SCHOLAR AND PEACE PRACTITIONER: A LIFE

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My books on peacebuilding have followed the course of my life's practices and engagement, and my life's peacebuilding practices have led to the journeys undertaken in my books (Gopin, 2000, 2002, 2009, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2021). Since I was a child, I have sought to know what is right to do in a broken world and what will make the world somewhat less violent. From a moral consequentialist perspective, I wanted to know what will save the most lives in violent situations, and what are the most morally relevant character traits. This has been a thematic question through the ages for philosophers of wisdom. The desire to search for ways to save the lives of innocents has been ingrained in me from childhood due to family tragedies, including the accidental death of my uncle when he was four. I have based myself as well on extensive religious and philosophical courses of study.

Experiments with interventions in war zones throughout my adult years and practice in a small field called international peacebuilding have prompted me to write books. These works have been a place where I could integrate peacebuilding with my first field of philosophical ethics and moral decision-making in religious traditions. I have also embedded in the books my style of interdisciplinary thinking, which prepares me for real-world ethical practices. My writings have been based on a lifelong and interdisciplinary examination of world religions, violence and peace in those religions and cultures, the neuroscience of prosocial emotions, positive psychology, and moral reasoning. In all of these disciplines, I have leaned towards a better and more effective form of conflict analysis and resolution.

The books have also been deeply personal and a place of my growth as a practitioner. They are a place for me of reflection, refuge, self-criticism, self-care, and exploration of future possible worlds. For 40 years, coffee shops with small tables – I am sitting and writing at one now – have been an oasis from the horror of seeing the world through the eyes of war victims. I see before me those people I helped and got to know, with their swollen eyes, blank stares, and nervous twitches. Just days before they had narrowly escaped being killed; they were weighed with the guilt of having left behind their cherished loved ones.

The memories of so many have passed through me, much as I try to forget. Some victims have even healed well from war, and in my small way, I helped that process of healing, as did so many other people. But due to the excess of empathic distress in my nature, my mind remains in those first terrible moments of encounter and learning. I see these victims as they looked when we first met, in their worst hour, and I see them repeatedly and involuntarily. Worse, I see what they saw; I feel it. I am stuck in time, as an involuntary witness and sponge of information, recalling vividly their stories of atrocities witnessed and experienced. Contagious or acquired trauma has had real effects on my body; though these are now mostly gone, they sometimes lasted for years.

Due to this difficult personal experience, I have tried through my writings and practices to chart for myself and my students a healthier course of interventions. I wanted to follow an intellectual and professional path away from empathic distress and acquired trauma, and yet I wanted still to be deeply engaged in the ethics, art, and science of conflict resolution. I have tried to emphasise a path of joyful care and service, and I am now convinced by the evidence that with more enlightened teaching and training, improved ethics, and vision, we can care for the world's wounded in better ways than we have done, as we repair and rebuild for a flourishing future. The more meaningful we make these encounters of care the more millions of people will find this path of service to be a healthy and beneficial way to live in and engage with a troubled world. This has been a journey to change the balance of society's reactions away from indifference and fear, or deep empathy and burnout, and towards confident, joyful engagement and responsibility.

I have found the path towards this end-state of healthy encounters and meaning to be the most challenging of mental and emotional habits for the mind to develop. It is the mind and the body that intrigue me endlessly in this challenge. It is not that I am less interested in society as a whole or

large patterns and movements of a social, political, economic, and military nature. But I am proposing that those large movements and patterns often cause us to overlook and avoid examining the basic building block of any societal evolution: the human being's habituated mind and body.

It is the difficult job of the mind and body to take a person from a life of escape and selfishness to a life of peacebuilding, engagement, and giving. Moving from despair and withdrawal from the pain of this world towards a flourishing compassionate engagement and service is the job of a disciplined mind and body. Once this transition occurs and we discover how to teach what I have come to call "Compassionate Reasoning," then engagement in the most difficult places can become attractive to younger generations – as attractive as any practice of joy and meaningfulness.

My greatest focus for the first 20 years of my research and study was traditional ethics across the range of world religions, with a special focus on global wisdom literature, ethical laws, and rituals that generate compassion in the human mind and in habits of behaviour. But for personal reasons I also had to make sense of why and how religions founded by nonviolent thinkers and prophets could turn genocidal, particularly against my people, the Jewish people. The Holocaust and centuries of atrocities have always haunted my mind and heart. My nature is especially prone therefore to extreme empathy and empathic distress from the awareness of tortured suffering in those people and civilisations that I meet.

I had to examine all religions equally, including Judaism, since I had been influenced by many ethical schools, especially deontology or Kantianism. I knew that an empirical, robust, and honest look at religious traditions across the globe would yield at least some sacred texts and traditions that advocate violence. This was a painful evolution of discovery for me since I grew up in a deeply religious and ethnically insular community. But on the bright side, the journey yielded a methodology of "hermeneutic peacebuilding," inspired in part by Hans Gadamer's (1979) fusion of horizons, across the lines of many religious traditions and denominations. It gave me the tools to see what was missing from the best efforts of political science, international relations theory, and diplomacy to create effective peace treaties. The very nature of these treaties excluded religious conservatives and/or extremists.

I acquired the tools to conceive new methods of combining conflict resolution practices, religious traditions, and ethical practices. This has yielded good results over the past 20 years as governments since 9/11 have scrambled to understand both the good of religious actors traditionally left

out of consideration and the dangers within religious traditions. Most importantly we have come to see the destructive consequences of all states that manipulate religious militancy for their national interests or their interest in conquering or controlling neighbouring states. I have been called upon many times, especially since 9/11, to engage media and government agencies in building a more rational approach to conflict through considering world religions, their adherents, their doctrines, and their power structures.

