



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A Charter for Compassion

Dear Friends,

Since the early days of the Covid-19 crisis, I have become even more keenly aware of the deep compassion and care that runs through our community. I have been moved by the commitment of individuals and community organizations to come together to meet the needs that have arisen, or more accurately the needs that have come into focus, during this pandemic. As we have experienced in other times of trouble, the inherent goodness of humanity is on display as neighbor reaches out to neighbor to lend a helping hand.

At the Princeton Senior Resource Center, we are deeply grateful for the ways that the community has responded to the needs of older adults who are particularly vulnerable to this virus. Volunteers have made wellness calls, provided programming and social engagement, delivered groceries and other supplies, and so much more. In a very difficult season, the compassion of our community has been inspiring.

In her powerful TED Talk from 2008, “My Wish: The Charter for Compassion,” world religion scholar Karen Armstrong notes that the work of compassion involves “dethroning ourselves from the center of our lives and putting another person there.” Cutting across all of the world religions, she argues, the value of compassion and the act of centering others is central to healthy living. She goes on to say that those who are working to create compassionate communities are moved through empathy to *compassionate action* — a desire to address pain and suffering wherever it occurs.

Certainly, we have witnessed pain and suffering in our community, across the nation, and around the world in an acute way over the past few months. As of the writing of this article, over 130,000 people in the United States and more than 550,000 around the world have lost their lives to Covid-19. There has been a new awakening to the struggle for justice in the black community — nationally and globally — following several instances of police brutality against people of color. Anti-Semitism is given new voice by athletes, creating more harm and threat to the Jewish



community. The economic impact of a global pandemic has left millions hungry and unemployed. And new acts of violence against LGBTQIA+ persons often get too easily swept aside.

With so much pain to bear, the temptation is to “look away” or attempt to move forward rather than be overwhelmed. Psychologists speak of “compassion fatigue” as the feeling of numbness or the paralysis of inaction that comes when one is exposed to seemingly endless stories of pain and suffering. Rather than succumbing to these temptations, however, I’d like to encourage you to look deeply into the face of these challenges and commit to one small act that can make a huge impact.

For example, one friend of mine became overwhelmed with the racial injustice inherent in our criminal

justice system. She made a firm commitment to learn and absorb information, through reading books like *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander and listening to podcasts such as Don Lemon's new *Silence is Not an Option*. She has also committed to writing one letter or email per month to one of her government representatives encouraging (or challenging) their work (or lack of) on criminal justice reform.

Another friend writes a handwritten letter to someone battling depression through the organization [Letters Against Depression](http://www.lettersagainstdepression.org). These letters serve as a source of encouragement and hope to people across the world who simply need to hear a message that they have value and worth — and that there is someone out there with support and a message of love. You can learn more about this small organization and volunteer to write letters at www.lettersagainst.org/volunteer.

There are several opportunities forthcoming, including our **Symposium on Race** put together by our program associate Breana Newton, that may give you some concrete ways to contribute to the work of compassion and justice.

So what might you do? How might you act? What small step can you take that will contribute to the compassionate fabric of our community? Remember the words of Amelia Earhart: “A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees.” In a world that too often feels dry and barren, let's start a forest full of compassion and kindness.

All the Best,
Drew A. Dyson, PhD
Executive Director