

# Compassion



Sample Pages

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workbook vol. 1

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Rebecca Brooks

# Table of Contents

Using this book – 10

Introduction – 11

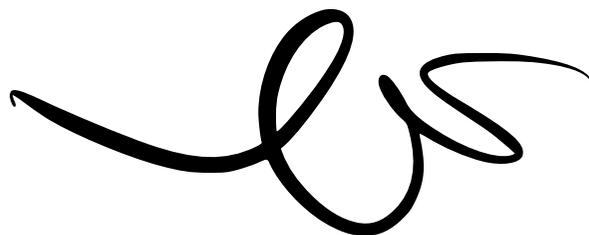
Orientation – 14

History – 30

Risks and Roadblocks – 42

Focus – 52

Action – 70

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## Using this book

Thank you for your interest in Common Converse!

Common Converse workbooks are designed to help you focus and delve more deeply into your relationship with one particular topic. They are *workbooks*, requiring fully engaged interaction. They contain many days' worth of activities, quotations, reading suggestions, reflection questions, and writing prompts. At the end of each section is a blank journal page. We recommend completing one workbook page each day during your self-directed course of study. The consistency will help you build a practice of intention and enable you to get as much out of your work as possible.

Our workbooks are also well suited to small-group work. Much like a book club, a Common Converse discussion group that meets regularly can add tremendous value to your work. Whether your group meets in person or online, the benefits of discussion and accountability cannot be overstated. The topics we explore are the building blocks of community. See [commonconverse.com](http://commonconverse.com) to download our free guide for groups. Discounts are available for the purchase of 12 or more workbooks. Contact us ([info@commonconverse.com](mailto:info@commonconverse.com)) for more information.

For individuals working through the book on your own, know that you're not alone! The Common Converse community is always exploring these big ideas together.



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# Introduction

I used to really hate baseball. When I was a kid I'd get dragged to my cousins' little league games and have to watch nine innings of little boys mostly fail to hit the ball. Baseball games are long. Little league games are, like, twice as long. And while sitting in the sun to watch your hometown team take on their rivals commands hundreds of dollars, sitting in the sun on stinging-hot bleacher seats when you're nine...well, is less fun.

One of my cousins didn't care for baseball all that much either. As he was suiting up and packing his bag, he'd complain that he didn't want to go. I couldn't summon up any compassion for him. *At least you get to play*, I'd think at him. We'd all pile in the truck, weighed down with dread. See that? Rewind a bit. *At least he got to play*. I didn't. Compassion had a roadblock.

Compassion is a funny thing. It's so easy when you already care. When you build a strong connection with someone, whether in friendship or romance or care-taking, it becomes easier and easier to have compassion for them. Compassion becomes the default, a habit of love. When compassion can't quite be mustered, for a cause or a thing or a person, we often chalk it up to disinterest. And it's true that there's no way we can be present to every single thing asking for our attention and love. But sometimes what we label disinterest is a tidy veil over something else. Judgement. Jealousy. Resentment. Anger. Prejudice. Powerlessness. Lack of understanding.

I hated baseball because I was angry that they wouldn't let me play. I wasn't jealous, exactly. I didn't really want to play, I just hated that I wasn't allowed to play. Compassion for my cousin couldn't make it over that wall. It wasn't his fault, but it was hard to see him outside of the system I was upset with. So I didn't. Anger stopped me.

Now, though, looking back at that little boy who didn't want to play baseball, my heart swells. I have a photo of him from that time. Skinny freckled kid, squinting in the sun, gingerly holding up a bat. He looks miserable. He looks like the sun is beating him with a hammer. I remember that feeling. It's what I felt in the bleachers. I can see him now, these years later, and understand him—accurately—to be outside the sphere of my anger.

So many of our little regrets are like that. If only we had known then what we know now. Do you have stories like that?

While we can't go back in time, we can be thoughtful about how we enact compassion today and in the future. How do we learn to move past the obstacles that

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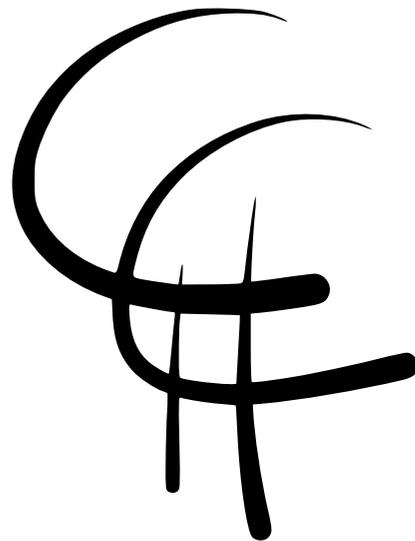
block compassion? How do we build our capacity for recognizing in ourselves the way prejudice interrupts our compassionate nature? How do we resist guilt in favor of learning how to be better? Intention and practice are how we make change.