It has been gratifying to see that there has been much progress in this regard and that it has helped to neutralise the threat of at least some forms of religious extremism. Of course, the last place that governments look for trouble is "under the hood" – at themselves and their own cultures and religions. Thus, much remains to be done in terms of self-examination by states and cultures. Various governments in the West and across the world have continued to weaponise and instrumentalise radical religion for the sake of strategic, economic, and military objectives. Nevertheless, the problem is far more widely exposed now and there are efforts to do the contrary.

This focus on self-examination as the key to effective conflict resolution has led me over the years to look at the consequences of the inner life of individuals for their effectiveness or failure as peacebuilders. The same can be said of governments and cultures, however, and that is why I keep studying the psychological capacities of the individual to grow and evolve in healthy ways. My practice and my research have moved towards the individual's inner life and the model of effective changemakers and peacemakers, but this necessarily has implications for policy and the behaviour of states in war and peace.

I had spent most of my adult life on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and so I naturally delved into the inner lives of Arab and Jewish peacemakers, to explore self-examination, the evolution of identity construction, and peacebuilding. It has been a long hard road, but I have travelled this road with many amazing people. These are not "famous" people in the Western world, which defines fame, power, and impact through a very limited lens. Nevertheless, their stories, though rarely told, hold the secret to better forms of conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

I decided to do whatever I could to tell the stories of extraordinary exemplars of peace. I wanted the world to know them, to stop ignoring the most significant Jewish and Arab relationships, which could give birth, through their model, to a nonviolent future. These peacemakers are a unique subset of human beings, partners in peacemaking across one of the longest and most serious enemy lines in modern times. In a certain

sense, they stand on the bridge of a divide that goes back many centuries, to the very foundations of a split in that cluster of religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – known as the Abrahamic religions. There are very serious and violent political divides, but my focus was on the inner lives of the few because the key to creating true partnerships across enemy divides is the inner life. Let me explain how.

From friends to lovers to business partners to academic colleagues the hardest challenge is a happy partnership. A partnership that is respect-ful, trustful, and generous is a precious and rare human experience whose maintenance requires constant effort, much trial and error, and long-term evolution. Imagine how much more difficult and how much more conse-quential – indeed fateful –is the difficulty of creating trusted partnerships and friendships across enemy lines where the blood of the innocent – the blood of your own family – has been shed. The obstacles are overwhelm-ing, the pressure from both sides to desist is unimaginable, and the inner challenges of guilt-ridden thoughts of betrayal are intense. Peace partners sometimes find themselves deserted by their closest friends, family mem-bers, and neighbours as a price for their association with a peace partner.

Almost all of the peace partners have either suffered violence them-selves or witnessed it against their loved ones. Almost all of them face serious opposition from those people whom they would usually rely upon for help and support: family, community, and teachers. How do they cope? How do they even flourish?

/// Self-Reflection at the Core

My principal focus and interest have been the practice and power of self-reflection. This is particularly important for me because I have concluded after decades of observation that a central source of endless conflict and misery between enemies – but also a central source of misery in families and communities – is the emotional, cognitive, and ethical failure of self-examination. An inability to examine oneself is one of the greatest impedi-ments to peace because it prevents the crucial calculations of science and reason that are anchored by *all* the facts about oneself and one's group.

A lack of self-examination also prevents an analysis of power relations and material relations. It prevents a person from making a thorough exami-nation of justice and fairness because one never sees one's own role in, or re-sponsibility for, destructive conflict. We all have a hard time looking at our-selves in the mirror, and the negative results of this fact affect each and every

one of us every day in our conflicts. Extraordinary peacemakers know this, and that is why they are working on themselves all the time. They are not saints, and they are not perfect, but I have observed for decades that they are far more conscious of their internal life and struggles, and much more ready than average people to "look in the mirror" as they struggle for answers.

/// Self-Examination as an Antidote to Despair

Self-examination is also the principal means of confronting and overcoming despair as we will also learn below, from Ibrahim. In my earlier years, before studying the neuroscience of "burnout," I posited that reflection is the ultimate defence against empathic distress because mental and emotional exhaustion are often due to an inability to accept the limits of one's capacities and the limits of what can be fixed about the past or the present. Reflection and self-examination, however, lead to a deeper understanding of limits, that is, to a level where these limits are grieved but there is also an embrace of the extent of human capacity. Critical reflection encourages taking responsibility for things we may have evaded, but it also exposes the wrongness of seizing *too much* personal responsibility, as doing so is often a prelude to burnout. Reflection is therefore very forgiving, and frequent forgiveness seems to prevent burnout – at least this was my operating hypothesis.

There is a good reason why thousands of years ago the Greeks expressed the essence of wisdom in two words: "Know thyself." I started to notice among the best peacemakers that inner knowledge is the key to authenticity and an antidote to despair. It seems to be for them the path of authentic growth, and it is the key to nonviolence in the face of adversity, injustice, and the tragedies of war. I have wondered what it would take for whole nations, tribes, and religious communities to do the same, and what rewards this would reap in terms of evolutionary growth and wisdom.

I want to examine the practice of knowing oneself by introducing the story of a little-known peacemaker who had a very strong impact on me. He was one of the members of the Bereaved Parents' Circle, a group of hundreds of Palestinian and Jewish families, all of whom had lost an immediate family member to the violence.

I made transcripts of Ibrahim's recounting of his story, and I want to quote it extensively. I have edited it minimally (only for the sake of clarity and to eliminate unintelligible phrases) in order to maintain Ibrahim's syntax and idiom.

/// A Word on Theory from Practice

I want to emphasise that my interpretation of every word of Ibrahim's, this non-scholar activist, is a deliberate act of mine as a scholar and theory builder of conflict resolution. I have become quite convinced in recent years that it is inside the minds and hearts of victims, and of would-be aggressors who have consciously worked through their pain, that we can perceive the best theory. It is they who innovate, who experiment, who invent a winding road that passes between radical injury and revenge and beyond to inner and outer peace. They crawl out of the hell of cyclical rage and revenge and into the mysterious region of peacebuilding, reconciliation, and the struggle for justice. In the process, they build unique theories of peacemaking that we must study. Therefore, I want to give Ibrahim's account as an extended example.

