

Reflections from Science Day Panelists

Debra Pearce-McCall interviews Daniel J. Siegel, Andrew Meltzoff, and Alicia Lieberman



Andy

Alicia

Dan

DPM: *When you think back on the Seeds of Compassion event, what powerful moment or memory will you treasure?*

Siegel: So many...I think His Holiness the Dalai Lama's reflection on what extends the "limited, biased" form of compassion toward the "unlimited, unbiased form" was an amazing moment in that he had the humility to say that it is a personalized effort, and the humor to comment "that it is confidential!" He acknowledged the need for "mental training" and it is this suggestion that for me inspired the possible framework that: Relationships → the near form (what he called the limited form, but that term "limited or biased" has a negative connotation in English so we can use the more neutral term "near" for now); and then Reflection → the extended form of compassion (what he called the unlimited, unbiased form). This notion enables us to see how Relationships + Reflection → Resilience. This is resilience for the personal life we lead, and resilience for our planet.

I felt honored to be with such thoughtful and well-meaning scientists in our effort to link science with mental practice, with inner knowing. It was a life-affirming event and I feel very changed by it, very privileged to have been able to share in the conversation.

Meltzoff: My most treasured memory is the dialog I had with His Holiness on the science morning. He was deeply curious about how empathy develops in children and about the origins of human consciousness and

learning. I had heard from others that His Holiness was probing, insightful, and intellectually generous. I was not prepared for the fact that he was such an intent questioner and listener. He asks profound questions, looks into your eyes, and seems to peer into your soul as you converse with him. I felt like I was talking with Socrates. When I mentioned that to one of my Buddhist friends, he winked and said, “Maybe you were.”

I was also touched by the value he put on Western science. He raised some profound religious and philosophical questions—what is morality, why do we care for others and what can we do to promote such caring? And then he said that science can help us answer these questions. Instead of contrasting science *versus* religion, empirical work *versus* philosophy, he saw a way for the “two cultures” (science and humanities) to work together. I found it deeply moving that he was encouraging this synthesis.

Lieberman: I was most impressed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s capacity for exuberant joy while remaining deeply attuned to grave questions about national survival and world peace. As I watched him break out again and again in delighted laughter during our talks, I kept thinking of the protests that were taking place in Tibet while we met, and the enormous pressures on him at that very moment as a human being and as a religious and political leader. It was clear from everything he said and did that, as he pondered the different facets of compassion with us and took pleasure in learning what Western science has to offer on the topic, he also resonated with the suffering of his people in the face of the brutal repression of their clamors for freedom, and he was weighing how to respond in ways that were both humane and politically constructive to his cause. For me, the most enduring lesson of the conference was the example of his capacity to connect simultaneously with the entire range of the human condition – including a joyous celebration of the world’s beauty, great curiosity and pleasure in learning, and an abiding compassion for the suffering inherent in living.

DPM: *What do you wish most people could know about compassion and their brains?*

Meltzoff: Many people think that their brains are determined by their genes. But modern developmental neuroscience shows that this is not the correct picture. Our brains are built partly through the experiences we have. The baby does not come into the world with a fully formed or innately determined neural system. The brain he or she end up with is partly a result of the experiences they have as a child. Our culture, our parenting, our kindnesses toward children penetrate beneath the skin and change the child’s brain. This puts great responsibility on us as parents, policymakers, and teachers. It is also an enormously optimistic message, because we can help change the future by changing how we act with the children. The children are watching, listening, and modeling themselves after how they see us act. We are role models for our children, and not just our teenagers, but our little children, starting from before they can talk. Some of my own research shows children’s intense motivation to “be like us.” We will reap what we sow.

DPM: *What are some practical ways we can sow Seeds of Compassion for children and in children, as clinicians, educators, activists, and parents, individually or collectively?*

Lieberman: Compassion originates in the very roots of our being. In Hebrew, one of the many words for compassion is “rachamim,” stemming from the word “rechem,” which means “womb.” Our earliest experiences have a lasting influence on our capacity to care for others. When we respond to children’s physical and emotional needs from the time they are babies, they spontaneously enact what they experienced by responding to others in caring ways. Children who are maltreated need to protect themselves by becoming aggressive in order to fend off pain. Family and community violence pass from one generation to the next when parents, teachers, educators, activists and policy makers don’t realize that aggression usually starts as an effort to protect oneself against helplessness and fear. Compassion begins in the understanding of our needs and other people’s needs. As individuals, reconnecting with our early experiences of suffering has the potential to open up our capacity to forgive those who hurt us and feel compassion both for ourselves and for others. Collectively, we need to realize that the society we want is based on caring for people’s needs. Compassion must take the form of action, in the shape of public policies and services that support parents and provide the means that enable them to raise healthy children.

DPM: *How do we continue to find the resilience and motivation to work for a compassionate future, to truly care for all children and all people, in the face of rising survival and security threats for so many on the planet?*

Siegel: This was my question to His Holiness in the event—and I think we can embrace these challenges as a part of our human legacy. Here is my optimistic note: Within these struggles is the challenge to remain committed to positive life energy, to find the wonder of life, even in the face of misery, at the heart of the privilege of being alive. Perhaps the Dalai Lama said it best at a conference years ago when asked this question: It is our duty to remain “happy” especially in the face of pain. That challenge, in the practical day-to-day, requires a vision of a better world for sure, but also a commitment to the small, moment-to-moment miracles of our connections with each other, and within our selves. These miracles are the ways in which the ordinary truly is revealed as extraordinary. Keeping an eye on this frame, on this glorious mystery and privilege that is life, is what our dear friend, John O’Donohue would reveal in his blessings (*To Bless the Space Between Us*) and in his poetry and prose. Getting ready to remember him at his upcoming memorial reminded us that life is so fragile and so temporary. We need to take life seriously—and we need to take life with the light and lightness that illuminate the privilege of being alive. As John would say: “The duty or privilege is absolute integrity.” That message reminds us, too, that we have a duty to bring light and compassion into the world. We can hope that the Seeds of Compassion will indeed blossom as we join together on this important threshold in our history as a human family.

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