Catholic, there's something very un-British about Catholicism with its sort of smells and bells and you know Italian popes, now a German one we've got and Irish priests, and most of us, too, unless we were aristocrats, are Irish, and that creates another problem about being British for obvious reasons, you know. So I can't quite see myself going into the Church of England, put it that way. I feel more at home with Jews and Muslims and I'm very drawn to the Eastern faiths, but so one day perhaps maybe I'll just plump for one and work within that, but at the moment I'm not quite ready for that.

Q: Maybe I can just ask you one follow-up question there. “Is there an afterlife?”

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Ohh, I’m entirely agnostic about the afterlife. I wouldn’t know, actually, I haven’t sort of been there or—but I am agnostic about the afterlife and I think a lot of religions are. Judaism, for example, doesn’t have a set thing about afterlife. Islam and Christianity place a great—although there’s very little about the afterlife actually in the New Testament. When Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven, he’s not talking about angels and clouds, but about the kingdom of God that will come on earth. He uses the word heaven, Matthew does, rather than God as a mark of say of the name of God, to use heaven instead, and it is something that will happen on this world. And Saint Paul says, “Eye have not seen, ear have not heard, nor have it entered into the heart of man what things God has prepared for those who love him.” In other words, “I don’t know,” **(laughter)** and if that’s good enough for Paul, it’s good enough for me.

(laughter)

And I’m wary of the afterlife because as a child my religious life was ruined by endless concentration on getting into heaven, and I didn’t think I was going to make it. I was quite convinced that I was bound for the other place. **(laughter)** And we’re given hellfire sermons and the whole thing you can get so sort of intent on the afterlife that all your good deeds are like paying your installments into your retirement annuity, **(laughter)** and there’s nothing religious about that. Religion is supposed to be about the loss of the ego and not about its survival in optimum conditions. **(laughter/applause)**

So I think—I don't know about the afterlife. I have no idea. I think I do believe, though, that we have moments of transcendence or what you're out of time in our lives.

Sometimes you can get it from art, sometimes from love, from looking at something beautiful, and sometimes you can get it in a religious context, and you get it too by compassion, going back to my—by taking yourself out of yourself beyond the ego, you can have moments of *extasis*, stepping outside the self, and if you don't have it here, you're certainly not going to have it on a cloud afterwards, I don't think. Just be prepared—I think what we have is now. This is what we know. We don't even know we've got tomorrow, and to live intensely, fully, and kindly in the present moment, I think, is how I try to get through my life.

Q: Hi, I'm originally from Israel and I came here in 2000 and then five years later I end up leaving Judaism myself and start the process of inquiring about other world religion, and basically I still feel like one of the problems that I sense in Israel today and not just against the Palestinians, now they have the Asian minority that they bring to do the hard labor, and they don't accept their existence there, and they're fighting the issue of education and other issues as well, and I just wonder what you can say about how to step away—I mean, I felt like for me it was important to step away from Judaism, from my own religion, in order to create a dialogue between non-Jewish, which even though five years I was living here I still didn't do that, so I wonder if this dialogue can be created other ways.

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Well, I think—A dialogue between enemies, you mean?

Q: Yeah. Not just enemies. Between people, really.

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Between people. I think a lot of talk about religion and about theology is very interesting but I think the best way of getting together is to work together, to put—you know, C. S. Lewis is not a writer that I spend very much time reading or quoting but he did—there was one thing that I read of his as a child, or as a young girl, let's say, that made an impression upon me, which is how he distinguished *eros* from friendship. And in *eros*, you gaze mesmerized into the eyes of the beloved and you want to lose yourself in the other and merge your souls. In friendship, you are standing side by side looking ahead at the same object. You're standing shoulder to shoulder, working.

I think working together for peace, or in your own community with problems, can bring out the similarities that you share, and if you think of this wonderful movement—I'm a patron of this—of the friends of this movement whereby Israelis and Palestinians who have lost children—sons, daughters—in this conflict have come together to work together for peace, to say, “Enough. We don't want anybody else to suffer this.” That's an example of what can be done.