/// Ibrahim's Story Analysed

These are Ibrahim's words (presented as block quotations) as he describes the Parents' Circle families. I will integrate my content analysis in the body of the text:

> Those families […] lost relatives from the first degree, sons or fathers or sisters or brothers. And they follow strange way, to sit and dialogue, to revenge in another way, to sit and make dialogue with the others.

Ibrahim emphasises the choice between "revenge" and "dialogue." For Ibrahim, in all of his thought processes about violence, the central moral choice is between revenge and dialogue. Because he is so honest and self-examined, Ibrahim articulates here the essential moral problem of violence. Violence against our loved ones demands the *moral* response that has been sanctioned by most human societies since the beginning of time and that is often referred to as "revenge."

Revenge is not immoral according to most human traditions. Rather it is a moral choice to achieve justice for victims. Countless cultures have institutionalised and authorised revenge. But most wisdom traditions – often in the same cultures (!) – have concluded that revenge is *at the same time* a very problematic choice, because it guarantees an endless cycle of injustices, each injustice demanding more vengeance.

The truly self-examined person, however, also understands that revenge is a morally problematic choice. Thousands of years ago, the great Greek playwright Aeschylus examined this question in depth. Both the Bible and the Qur'an, for example, allow for revenge under very particular circumstances, but they also discourage its use at the very same time! Why? Because the boundaries of revenge and justice are entirely unclear, and the effects of revenge are almost always cyclical and therefore destructive to human happiness and the goal of creating a just society.

/// Ibrahim's Understanding of Revenge

Returning to our bereaved parent, Ibrahim's examination of revenge and the inner life is every bit as sophisticated as that of the classical writers. More importantly, it is wedded to an examination of the complicated choice between revenge, justice, and nonviolence. He argues that nonviolent engagement with enemies can result in a more authentic form of justice, and more importantly, *a better kind of revenge*, so that nonviolence and revenge merge, and violence dissipates. In other words, there may be a way to separate revenge – or getting even – from violence and aggression.

Ibrahim:

> The normal feeling, the natural feeling when you are lost is to go and revenge. This is the first thinking […] this is the first answer for the first question in your mind, that the only solution is to go and revenge immediately. Because when you are losing, the pain and the sorrow of the loss, it's building a new energy, a very, very strong and huge energy. This energy – I can describe what's happened to me – it's more dangerous than the energy of nuclear weapon. And as you know, the nuclear energy, you can use it to make darkness or you can use it to make light. But the first thing you are thinking after is how to go and revenge.
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> The tragedy as I told you, before four years from now […] I build small family, composed from one son and two daughters. This family, despite the way we are a small family, a small family living under full occupation, we still believe in dialogue, and this is very important, dialogue inside the house first of all. Peace inside the house. Because if you cannot make peace inside the house, you will never make it outside the house. And this is the problem of the peace here between Palestine and Israel. I mean the Israelian

[sic] people have to start to make peace inside their society, the Palestinian people must make peace inside their society, I have to make peace inside my family, he has to make peace inside his family; then we will go out.

Ibrahim is arguing that peace in society depends first and foremost on peace in the home. The most important preparation for Israelis and Palestinians who are making the difficult transition to meeting and knowing each other is their home lives. It is an essential prerequisite that they work on peace in the family as a part of the path towards reaching out to enemies. This is an interesting theme that I heard throughout my years working with the Palestinian side of the conflict.

Here is Ibrahim's succinct and cogent critique of the entire Oslo Peace Process, whose leaders might have benefited from his words:

The main obstacles in front of the peace, all the people asking why is there no peace here. The answer divide to two things. The first one, that all trying to bring the peace from up [i.e., top] to down. That's why all the agreements falling down with all the Israelian. And the second thing, the settlements. The settlements in the West Bank are considered one of the most important obstacles in front of the peace process. I don't have a problem with a nice guy from Tel Aviv or from Israel to come and build factory close to my village and to create chance of working to my friend. I have problem with the settlers who have a different ideology than the other Israeli who lives inside the Green Line.

Now tragedy strikes Ibrahim to his core:

So, it's three and a half years ago now, a settler runs over my son on his way to school with his mother. And they called me on the telephone that the only son that I have is injured. Ok, "the only son that I have is injured" is so far away from my mind for two reasons. I think because I am a peaceful one, I am a Palestinian who think within the peace. It's not easy because the peace in the Palestinian society is not as well [accepted as] in Tel Aviv or within the Israelian society. With whom are you going to talk about the peace, the majority of the people there are against your idea? So to be a peaceful man in West Bank under full occupation is not

easy. On the contrary, sometimes there may be some people who will harm you. But despite all of this situation, I took the decision, I have to be a peaceful man. I decided to be an ambassador for peace, not a soldier for war. A settler run over my only child that I have, the only thing that I have, that he lives with me 12 years ago, and he was killed immediately.

The natural feeling, the first feeling that you face it, that somebody come and take a flower from your garden, that you have to go to his garden and take another flower. But imagine, this is a flower or a tree, what about the son? Someone took your son. In Arabic it says a child is a part of earth.

So, the first thing, the first ambition after this tragedy […] it's to go and revenge. Have your revenge by killing other Israelians [sic]. This is the first ambition. It's a natural thing. It's something that is other than you control, that you have to go and kill another Israeli, innocent as your son.

/// Introspection and the Triumph of Compassion and Reason

Here is the crucial turning point in the story. We see the heroic strength and resilience of Ibrahim's personality emerge triumphant; we note the astonishing level of self-examination. Note the emphasis on his "I," his self, and its centrality in his emotional survival and transformation. Here we see how a life of introspection liberates two essential functions of the human mind, the capacity for reason, and the capacity for compassion. Both seem essential in the transformation of revenge into heroic reconciliation. This is something that I had concluded in the early 2000s and would later make into a formal theory of ethics and neuroscience, which in 2021 I named "Compassionate Reasoning," as the reader will see below.