At the same time, how do we notice when an obstacle is necessary for our own protection? While everyone deserves compassion, not everyone deserves it from *you*. Channels of compassion are sometimes blocked for good reason. No one needs to have empathy for their abuser. One of the many harmful effects of violence is the way it can rob us of our natural ability to feel and show love. Fear short-circuits trust and compassion in unpredictable ways. Learning where the emotions protect us and where they interfere is part of a healing process and can take a long time. Cultivating appropriate compassion can help.

To cultivate anything takes time, desire, practice, and patience. I hope this workbook helps you to build on the interest you have in cultivating your own compassion. Like anything, you get out of it what you put into it. Whether you spend a month of focus on it, or revisit it many times over the course of a year, your attention and practice are what makes the work successful.

May your work be all you want it to be.

Rebecca Brooks  
Common Converse



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*Thinking over the past week, when have you seen compassion in action?*

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*What is something you know about compassion now that you didn't know earlier in your life? How did the new understanding come about?*

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## Further Reading

*“We are trying to retrain our responses to form mental habits that are kinder, gentler, and less fearful of others. Reading and learning about compassion will be an important part of the process and should become a lifetime habit, but it does not stop there. You cannot learn to drive by reading the car manual; you have to get into the vehicle and practice manipulating it until the skills you acquire so laboriously become second nature. ...It is the same with compassion; we can learn about the neurological makeup of the brain and the requirements of our tradition, but until and unless we actually modify our behavior and learn to think and act toward others in accordance with the Golden Rule, we will make no progress.”* (p. 26)

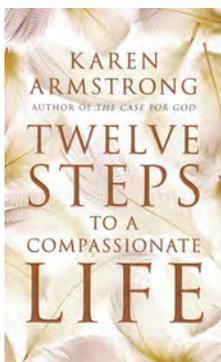
—Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*

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### Study Questions

- The first step in Armstrong’s book is to learn about compassion. Reading through the quick survey of the first chapter, what surprised you? What was something that inspired you? Reflect on and discuss the history of compassion in your own life, religious or otherwise.
- Armstrong writes “[W]hat would a compassionate modern nation-state be like? What would be the minimum requirements for a compassionate nation-state?” (p. 72) Do you understand your own country to be compassionate? In what ways? How does your country fail to be compassionate towards its own citizens? Toward other nations? Is there anything within your own power that you might do to improve the compassionate nature of your country?
- Armstrong explores how Buddhism addresses the need for us to show compassion even to ourselves. What about this is within your experience? How does compassionate action on behalf of others support compassion for ourselves? How does it make compassion for ourselves more challenging?
- “Imagination is crucial to the compassionate life,” writes Armstrong. While one avenue of compassion is the idea of how our lives and others connect, another component is having the imagination to contemplate an experience that is not our own. Acknowledging that our imaginings of another’s suffering should never trump their own self-report, how might you go about attempting to bridge your experience with another’s in a respectful way?
- How does art relate to compassion?
- As someone who has written extensively on World Religions, it is no surprise that Armstrong advocates exploring traditions outside the one(s) within your own experiences. What have you learned from religions not your own? How might responsible inquiry into other religions change the way you think about the world? What do you think you might discover?

- In her chapter on Mindfulness, Armstrong articulates one of the valuable learnings of mindfulness practice: noticing how quickly we move from one thing to another. She writes “Gradually, as you become conscious of your changeability, you will find that you are beginning to sit a little more lightly on your opinions and desires.” (p. 108) She suggests that this is a good opportunity to notice the ways a small hurtful gesture can have ripple effects well beyond the moment, as can a small kindness. In what ways can focusing on the present moment facilitate our practice of compassion.
- Confucius advocated “stepping outside” the egotistically confined self (*ekstasis*) “all day and every day.” (p. 113) This notion of empathy, a critical part of what’s known as “The Golden Rule” is simple but challenging. Armstrong argues that far from being a self-less exercise, adherence to “The Golden Rule” is a process that supports and promotes our own happiness and well-being. Have you found that to be the case? How is our kindness connected to our happiness? How might we increase both through practice?
- Armstrong writes “Remember that a myth is a program for action: you will recognize its truth only when you put it into practice in your own life.” (p. 170). What is the role of story and myth in your own moral development? Are there foundational stories in your own life that helped mold your perspectives?
- Karen Armstrong delivered the Ware Lecture at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in 2011: “The Challenge of Compassion.” (watch online: <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2011/184434.shtml>) In it she talks about the Charter for Compassion project (<http://charterforcompassion.org/>), a multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-national project to bring more compassion in to the world. The development of this project was essentially a wish of Armstrong’s, brought to life by many dedicated people who shared her ambitious dream of expanding compassion. What dreams do you have for compassion in the world? How might we work together to make these dreams a reality?



