

What Kind of Kindness?

A Sermon Delivered on November 10, 2019
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

“My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness.”

-- Dalai Lama

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Meditation: a poem by Danusha Laméris entitled “Small Kindnesses.”

I’ve been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say “bless you”
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. “Don’t die,” we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don’t want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, “Here,
have my seat,” “Go ahead — you first,” “I like your hat.”

First Reading: by George Saunders, from a small book entitled *Congratulations, by the Way: Some Thoughts on Kindness*. It’s the text of a commencement address he gave at Syracuse University in May of 2013. In it he talks about some regrets he’s had in life. In this passage he recounts one particular regret, from when he was in 7th grade, when a classmate of his was teased by others. He remembers clearly that he felt badly for her, but he didn’t intervene. He writes:

Sometimes I’d see her hanging around alone in her front yard, as if afraid to leave it.

And then – [her family] moved. That was it. No tragedy, no big final hazing.
One day she was there, next day she wasn’t.
End of story.

Now, why do I regret that? Why, forty-two years later, am I still thinking about it? Relative to most of the other kids, I was actually pretty nice to her. I never said an unkind word to her. In fact, I sometimes even (mildly) defended her.

But still it bothers me.

So here’s something I know to be true, although it’s a little corny, and I don’t quite know what to do with it: what I regret most in my life are failures of kindness.

Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering and I responded... sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly.

Or, to look at it from the other end of the telescope: Who, in your life, do you remember most fondly, with the most undeniable feelings of warmth?

Those who were kindest to you, I bet.

It's a little facile, maybe, and certainly hard to implement, but I'd say, as a goal in life, you could do worse than: *Try to be kinder.*

Second Reading: a wisdom tale from the Buddhist tradition

A young female disciple spent many hours trying to understand the spiritual concept of loving-kindness and treat others with respect and compassion. Sitting in her small room, she would fill her heart with loving-kindness for all living beings; yet each day as she went to the bazaar to buy her food, she would find her loving-kindness sorely tested by one shopkeeper who subjected her to unwelcome touches.

One day she could stand no more and began to chase the shopkeeper down the road with her upraised umbrella. To her mortification, she passed her teacher standing on the side of the road observing the spectacle. Shame-faced, she went to stand before him, expecting to be rebuked for her anger.

“What you should do,” her teacher kindly advised her, “is to fill your heart with loving-kindness, and with as much mindfulness as you can muster, hit this unruly fellow over the head with your umbrella.”

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I think children are especially attuned to kindness, or the lack of kindness.

George Saunders, the author of our first reading, remembers clearly what happened to a young classmate years ago in middle school. He calls her Ellen. She was small and shy, and wore blue cat's eye glasses, that, at the time, only old ladies wore. Those glasses caught the attention of the other children. And when Ellen was nervous, which was pretty much always, she had a habit of taking a strand of her hair, putting it in her mouth and chewing on it. And because of this, because she was small and shy and nervous, she made an easy target for other kids to tease.

This sad memory is at the heart of George Saunders's thoughts about kindness. As it turned out, his words struck a chord, not only for the students listening to him that day, but thousands of others, who heard about his short talk, and watched it on YouTube. The ten-minute clip went viral.

Many of us can relate to the childhood experience of being an outsider, feeling vulnerable and alone, being taunted and teased. And I am sure many of us have witnessed times when someone else was the object of ridicule. In those situations a small act of kindness can make a big difference.

* * *

I remember my middle school years felt tough. My family had recently moved to a new city in Germany, and I felt insecure and lonely as the new kid in class. I was afraid of the teachers, who all struck me as terribly strict and stern. All the teachers, that is, except my math teacher, Mr. Schinzel.

Mr. Schinzel seemed very old. He was a small man, and spoke with a distinct accent that hinted he was from somewhere south, maybe Bavaria, maybe Austria. When saying hello, he wouldn't say "Guten Tag," but rather used the greeting common in the South: "Gruess Gott," which means "God bless (you)." And unlike the other teachers, who called us by our first name in class, he always addressed us formally. I was Herr Gehrman. I would sometimes see him around town, and when our paths crossed, he would lift his distinct Tyrolean hat, smile, and with a sparkle in his eye say, "Gruess Gott, Herr Gehrman."

These simple gestures meant a lot to me.

Because of Mr. Schinzel's kindness I was very attentive in his classes. And for the few years he was my teacher, I had straight A's in math. I thought I had a natural gift for algebra, geometry, and calculus. And so in high school I took advanced classes. Once I moved on to other teachers, though, I slowly realized, my mathematical prowess was actually a figment of my imagination. Once I lost contact with Mr. Schinzel, my grades steadily declined. In the end I flunked my math finals. (Who knows, where I might be today if Mr. Schinzel had remained my teacher? Instead of a minister, I could be a serious numbers cruncher, a Wall Street hedge-fund manager maybe?)

* * *

Simple acts of kindness can make a big difference. And yet, in this day and age, kindness seems to be in short supply.