Ibrahim's introspective moral reasoning in his worst moment of agony leads to a more generalised compassion for *all* people *as humans*, for *all* victims as simple victims regardless of their identity. Listen to Ibrahim's remarkable words, which I have kept in my mind to this day:

> **But I am the one** who was in touch with myself, and this is one of the very important things. **I am the one** who used to be in touch with Israelian people. I know that the majority of the Israelian people I succeed to build very deep social relations with them, and I am sure that – I speak the Hebrew language well, and this is

very important, I listen to the Hebrew language well. I saw, I am sure there are so many families from the Israelian side losing their children in the same way, when the Palestinian comes and explode himself inside a bus or inside a coffee shop.

I ask myself another question, another important question. If I go and revenge, if this will come [i.e., bring] back my son? Who will care about my two daughters [if I commit suicide]? All of these questions, I don't find answers for them. But what I find one answer, that revenge will not put any results on both sides.

/// The Inner Path from Revenge to Heroic Reconciliation

Here the story becomes more profound as we see Ibrahim as a champion of reconciliation:

> I was in touch with Israelian people and what's happening to my son was in the newspapers, the Israelian newspapers and on the radio. One of my friends in Tel Aviv he ask me, "Who is this boy? Who is this family?" And I told him, "That's me." And they know my son and they know me well. So he starts to cry at the mobile [phone] at this time. He, the Jew in Tel Aviv, "starts to cry at the mobile at this time," at the time that he hears of the boy he knew and loved, a Palestinian boy, now dead. He knows that his friend Ibrahim will never be the same ever again.

Every time I read this line, every time I remember Ibrahim's care-worn face as he said this to me so close to my face, eye to eye, I have to read it again and again, as if I am searching for an answer. Every time, my eyes moisten and my throat tightens like a strangulating knot, my breathing accelerates. After 35 years of this Arab/Israeli war that I have fought against, 35 years of resisting this abundant killing of innocents, I read these lines as I edit them, and I still burn with sorrow.

Why in particular does the weeping of the Jew on the mobile phone upon hearing of the death of Ibrahim's son affect me this way? Is it because I have felt his pain before when I have been on the other end of the telephone consoling Palestinians and my fellow Jews? Is it because I also have two daughters and a son, just like Ibrahim? Is that Jew on the mobile phone a role model for me, a kin relation that permits me to mourn, to let go of

a polarised view of Jew and Palestinian and just feel the pain of humanity? Am I proud of this Jew amid all this insanity, and is it the pride that makes me weep? Or perhaps exposure to this pain of the Jew in Tel Aviv and to Ibrahim, to their shared moment, is just an open trauma for me now after so much of the same that I have seen, so much that I have had to hear.

Perhaps there is a more hopeful motivation to my reaction. Perhaps it is the absolute truth of parenting and loss and solidarity and the unconditional evil of violence against children. Maybe that moment on the phone gives me hope, a moment where all ethnic and national narratives fall into a pile of rubbish before the kinship of parents who love their innocent, beautiful, amazing children – children now buried beneath their feet.

I wish I could capture that moment in time. I wish I could have a photograph of the parent on each end of the mobile phone, a photograph of the Jewish parent weeping, and a photograph of the Palestinian parent Ibrahim, and a recording of the conversation. I wish I could make this conversation into the Eleventh Commandment, a commandment that says, "Thou shalt not stand idly by the tears of parents for their dead children."

Ibrahim continues:

> After two days or three days they [the Jews] will ask me, they will call me that they would like to be with me. A group of thirty-five persons would like to visit me… to be with me. I say, "This is my privacy, this is my house, these are my friends that I have succeeded to build good relations with them since ten years ago. I am going to see them at my house." And thirty-five persons came to my house, and we prepared breakfast, lebneh and hummus, something like that. And we sit.
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> We start to cry. That's it. Because when you've lost something from your family, it means a lot. It means no Fridays with the son. No social occasions with the son. Everything gone away. The things that stay are the memories and the pictures.

/// Towards a Life Committed to Justice and Peace

The power of shared mourning is apparent here, but what is less apparent is the resilient strength of the peacemakers, the social genius combined with superhuman strength to go on, carrying their pain, and proceeding to work with everyone, even with those who created the atmosphere that has led to so much injustice and pain.

Ibrahim's concluding message for the diplomatic elites:

> So my message to the people here… the change starts from the house, from the family. If there is no change… from the family, from the childhood, from the mother of the family, from the school, from the university, they will never have change from the leaders. We need a change and we are not going to do it alone, as Israeli and Palestinian, because we live inside the mud and we need people to rescue us, to help us…

/// The Origins of Compassionate Reasoning in My Life

It has been 20 years now since my conversations with Ibrahim. After that time, I became deeply immersed in peacemaking and religious diplomacy as a citizen diplomat in Syria and elsewhere. I visited Damascus, Syria every year from 2005 to 2011. Right up until the fateful days of the Arab Spring, I brought my students from George Mason University to study and practice diplomacy with me in Syria. But 2011 ended all that because it became essential to side with the victims of genocide in Syria, to take care of them and apply the lessons of interfaith conflict resolution to their survival and to the management of severe trauma among the war refugees in Turkey and Jordan. My work, and research for several books, moved my focus towards developing training for "conflict healing." Secondly, I developed a psychosocial, neuroscience-based form of moral reasoning called "Compassionate Reasoning," as I recounted in my most recent volume for Oxford University Press (Gopin 2021). This book was written in response to the intense pain that I experienced while trying to help Syrian refugees survive and resist their cultural and physical destruction.

