

# Why Do So Many People Lack Compassion?

Milan Kundera, in his beautiful novel [\*The Unbearable Lightness of Being\*](#), said that compassion was preeminent of all human sentiments.

In languages derived from Latin, the word “compassion” is formed by combining the prefix “com” (with) and the noun “passio” (suffering). Other languages use words with a slightly different meaning—“feeling” instead of suffering. This, Kundera argued, gave the word even greater potency. Here is what he wrote:

*To have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion- joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. This kind of compassion...therefore signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then, it is supreme.*

I thought of this passage after a conversation I had with my wife recently. I mentioned in passing that above anything else they do or become, I want our children to be compassionate—more than intelligence, athleticism, education, or riches.

It made me wonder: How does one acquire compassion? From where does it flow? Is it more through our nature or nurture? Do we learn it from example? From books? From religion?

[Psychologists say](#) mammals are born with compassion. That it's an instinctive impulse that has helped humans evolve as a species. But if humans are born with compassion, how is it that history and psychology have observed so many humans without compassion? ([Psychopaths](#), for example, often seem

incapable of it.)

There are two possibilities: 1) some humans are not born with compassion; 2) humans are born with compassion but they are capable of losing or burying it.

Psychologists are likely right that mammals are born with traces of compassion. But rats paying attention to their dead or the eyes of human babies dilating while observing people helping one another is quite different from the “emotional telepathy” described by Kundera.

Compassion seems to be like a seed; it flowers in some people and dies in others. This would explain why Joseph Stalin could kill millions and [erase](#) his allies without compunction, while Nietzsche [was driven](#) mad by the sight of a horse being whipped.

Nietzsche’s fate helps explain the paradoxical nature of compassion.

Sharing the suffering of other creatures is a beautiful and noble thing. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer called it “the basis of all morality.”

But sharing the suffering of others in a world full of pain and misery is also a heavy burden. Perhaps this is why Kundera, who praised compassion as supreme in the hierarchy of sentiments, also called it a curse.

If humans allowed ourselves to feel the full spectrum of creature suffering in this fallen world, we probably would end up much like Nietzsche. That said, I can think of few things this world needs more. Perhaps this is why I so desire my children to have compassion, even if it is a curse. It’s a cross we’ve been taught to carry.

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