

In need of

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Design Academy Eindhoven

Trapped in the system

Since living history mankind has designed systems, processes, traditions and rituals, which are meant to protect and benefit us, and organise our lives beyond chaos. When times change and habits and situations change, we nevertheless cling on to these systems since, amongst other things, we find it difficult to divide them from the beliefs and values they are based on. The system has become a value in itself. So it goes wrong.

Some time ago I read a story in the news that hasn't left my thoughts since. I've been trying to grasp why. And by doing so I came to the understanding that it reveals the essence of human nature, its vulnerability and helplessness, and at the same time its resourcefulness.

Here's the story.

It is placed in Thailand, a Buddhist country. It is about Buddhist monks.

In Thailand every man or boy should become a monk for a short period of his life, but there are also men who become monks for life. And in the Thai tradition Buddhist monks still roam the streets to beg for food as part of their tasks. People give food as a good deed to show their gratitude and to influence their karma.

This tradition goes back centuries; it is part of a mode of life based on an intrinsic belief system. Monks play an important role in society; they are the holy intermediaries.

But currently almost half of the monks are facing health problems – they have high cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity, and Diabetes. The faithful used to give begging monks home-cooked food, which was healthy. But nowadays, with the growth of welfare, life has changed and people are too busy or distracted to cook. Instead they turn to giving food they buy on the streets: fast food, deep fried food, soda drinks, etc. The monks are not allowed to refuse what is given to them. And so they get ill.

Maybe people are unaware, but it might also be possible that in their hasty, preoccupied way of life important deeds like, in this case, giving food to monks become just another thing on their checklist.

It goes without saying that the Thai government wants to change this situation; it stimulates the monks to go on a diet and informs and educates them as well as the faithful givers.

This situation is so poignant because people are trapped within a system that, without intent, allows a deed of selflessness and gratitude to become a deed of self-centredness and indifference. This story is exemplary of what is currently going on; we can easily transport a situation like this to other cultures and belief systems.

Changing any sort of system fundamentally is only possible over the long-term. But a faster change might be possible on a personal level; maybe it is possible to reach people's hearts and make them aware.

And this brings me to what, in my belief, the world really is in need of; it brings me to the notion of compassion.

Compassion

There is a difference between pity, sympathy, empathy and compassion. Where pity implies loftiness of the one who is taking pity, sympathy indicates a distant awareness of the situation of the other. Empathy however involves being able to place oneself in the situation of the other and to experience his/her emotions. Compassion goes one step further and leads one to actually doing something about it. Being compassionate means to be aware, to feel, to experience and to act. That is why philosopher Hannah Arendt sees compassion as a political act, an act of engagement and as she states in her famous book 'The Human Condition' (1958)¹, an act of solidarity.

Philosopher and classicist Martha Nussbaum connects to this idea by stating that compassion is about sharing justness or fairness. Life isn't fair; some people are born or end up in less fortunate circumstances. Some people are born in a poor country, into a poor family, or amidst a war or crisis. Some people are ill or cripple, or have psychiatric problems. Nussbaum's central question is how can we share justness with less fortunate people we are not familiar with, who are total strangers, not known to us at all?²

A source of knowledge

One of the ways to train the quality of compassion is to read, to experience stories and to practise storytelling. Stories teach us to empathise with the life of distant others and to experience the emotions that accompany this. For Nussbaum, emotions are an important source of knowing.

Compassion means an inner experience that can be painful but is always a source of knowledge, as well as of imagination and creativity. In our Western culture this type of inner experience is almost extinct.

Compassion comprises self-compassion, which implies reflecting on oneself without judgment, allowing oneself to be vulnerable, to be insecure, to be different, to not fit in. Self-compassion is the only way to truly allow oneself to be talented and to use these talents to create something that relates to others, to the pain and suffering, but also to the joy and harmony in other people's lives.

Compassion leads to the capacity to embrace what is there, to accept and experience a gratitude that enables us to connect to ourselves and others, and be vulnerable and resilient at the same time.

Within the field of design there are some important studies on compassion; the key ones are in the crossover field of technology and health, specifically the field of UX-design. This research states the following insight:

"While empathy involves experiencing the same emotion as another, compassion triggers a positive affect in the face of suffering and therefore contributes to resilience and well-being. Supporting elevation, altruism, and agency in design are among those strategies that can help foster compassion."³

Cosmopolitan attitude

In her important book 'Not for Profit' (2012)⁴ Martha Nussbaum explains how the humanities play a major role in training and educating three capabilities that are conditional and inherent to compassion:

- The capability of critical self-reflection;
- The capability to see oneself as part of a heterogeneous society;
- The capability to relate to and empathise with others who are completely different, including animals.

These capabilities lead to what Nussbaum calls the 'cosmopolitan attitude' that is needed in our diverse and complex world. She states that our world can only be a decent world in the future if we acknowledge right now that "we are citizens of one interdependent world held together by mutual fellowship as well as the pursuit of mutual advantage, by compassion as well as self-interest, by a love of human dignity in all people, even when there is nothing we have to gain from cooperating with them."⁵

Narrative and humanities

This academic year Narrative as well as the Humanities are part of DAE's curricula: the Humanities are part of the new minor-programme of DAE's Bachelor degree, and Narrative will be part of the graduation of our students. Also this year, a programme we named 'Reflections and References' will be developed, including cultural studies, philosophy, art and design studies, future technologies, ethics and current affairs. Our master education also features Humanities as part of its theoretical source programme. The Humanities and Narrative part of the curricula will be further developed in the coming years.

Design practice

Humanities and narratives are needed to train and understand compassion, but, as stated before, compassion is about action, engagement. It is about doing things, and in our case about creating and giving form to ideas based on a deep understanding of what defines us as human beings. Not only others, but also ourselves.

That is why in our education (BA and MA) Narrative and Humanities will always be seen as healthy food for actual design practice, crafts and applied research.

This will enable us – students, teachers and staff – to work from a different point of view, surpassing complacency, openly embracing empathy, vulnerability and compassion, but also beauty, joy and resilience. Working like this takes a lot of persistence, strength and courage.

Counter-movement

We see design as an act of engagement and we aim to educate designers who are committed to making a difference to the world.

Not to solve all the problems but to create meaningful alternatives. This is only possible on a fundament of compassion and thus the capabilities that lead to a 'cosmopolitan attitude'.

In this sense design education can be a courageous counter-movement.

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Executive Board

- 1 Arendt, H. (1958). 'The Human Condition'. University of Chicago Press.
- 2 Nussbaum, M. (2003). 'Upheavals of Thought; the intelligence of emotions'. Cambridge University Press.
- 3 Peters, D. and Calvo, R. (2014). Compassion vs Empathy: Designing for Resilience. In: 'Interactions, September - October 2014'.
- 4 Nussbaum, M. (2010). 'Not for Profit, why democracy' needs the humanities. Princeton University Press.
- 5 Nussbaum, M. (2009). 'Frontiers of Justice'. Harvard University Press.