This work led to some serious trauma in my own life and many upheavals. I had to face the effects on my psyche of war and my work among war victims. I realised that I could not persist in the practice of conflict healing and peacebuilding without a much deeper analysis of the human being's interaction with suffering. This brought me straight back to "old friends" of my younger years, that is, I remembered my work on a philosopher of religious moral sense, Samuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865), conversations with the Dalai Lama (2012), study of Viktor Frankl (2013), the *Tao Te Ching* (LaFargue 2010), and many other psychologists and philosophers. I reread many books on resilience and depression and I especially followed the evolution of Dr Martin Seligman from his focus on depression to a focus on

positive psychology and cognitive therapy (Seligman 2011; Seligman et al. 2016). Steven Pinker's work on war and positive social change also had a deep impact (2011). I further delved into the amazing work of neuroplasticity, particularly the neuroscience of compassion.

/// Every Moment a Teacher: A Stranger's Fate in a Hotel Room on the Border of War

I remember a time in the field when I had minutes to convince a young man not to go over a border and into a war. He felt driven to seek out the murderers of his brother, who were part of one of the worst terrorist organisations in recent history. A friend of his begged me to intervene but without giving me any advice on how to save this complete stranger. I agreed to see him, and he entered my hotel room in a Middle Eastern country. I looked him in the eyes, this underweight and agitated, oddly smiling and barely 20-something survivor of absolute horror, which I will not describe here. Considering whom he wanted to go up against, I was certain that – despite his considerable intelligence and strategic ability, which was obvious after I listened to his story – he would die if he left my room and went over the border. I had no idea how to organise my questions and my thoughts.

The moral choice was what to say to him and how to say it in a way that would save his life. It was clear to me that although he was very intelligent, strategic, and capable, he was making a decision driven by survivor guilt and desperation in order – most likely – to join his brother in death, as atonement. I had many confusing thoughts instantly about the ethics of the situation. How could I convince him not to die, not to join his brother? How could I convince him to spare his own life? Should I lie or bend the truth to convince him not to cross the border, to save his life at that moment, and then build a relationship of trust with him later? What were my moral priorities at that moment? What were my goals? What methods could I use to decide what was right for me to say or do? Should I focus on principles or stick to the likely consequences for him of not following my advice? What was more important, his independent right to choose autonomously or saving his life?

I felt his pain, I had no time to reflect, and I felt agitated with emotions of radical empathy, a sense of responsibility for this complete stranger. As is so often the case with me, I was agitated because I felt all the emotions of the person in front of me *in addition to my own*. This is a well-known

symptom of empathic distress. I frequently faced these fateful moments and choices, as many of us working in war zones have experienced.

When confusion rooted in overly active empathy affects us about serious matters, it can lead to despair and withdrawal. Science tells us we human beings can deal with *some* confusion, but the more that confusion piles on, the more tired we get. And the more tired we get, the more we lose our ability to reason through problems and difficult decisions. An agitated moment of empathy triggers memories of other agitated moments, and together they build to a traumatic paralysis and social withdrawal (Timmons & Byrne 2019).

/// The Need for Training in Ethics, Empathy Management, and Internal Conflict Management

The goal of clarity in moral thinking is not to have simplistic answers for every situation because that is (a) impossible and (b) unwise. It is impossible and unwise to pretend that there are simple moral prescriptions for every situation, just as surely as we would never train a doctor or any diagnostician in such a primitive way. Rather, the goal is to discover a way for us to work dynamically with the mind and heart, both ourselves and in concert with those we are trying to help. The goal is also for more of us to make better decisions together for each situation – "better" in the sense of decisions that are the "best" they can be, that maximise goodness, in the moral consequentialist sense of that phrase. This would become part of the Compassionate Reasoning methodology that I outline in the books.

Most of us choose to believe in certain truths and certain paths of right and wrong, but we are unprepared for the task of wading through the confusion of everyday choices in light of the values we hold dear. From personal choices to political ones, from local choices to global ones, we need help with the confusion over how to *practise* and *apply* our values, how to make them part of our lives. This is a lifelong challenge that will have its successes and failures, but we can become better at the habits of thinking and feeling that will make those choices more consistent and more satisfying. In so doing, we will contribute to making a better society by providing a model of ethical thinking and action for ourselves as individuals, as well as for our role as part of collectives of citizens. But we will at the same time contribute to our mental health and sustainability as citizens and moral agents by developing the habits of ethical reflection and debate in the context of exercising our best prosocial emotions. This is a practice of the mind and the body, as I outline in the research.

/// From Reflection to the Compassionate Embrace of Others

There is more than one legitimate way to evaluate the goodness or badness of a course of action, as is attested to by the variety of schools of philosophical ethics globally, not to mention the variety of religious approaches to complex ethical questions. These discrepancies can leave humans at each other's throats, or people can respect differences when their principles contradict each other. This is where Compassionate Reasoning enters. The embrace of compassion *concomitant* with moral-reasoning deliberations compels us to listen and truly hear multiple moral perspectives and frames, which in turn positively sharpens our collective effort at moral reasoning. This way, all parts of the mind work in concert to discover the good and the right in complex situations. Compromise also clearly presents itself to the mind as an important way to manage multiple well-argued moral positions.

The individual's cognitive recognition that other humans may come to very different moral conclusions about a situation, all based on moral reasoning, on positive moral intuitions, and calculations, is the beginning of nonviolent coexistence, conflict resolution, and compromise. Out of these compromises comes a greater valuation of and attention to principles of goodness, as seen from many angles. The glue that holds them together is the skilful cultivation of compassion through thoughts and deeds. Those thoughts and deeds can be secular or religious, or based on multiple motivations and world views in concert with each other.

From training our thoughts and emotions to focus on compassionate action and practical aid, we then build the rational ethical principles necessary for a good society and good civilisation to flourish, and we do it with the sustainable mental and physical health necessary to be strong.