Armstrong, Karen. [\*Twelve Steps to A Compassionate Life\*](#). New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.

As one of the world’s preeminent authorities on world religions, Armstrong does a remarkable job of providing a concise overview of the history of compassion in some of the world’s most popular religions. She makes the case that compassion must be cultivated diligently and offers suggestions for how to do it.

Purchase through the common*converse* affiliate [link](#) or find it at your favorite bookstore.



*“Make no judgments where you have no compassion.”*  
— Anne McCaffrey



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What is the relationship between judgment and compassion? Have you experienced judgment (yours or someone else's) that felt devoid of compassion? What does it look like when judgment is informed by compassion?



## Noticing

*Keep this workbook with you all day and make a note whenever you see or hear something related to compassion. Fill each box with a different thing you've noticed.*


# Five Questions

*Common Converse Five Questions interviews include the same five thematic questions, posed to folks from a variety of life experiences.*



**Kenny Wiley** is a Senior Editor for the [UU World](#). A recent intimate and illuminating feature, "[Nights Can Be Tough](#)" was greeted with great acclaim. He also serves as Director of Faith Formation, [Prairie Unitarian Universalist Church](#), Parker, CO. His writing has appeared in the Boston Globe, the Houston Chronicle, and Skyd Magazine. He can also be found online at [kennywiley.com](#).

## **What is compassion?**

It's the willingness to look beyond self into someone else's reality, presence, or situation. It's being willing to love and listen instead of relying on snap judgments or biases.

## **Tell us about a moment when you experienced compassion.**

After a terrific junior year and a stellar summer, my senior year started off nightmarishly. I was deeply depressed out of nowhere and continually spiraled downward. It hurt my parents to watch, and my sisters as well.

Two of my friends came to spend a weekend with me. Though neither of them had personal history with depression, they listened rather than judged, and slowly, painfully, they started me on the road to healing. In 'The West Wing,' presidential candidate Matthew Santos said, "I blame everyone I can think of and I am filled with rage. And then I try and find compassion. Compassion for the people I blame. Compassion for the people I do not understand, compassion."

Compassion for the people I do not understand. Indeed. That's the hardest thing. Sometimes the people we are close to are the ones it's hardest to have compassion for. My friends, back in my senior year, found compassion for me even though they didn't understand my pain. They taught me so very much.

## **How has your understanding of compassion changed during your lifetime?**

I focus more now on how I can give compassion. It seems to me to be a "pay it forward" kind of thing instead of an equal (or not!) exchange between two people. I think less about whether each friend in a friendship has "given equal amounts of compassion" and more about who needs the compassion at any time. A friend grieving the loss of a family member may be giving so much compassion to other family, and need some themselves. They might not have much to give to me; three years from now, they may have lots to give to me, now I'm dealing with something big.

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If you could sit down with anyone—living or dead—and have a long conversation about compassion, who would it be and why?

Ella Baker. The late civil rights leader faced so much racism and sexism, and black men in the movement often didn't take her seriously. She was willing to call people out but believed that love was the guiding force for her work of fighting for justice. What did compassion toward hateful whites look like to her? What about toward those who Dr. King referred to as "the white moderates," those who didn't actively preach hate but also did not challenge it? What about compassion toward the black men (and women) who thought her too pushy and strong-willed to value her work? I've been thinking about this because, right now, in the racial justice movement we are asking similar questions. What does compassion look like against those who refuse to see these problems?



*"Give people light and they will find a way." – Ella Baker*

**What hopes do you have about compassion?**

I hope we can realize that compassion doesn't mean weakness, it doesn't mean we don't have to speak truth to power, and it doesn't mean we get walked over. It means we look beyond the present moment to deeper pain that may lay within.