And similarly, in Pakistan, the extraordinary young man who's promoting the charter in Pakistan, a young businessman, has created a movement, but he said, “Leave the

politicians out of this. We in civil society will step forward and work together for peace.” And this last month he’s taking groups of leading members of civil society in a given profession, like IT specialists was last week, and he takes them into India, where they meet their opposite numbers in several Indian cities, and they sit round and work out how we can bring India and Pakistan back together again, working together, especially in business. Businessmen can be a force for great good because they want peace.

So I think doing is better. I mean, it’s fascinating discussing different ideas of God. I love it, of course, it’s my stock in trade, but it can just get into a sort of impasse—well, “we believe Jesus is the son of God,” and “well, we don’t,” and that’s the end of the story really, you look at each other. And just never mind this, because I don’t think anybody has the last word on God or what we mean by God. We’re—God is a symbol that points us into a great transcendence, but by working together we discover the deep similarities that we can share.

Q: I’m just—I’m grateful that I live here where I can actually do that, but back in Israel, that is not reality, that working together was no longer a reality. When I left, there was very little interaction between Palestinians and Israelis.

KAREN ARMSTRONG: I know. But we have to keep hoping. We have to keep hoping for the good of the world. Because once we lose hope we see what happens when people fall into despair of the ordinary political processes. Yes, sir.

Q: How important is humor in the practice of compassion?

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Very good point. You need to laugh at yourself, I think, because we are so ridiculous. And I think, you know, compassion for yourself should have a good element of humor in it, actually. When you see yourself going into one of your—I say me, not you—I watch myself going into one of my states and rages, I'm going round and round in a kind of rat run, just say, just have a laugh, and to laugh together, not to laugh at so much, but to laugh together, because we are absurd. We have these extraordinary ideals and ambitions and intimations of grandeur, having achieved such wonderful things, and yet we are so petty minded and ridiculous. That's a very good point. Thank you.

Q: I should have gone after him, I mean before him, because this might be a downer. But I studied the Old Testament this semester, and I haven't read the Qu'ran, but it seems to me that the Old Testament and the Torah also have so much violence in them, and I'm wondering is it important to acknowledge that and work with that, or is it a waste of time to also study that since you can get so much good from—

KAREN ARMSTRONG: I'm awfully glad you asked that question, because it's one of the things the charter is calling for. And I want to write something about these difficult violent passages myself perhaps in an upcoming book. Because we've got to see how these—and it's in the New Testament, too. It's there. The book of Revelation is a very violent book, and we have anti-Semitic passages that caused—anti-Jewish passages, I

should say—that caused pogroms for a long time in European history. And we've got to look at these passages and see how they came into the tradition.

Now what we call the Old Testament, you know, all these battles and, you know, killings and Joshua's wars and all the rest. We're not sure at all which religious function these had when they were written. Judaism was a religion of the temple, and it was the rabbis who after the temple was destroyed, which made Judaism a religion of the book, so and then the great thing is that we're reading our scriptures differently these days. We—from the very first, the rabbis understood that religious language needed interpretation and that you had to be selective, and they read the—what the Hebrew scriptures through the eyes of the *mishnah* and then the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmuds, which change it, just as Christians read the—what they call the Old Testament through the lens of the New, which again transforms it.

But the rabbis had—they liked to be highly inventive and make the biblical passages speak to their own time, even if this was far removed from the original author's intention, because this was the word of God and therefore capable of multiple interpretation, but there was a limit to the amount of inventiveness they allowed themselves, and one of the principles was that you—an interpretation that spread hatred or contempt was not legitimate, and Saint Augustine made the same point when he said that if a religious text, scripture or text, seems to preach hatred, you have to give it an allegorical interpretation and make it speak of charity. So we need to get back to that, I think, at least find out more

about these texts—what influence did they have in the tradition as a whole? Are we reading them differently today?

Q: Thank you.

Q: Hi. My parents are fairly conservative Christians who would probably take umbrage at the prescription by someone who didn't practice exactly the same spirituality that they did to pay more attention to the Golden Rule than all the other aspects of the religion that makes it unique to the point that converting other people is very important to them, so I was wondering whether you could speak to the issue to appealing to people to pay attention more to what makes them more in common with other spiritualities as opposed to everything else that makes their religion or spirituality unique, because in the end if I could project onto my parents, I feel as if they would say, "Well, you know, that other fellow may be nice and good, and we can do certain things together, but deep down inside, I think he's going to go to hell and it's my responsibility to save him."