/// Alternatives to Too Much Empathy

Some of us who have worked in war and conflict management for decades have come to realise just how debilitating this work can be. We have experienced how constant empathy for those countless victims who suffer in war can deplete you, make you angry, or cause you to be lost in despair. Empathy can even make you self-harm in conscious and unconscious ways in order to relieve the distress of impotence, the sorrow of not being able to do a damn thing for those you thought you would help, for those you came to love. And yet there are others among us in this work who seem continually energised and ever ready for more experience.

I have asked myself for years how these opposites are possible in the same field of dedicated practice? What makes for a happy practitioner in war zones? It was hard for me to understand my own experience of empathic distress as a scholar/practitioner until I started to reevaluate my field and my practice of conflict resolution.

I reevaluated my field and my practice by way of a conscious comparison of my field to the field of medicine and healthcare. In a previous book, I have suggested that a comparison of healthcare and public health may be an effective way to discern complicated questions of conflict resolution and the ethics of peaceful intervention (Gopin 2009).

In light of this, I made the analogy to the provision of health care. Why do some caregivers, nurses, and emergency doctors flourish under the worst of circumstances while others fall apart? To further explore this analogy, I want to briefly mention some personal experiences. In 2014 I was immersed in caring for my sister as she fought for her life against the H1N1 virus. The intensive care unit where I stayed with her for many weeks gave me the chance to observe a very large number of her doctors and caregivers. She remained in the intensive care unit, hovering every day on the edge of life and death. I was suffering grief and fear. Her chances were considered rather bleak.

I learned many things from observing my own empathic distress while simultaneously watching many medical caregivers in those weeks – all the shifting doctors, nurses, surgeons, and technicians. I compared and contrasted their every move with the many suffering families who passed through the intensive care unit as their relatives either survived and moved to regular beds – or died. The contrast between these two groups transfixed my mind.

I watched as the caregivers focused on actions, on the *tasks of healing*, on *using all of their rational minds and hearts in those tasks*. Many family members by contrast watched passively, empathetically, sometimes looking paralysed, and becoming traumatised, just like me. There were two types of sympathetic actors in that setting, and there are two types every day of every year in every hospital around the world: activist caregivers and traumatised observers. It is not that the pain of empathy with the victim did not affect the proactive professional caregivers. The caregivers, most of the nurses and technicians, were engaged through minute-to-minute observations and intense care. Watching is passive for many of us; it is a passive act of observation. *But these people watched and engaged as warriors*, in a kind of dramatic battle that – in my sister's case – they were waging with

H1N1: shifting medicines and doses from hour to hour, or sometimes by the minute, to fight off the effects of the virus, to stay ahead of the virus. It was dramatic for them and in some sense invigorating as a battle for life. I could see it in their every move.

What I now call Compassionate Reasoning was the weapon of war that they deployed, in my opinion. It is the lens of rational, ethical medical expertise combined with intense knowledge of the patient's minute-to-minute condition. These professionals had time only for detailed care and no time for sadness or frustration, since there were so many other patients to care for. More importantly, critical decisions needed to be made from hour to hour (or sometimes from minute to minute) on oxygen levels, fluids, meds, and so many other variables. They watched my sister continually, like hawks guarding a nest, as if fighting an Angel of Death and being victorious every moment. In response to this situation, they evinced strength and power. They even seemed exhilarated at every challenge to her survival. To watch the healers at the Mass General Hospital's intensive care unit was truly a marvel of modern medicine to behold. But it was also a marvel of human ethics at work with the maximum compassion needed to save one single life.

There was a young doctor who worked incredibly hard for my sister. One disastrous night he worked for hours, till his hands were numb, in order to stop her bleeding, to save her. I was astonished, however, by the emotional difference between me and these caregivers: we were both dogged in determination, both exhausted – but they were exhilarated and I was in a state of bodily and mental distress.

This contrast started to make perfect sense years later as I began to learn about the contrasting neural pathways of empathic distress versus compassionate care. This was the exact distinction that the neuroscientists had observed as they traced in fMRIs two radically different neural pathways, one for compassionate care and one for empathic distress.

This realisation led me in the years afterward to strenuous mental efforts to change my own mental habits in international interventions. Every time I felt despair in the company of the victims, or felt overwhelmed by the pain of the victims of genocide whom I was serving, I started in very halting ways to try to redirect my solidarity with them to an exclusive focus on what needed to be done in the moment, as if I were a nurse at a bedside. I started to focus only on the moment, without giving a thought to the enormity of the tragedy I was watching. I especially did so at moments of my own deepest pain, when I had heard stories of horror from people

whom I loved. This gave me the sense of power I needed in order to provide the care I had to give.

Later, as I practised my own intuitive distinctions between the experience of empathy versus the art of compassion, I started to realise something. Many ancient religious traditions and wisdom traditions had often made a fine distinction between empathy and compassion, between *feeling* the pain of the other versus the *actions* of care. But very rarely had anyone, either in old religious ethical communities or secular systems of care or in my professional field of conflict resolution, conducted training to help the mind make this fine distinction at the moment of an emergency intervention. There was no training to redirect the mind away from destructive empathy and towards the nobility and power of an exclusive compassionate concentration on what must be done next, on what are the most reasonable and ethical actions to be taken. No training on how to exult in the passion of that practice of love, in the nobility of that moment, in its meaningfulness for one's life.

The subject of compassion was not new to me, and in fact, it had been a fixation of my scholarship for decades. By 1993, I had finished my PhD dissertation on Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto, a much-overlooked nineteenth-century philosopher and theologian, as he centralised compassion as the core "moral sense" of Judaism, building on the philosophical moral sense theory of Francis Hutcheson and the Third Earl of Shaftesbury. I published a book in 2017 expanding on that dissertation, entitled *Compassionate Judaism* (Gopin 2017).

