

## Are We Ready for Compassionate Community?

Jeff Vander Clute

There is a rising tide of compassionate communities around the world. Communities of various types, including cities, counties, countries, businesses, and schools, are taking a stand for respect and human dignity by declaring that compassionate behavior is a top priority. In so doing, these communities are shifting away from a focus on conflict and division to an emphasis on care, cooperation, and mutual well-being.

This shift is transformative as research shows that communities tend to experience more of what they focus on. If we focus on violence, then that will be our story, and that will be the pattern we experience. If we focus on compassion, then the Napa Valley can become a place where compassionate behavior is the normal state of affairs. Presumably very few people would argue with such an outcome!

We can begin our own shift by clarifying what is meant by the word compassion and by looking at how other communities have taken this step.

The concept of compassion is common to the major religions, spiritual traditions, and humanistic philosophies. It can therefore be said that **compassion is for everyone**. Compassion can be defined by the Golden Rule, which invites us to treat others – all others – as we would like to be treated, as well as by a desire to relieve the suffering of those we encounter. Compassion embraces both sympathy and empathy, and is considered essential for a healthy society.

In 2008, author and scholar Karen Armstrong won the TED Prize and received a \$100,000 award to support the realization of a “wish big enough to change the world.” Her wish: to create a “Charter for Compassion” through a large-scale interfaith collaboration that ultimately involved more than 150,000 people from over 180 countries. The Charter was published online in the fall of 2009 ([charterforcompassion.org](http://charterforcompassion.org)) and has since been signed by 80,000 people, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. In addition to individual signatories, cities, regions, and other types of communities have affirmed either the Charter itself or the Principles of Compassion, a document written without reference to religion so as to honor the beliefs of everyone including atheists and agnostics. Again, compassion is for everyone.

In April 2010, Seattle became the first Compassionate City after the Compassionate Action Network (CAN) presented 1,000 signatures to the Mayor and the City Council. The Mayor and City Council affirmed the Charter for Compassion and proclaimed Seattle to be a participant in the Ten Year Campaign for Compassionate Cities organized by CAN. In March 2011, nearby Lake County affirmed the Charter. Then in July 2011 the Millbrae City Council unanimously adopted a Resolution to become a Compassionate City. The Mayor of Lexington, Kentucky campaigned on a

pledge to make Lexington a Compassionate City and was elected. The list of candidate cities and regions is long and includes Canada, the City of Sonoma, and Tel Aviv, Israel.

With all the regional and international interest, we might well ask, “Could the City or County of Napa become a Compassionate Community?” The answer is, of course, yes. Moreover, doing so would be highly beneficial. The Napa Valley is known to the whole world, and our standing up in this way would broadcast a powerful message that this is a friendly place of peace and respect. Becoming a Compassionate Community would provide another powerful reason for the world to visit, to savor our wine, to dine in our restaurants, and to meet the fine people who make it all possible.

Such benefits would certainly be wonderful, but becoming a Compassionate Community can pay even greater dividends in terms of increased community well-being. There is evidence that when a community makes compassion a priority, people’s behavior changes. In the city of Basalt, Colorado, after it became a Compassionate City thanks to a campaign led by local schoolchildren, a judge admonished two lawyers for not behaving compassionately in his courtroom. Compassion is for lawyers, too!

Indeed, in a Compassionate Community, everyone has permission to ask questions, publicly, such as “Is this a compassionate behavior or policy? Are we acting with compassion toward our neighbors? Are we being treated compassionately? What would be more compassionate?” And in the process, behaviors change, social divisions subside, and communities heal.

That sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? So let’s explore becoming a Compassionate Napa Valley. The world is waiting!

*Jeff Vander Clute is a co-organizer of Thrive Napa Valley and a board member of the Compassionate Action Network. For more information, please visit [compassionatenapavalley.org](http://compassionatenapavalley.org).*