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Yeah. **(laughter)** Yes, I know that mind-set a lot. And what you have to understand is a lot of these hard-line spiritualities, as I say, are rooted in some kind of insecurity. Sometimes we can't—the idea—and what's happened in our global world, the more we've got to know about other faiths, some people like me love this exploring other faiths and seeing similarities. Others find it profoundly threatening and have retreated into denominational ghettos which are much stricter than would have

been in past time. These—a lot of these so-called fundamentalist theologies, not a good word, but I haven't got much time. Fundamentalist theologies are highly modern, unorthodox, and would have been and are new, speaking of modern insecurities. But I think you have to be patient.

Liberals can be just as hard-line. I once went, very early just after I'd written *History of God*, I went to speak to a British group called Sea of Faith, which has deconstructed God and they were furious with me for using the word God, and they said, "You mustn't use that at all." And I said, "Look, you've left all these denominations because you're fed up with the dogmatism and the orthodoxies. You're creating a new orthodoxy. You know, leave it." Just be patient. I always think, I do believe that if I don't care what people believe, I really don't. If they want to believe that God created the world in six days, this is not a belief I can share, but, you know, it's not worth being argumentative about it.

And if your religion—and this is not my idea, this is, you know, in the text and in the tradition themselves. If your beliefs lead you to be kinder and more open to others, they are good beliefs. If they make you retreat and become aggressive, there's an insecurity, there is insecurity there, so be patient and don't try to bludgeon people into accepting a liberal perspective.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Just before asking my question, I would like to encourage everybody to come up later and talk to you. You'll be signing books there. Now to my question. I'm interested in the limits of compassion. Whether they are limits in a liberal

context, compassion giving us a good feeling, or whether it is in some way sometimes very, very difficult to put oneself in somebody else's shoes, and I'll give an example of this from this stage. I had the good fortune and pleasure of interviewing on this stage with Cornel West Jay-Z. And one thing this hip-hop artist said to me is, you know, I come from a very poor neighborhood, you cannot imagine what it means for me to be on this stage, but you also cannot imagine what it means to be me. You cannot put yourself into my shoes, they would not fit. They're much too uncomfortable shoes, so his shoes and my shoes are not only of a different size but also completely different. So I'm just wondering the limits of compassion, the limits of empathy, if you could explore that I'd be very grateful.

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Certainly. That's the mystery of the other. Where you find you cannot put yourself in the other's shoes, and you've come up against the mysterious otherness of the other and you realize the limitations of your knowledge of that person, and therefore you put a curb on your omniscience about him. It's how little we know, again, it's that seventh step, the recognition of the limitations of what we can know about the other. The other will always remain elusive and therefore can't be summed up neatly by us. To pluck out the heart of my mystery, that you can't do. It's another way perhaps of giving that Hamlet quote.

Empathy doesn't mean identification. The other remains other. You're not merging with the other. Our friends, our dearest friends often mystify us. We can imagine lots of their life, but they often are mystifying and surprising to us, and that doesn't make us any the

less affectionate towards them or a desire to wish their good. We wish the good of the other, and I suppose another limitation and it doesn't mean empathy, or doesn't mean approval, again, that's all sort of very subjective, whether I like you or whether—this is you are seeking the good of the other who will remain mysterious and elusive and other to you.

And also let's think of the terrorist. I think it's important to try to understand what—the steps that have brought the person to this criminal atrocity. Because if we don't understand what's going on, we are lost. We've got—intelligence doesn't just mean finding out the whereabouts of weapons of mass destruction, it means what's going on in people's minds and hearts but ultimately one can't—having gone through yes I can see that there's this, that, and the other that might have pushed him to that, ultimately if you believe in the Golden Rule you cannot in any sense condone or put yourself in that place where he was when he takes the lives of other people. If you do the Golden Rule, you can't do that. But that exercise might help you to understand the plight of some of his fellow countrymen or coreligionists, who may have felt the same sense of disease, malaise, injustice, but have not resorted to criminal atrocity, so, but again there's a limit. We're not merging with the other, we're not saying that we know the other but we desire their good, we try as far as possible, especially if we're challenged by somebody, to see where he or she is coming from, but ultimately the mystery will remain.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you very, very much. Karen Armstrong.

(applause)