Luzzatto argued – just as Viktor Frankl would write over 100 years later after surviving the death camps of the Holocaust – that the human being can discover the highest experience of meaning through altruism or compassion (Frankl 2013). Luzzatto asserted that compassion is even a powerful *pleasure* that no one can ever take away from you, no matter how battered you have been by life, no matter what you have lost. You could lose your partner and most of your children – as Luzzatto tragically did – you could lose all of your money and worldly possessions, as he did many times; but no one could take from you the meaningful experience of caring for another who was suffering. *That*, Luzzatto believed, is the essence of true religion, a true embrace of God, through the embrace of the other human being. This message seems to me to echo deeply what Viktor Frankl discovered 80 years later in Auschwitz.

Subsequently I wrote on compassion as a core of ethics, but I never practised this framing and experience of compassion or trained myself in the joy

of compassionate care in my fieldwork with survivors. I never made it satisfying and healthy, as there was too much empathic distress all the time. I found work with survivors to be devastating to me personally – to my body, to my state of mind – such was my bodily identification with their pain. I did not realise at the time that some of us need training in this kind of joy of compassion, especially if we have been habituated to empathic distress.

The surprise to me and others is that I persisted in the work of peace in war zones anyway, despite all the pain I was bringing home from the Middle East. As I look back, I think it was a sense of stoic duty that drove me, in a rather Kantian way. From early childhood, I was under the influence of a teacher, mentor, and friend, Rabbi Dr Joseph Soloveitchik. He was in many ways the most important Modern Orthodox Jewish theologian of the twentieth century, and he embraced a kind of stoic neo-Kantian legalism as the core of ethics and the core of religion, at least in many of his significant writings, hundreds of lectures I attended, and in the many private conversations I had with him as I was growing up. Rabbi Soloveitchik's PhD work before World War II had been at the University of Berlin on Kantian and Hermann Cohenian logic. The core choice of life for Kant, and I believe for my teacher, was the exercise of the moral will, for duty and principle, no matter what the circumstances, no matter how difficult. In fact, the more difficult the circumstances the more you were exercising your will out of a pure sense of duty to humanity, the Kantian categorical imperative. Meaning and salvation came for Rabbi Soloveitchik from obedience to duty and to law (Soloveitchik 1983).

I was inspired by Kant more and more over the years as I charted my journey of social change, beyond the confines of the religiously conservative world of my youth. I dove into saving lives in war with a dogged determination to fix what was wrong with life on earth, to challenge and fix what was unjust, and to champion what universal laws of fairness and dignity for all demands of us in an increasingly interdependent global community. But my somatic empathy with pain caught me off guard and hammered away at my ability to function.

It is risky to engage in activities that provide constant stress, but my work trying to prevent global violence came out of a place inside of me of perseverance—of duty, not joy. On the contrary, it often felt like being in hell. I don't regret the work, but I now realise that there are healthier ways to pursue such vital activities, and these attitudes need to be carefully and consciously cultivated if the work is to be sustainable. Dogged determination is a good quality to have, but not in a state of perpetual misery and guilt.

/// How Traditional Cultures Can Amplify the Positive Effects of Compassion

Out of this experience of my youth and my unique background in both conservative religion and Enlightenment philosophy, I realised traditional cultures need to be at least a part of the solution to global problems. There must repeatedly be an invitation of inclusion. We must work harder to establish superordinate ethical goals that transcend faiths, moral differences, and lifestyle differences. All my work in the Middle East has provided me with evidence that traditional peoples, even those divided by conservative religions, could be at the table of peace and coexistence with more liberal-minded folks in every culture, and in fact, have a great deal to teach. But it would take the hard work of relationship building, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution to convince everyone that this is possible.

I also realised that we need to study the long history of ethics, both secular and religious, in search of what values can be shared and built upon to establish a moral community and peaceful processes of conflict management and resolution. I have seen it happen countless times among people of goodwill all over the world, but it requires painstaking work and far greater global investment in education and training than at present. For example, one of the highest experiences of Judaism, with "rewards" promised in this world and "the next world" (Heaven or the World to Come), is called *Gemilus Hasadim*, the bestowal of abundant kindness (Pirke Avot 1:2). Feeling the pain of others is indeed lauded as a sacred quality in the sacred texts of Judaism, but such feelings are not at the same level of spiritual achievement as compassionate *actions* – actions that express or come out of a motive of compassion to help, to care, and to love.

Perhaps this suggests the reason why these ancient sages were so confident that there were "rewards" in this world for compassionate actions. The "compassionate" actions are decidedly not empathic distress, which, as compassion research is proving, causes a great many health problems. These ancients were not just making promises of Heaven to lure the believer into righteous behaviour, but rather they were earnestly asserting on the basis of experience that compassionate actions lead to joy and health, that compassionate feelings and behaviours are indeed their own reward – as has recently been shown by evidence of metabolic shifts in blood pressure and many other interesting indicators.

From the ancient rabbis to Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Luzzatto, and Frankl, we have a clear line of philosophers, ethicists, psychologists, and

practitioners of ethics who were offering a pathway to positive social change, health, and happiness through compassion. This path is decidedly *not* through extensive personal suffering and empathic pain with victims. On the contrary, it embodies a victory over suffering through love and compassionate care, even in the direst circumstances of poverty and premature death, and even in Auschwitz.

In the context of societies where sacred virtues are relevant, the positive impact of training in compassion – a social emotion known to improve health, mood, and socialisation – becomes combined with the spiritually or religiously sanctioned emotion of compassion, or religious compassion. This reinforces the positive motivation to be ethical *from several parts of the mind at once*. In other words, part of the mind imagines compassionate action as a positive religious deed, an exalted imitation of God's ways in the world, for example, or even in many traditions as a way to see the face of God through the face of the sufferer whom you are helping (Gopin 2000, 2002). At the same time, science enters with specific methods of compassion training that reinforce parts of the mind known to increase happiness, socialisation, and health (Singer & Klimecki 2014).

This, it seems to me, puts training in Compassionate Reasoning onto a very solid footing in conservative societies but also on a solid scientific footing at the same time. An opportunity arises for a crucial peacebuilding bridge, an area of collaboration and cooperation between secular and religious constructs, which so often keep everyone divided in modern societies and situations of destructive global conflict.

As I have argued elsewhere, however, the key detriment to ethics in conservative societies is effectively the opposite of Kantian universalism, namely the mandated or militant restriction of an ethical act to a very limited set of believers (Gopin 2000). Such restrictions of moral obligation to only a small set of believers undermines ethics altogether as a binder of a multicultural and multireligious society. When this happens, the observer will notice that broad ethical principles and practices become suppressed in militant societies. In their place you will notice that obscure rituals, clothing, and tribal markers peculiar to the group become the markers and tests of piety, the markers of who is in and who is out, who is deserving of moral care and who is shunned, even who deserves salvation and who deserves bigotry and aggression.

What I am arguing, however, is that the stronger we make compassion training in conservative societies, the more health benefits it offers, the more it will become a natural bridge to others *beyond* the conservative

community. It will be the same for those who find it difficult to tolerate conservatives. Reasoning based on compassion will ineluctably lead, then, to reasoning out and discovering shared principles, values, and public policies across liberal/conservative divides and across secular/religious divides, such as the passionate love of and care for children. This will create the context for shared superordinate moral values and shared habits, and then the higher mind will use reasoning and planning for compromise, strategy, and joint principles.

As opposed to empathic distress – which makes people, including religious believers, angry and withdrawn as they mourn the losses of their beloved group – the expansive quality of compassionate socialisation is our best contribution to inducing conservative societies to ethical engagement with others. I have seen this work in global interfaith activities for 30 years across lines of religions and across enemy lines themselves. I continue to be amazed at how much compassionate work with children and other victims, for example, binds together very conservative and very secular people, across all boundaries of ideologies.

The *motivation* to even conceive of universal laws applying to all requires some significant degree of compassionate interest in the good of all others and society as a whole. It is hard to do that if your brain is stuck in anger, withdrawal, and apathy. This goes for both secular and religious people, left-wing and right-wing political ideologies. Empathic distress that gets out of control, turning into excessive anger about victims, is an equal opportunity destroyer of universal values.

Habits of compassion, by contrast, have provided crucial bridges across the world, and at many times in history they have actually prevented outbreaks of violence and created beautiful integrations of religious communities. In other words, an excessive experience of pain for one's own side can be a dangerous political tool, whereas compassionate action, such as for the poor, for children, or the environment, can more easily build a bridge between competing groups. It all depends on generating cognitive frames that move the mind into becoming a tool of healing and resilience, even if scarcity or tragedy strikes.

Training in compassion can change pathways in the brain, strengthen what brings us joy, deepen paths of a meaningful life, *and at the same time* strengthen good health, *even* when dealing with the pain of others. This takes a subtle combination of Compassionate Reasoning – namely, cultivated compassionate feelings and habits, in one part of the brain – and then the logical and planning steps it takes to act on those feelings by

helping others with enthusiasm and pleasure. It is the difference between being a grieving, burned-out, ex-peacemaker versus an oncologist who daily bounces down the hospital hallway to treat his next cancer patient. (I am contrasting deliberate stereotypes just to sharpen the point.)

Compassionate Reasoning as a practice should pave the way to be better professionals, better change-makers, healthier people, and even, for those who are religious, to be better people of faith. I suggest this should lead to a revolutionary approach to the ethics of care and the way we practice conflict resolution and peacebuilding in every society. It is not ethical or logical that the change-makers should suffer and burn out, even as they are offering such vital aid to others. It is unfair to those doing the most, and it is an illogical waste of a precious social resource.

Training in ethics, therefore, should dovetail these neuroscience discoveries about empathy and compassion in order for the ethics of care to be strong, sustainable, and based on reason's training in the full range of moral theories and best practices. This way the reasoning part of the mind could be at its peak performance in Compassionate Reasoning. Due to the discoveries of a remarkable level of neuroplasticity, this kind of training can lead to significantly altered brain patterns over time, a kind of further ethical and spiritual evolution of humanity. Perhaps it is the key element we need in order to help each other overcome our global threats and build a flourishing future.

In summary, for me and my trajectory in book writing and peacebuilding, Compassionate Reasoning has become (a) the optimal way to use the faculties of the moral mind, and (b) the best way to integrate the best lessons of moral reasoning from all the schools of ethics, and thus to help my students and myself to flourish in the difficult circumstances of compassionate care amid conflict, war, or social strife. I have been struck by the fact that not only my training in compassion but also my training in multiple schools of ethical reasoning has led to my greater calm in coping with conflict, and a greater ability to work with difficult circumstances together with others. It has generated a more rational language of debate and discussion, which is by definition more subtle, less angry, more prone to compromise, and more adept at earnest curiosity, inquiry, and mutual learning. In other words, compassion, unlike empathic distress, leads good people into far more sophisticated forms of conflict resolution, and these are enduring due to the people's engagement with the most advanced forms of moral reasoning and the most prosocial forms of care, service, and love.

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/// Abstract

This article reflects on the author's life's journey as a peace practitioner and scholar. Gopin recounts his lifelong quest to understand and mitigate violence in the world through peacebuilding, influenced by personal tragedies and extensive study in religious and philosophical ethics. His peacebuilding interventions in war zones have shaped his interdisciplinary approach to conflict resolution, integrating philosophical ethics, neuroscience, and positive psychology into a methodology he has developed entitled Compassionate Reasoning. Gopin explores the personal impact of empathic distress and trauma, advocating for a healthier path of joyful care and compassionate reasoning in peacebuilding. Through the story of Ibrahim, a member of the Bereaved Parents' Circle, Gopin illustrates the transformative power of self-examination and dialogue over revenge. The article underscores the necessity of Compassionate Reasoning as a means to foster nonviolent coexistence, ethical engagement, and sustainable mental health among peace practitioners. Gopin calls for a revolution in training conflict resolution professionals, emphasising the integration of compassionate actions and rational ethical principles to achieve a flourishing future.

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