In a book on kindness, the psychologist Tara Cousineau describes unsettling developments: in recent years political mudslinging has intensified, children are more anxious and aggressive, immigrants are being taunted and vulnerable minorities are being bullied. There is a growing sense of fear and divisiveness. Even though historians say we are living with less violence than ever before, the world feels like a meaner place.

Talking about these trends with family members, colleagues and clients, she found the topic of "kindness" come up again and again. "What happened to kindness?" she wondered.

Kindness can ease our fear and anxiety. It can help us be more generous and caring. And yet a spirit of kindness often seems hard to come by.

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Scientists studying our natural environment see many signs of global warming. When it comes to our *social* environment, however, we seem to be in the midst of a “global cooling.” That’s the way the Italian philosopher Piero Ferrucci sees it.

Human relations are becoming colder, more hurried, and less personal. Ferrucci says:
“I am convinced that we are going through an Ice Age of the heart, which began more or less with the Industrial Revolution and continues in our post-industrial age. The causes of this Ice Age are many: new living conditions and forms of work, the establishing of new technologies, the decline of the extended family, the great migrations in which people are uprooted from their birthplace,... fragmentation and superficiality ... [and], the accelerating pace of life.”

Kindness can help turn this around. Kindness is rooted in our ability to feel for others, to imagine their experience as if it were our own. It is rooted in empathy.

Empathy is more than a warm and fuzzy feeling. It is a human trait hardwired in our bodies and minds. It is a force of nature. The psychologist Jamil Zaki describes it like this, he writes:

“Imagine putting on a pair of goggles that work like thermal sensors but pick up emotion instead of body heat. You could watch, in glowing infrared, as anger, embarrassment, and joy bloomed inside people. If you kept watching, you would see that feelings do not stay put in one person. When a friend cries in front of you or tells you a hilarious story, their voice and expressions leap through the air between you and into your brain, changing you in the process. You take on their emotions, decode their thoughts, and worry about their welfare.”

This is empathy.

Zaki continues:

“I can’t know for sure how you experience the color blue, let alone exactly how you feel when you’re excited or frightened. Our private worlds circle each other in wobbly orbits but never touch. When two people become friends, their worlds inch closer together... Empathy is the mental superpower that overcomes distance.”

Empathy inspires kindness and our inclination to help others. Kindness is more than a superficial gesture. In the animal kingdom kindness is a vital survival skill. In humans the capacity for kindness took an evolutionary quantum leap. Without it we could never have developed the complex societies and civilizations that distinguish humans from other animals. On a profound level, kindness is what makes us fully and deeply human.

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The great English philosopher Aldous Huxley was a pioneer in the study of techniques designed to develop human potential. He explored Hindu philosophy, meditation, psychedelics, bodywork, hypnotic trance, and Zen. Toward the end of his career, he

remarked, “People often ask me what is the most effective technique for transforming their life. It is a little embarrassing that after years and years of research and experimentation, I have to say that the best answer is – just be a little kinder.”

Just be a little kinder. It sounds so simple. But it is profoundly true. The practice of kindness has been called the “ $E=mc^2$ of the Spirit” – a universal principle for good, that cuts through all dogma, inviting us to concentrate on the essential and showing us the simplest way to liberation.

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It can seem as if we are heading into an Ice Age of the heart. It can seem as if the pace of our modern lives is undermining our ability to be kind and caring. But this is by no means a given. Yes – advances in science and technology, computers and social media can distract us from our essential nature and our need for kindness. But these very same technologies can also help us expand our powers of empathy. In our modern age, we also have the capacity to take kindness to a whole new level.

Kindness has profound benefits in the realms of human health and education, in business and commerce, in politics and environmental policies. There is no doubt about it: we would all be better off in a kinder world. And a kinder world is within our reach. But there is a catch: we have to choose kindness.

Scientists and sages have clearly established that we have a great capacity for kindness. But whether or not we put kindness into action is up to each of us. Because we are human, we always have a choice. We can choose a path of cruelty, or of kindness. We can choose a path of empathy, or of indifference. We can choose a path that will lead to greater health and happiness and a better world, but we don’t have to. And sadly we often choose not to. Sadly, we are often short-sighted and confused.

George Saunders writes:

“Each of us is born with a series of built-in confusions that are probably somehow Darwinian. These are (1) we’re central in to the universe (that is our personal story is the main and most interesting story, the *only* story, really); (2) we’re separate from the universe (there’s *us* and then, out there all that other junk – dogs and swing sets and the state of Nebraska and low-hanging clouds and, you know, other people); and (3) we’re permanent (death is real, okay, sure – for you, but not for me). ...Now we don’t really believe these things – intellectually we know better – but we believe them viscerally, and live by them, and they cause us to prioritize our own needs over the needs of others, even though what we really want, in our hearts, is to be less selfish, more aware of what’s actually happening in the present moment, more open, more loving.”

We really want to be more loving and kind. But choosing kindness isn’t always sunshine and roses. Kindness sometimes requires that we step out of our comfort zone. Real kindness requires courage. It means resisting wrong and standing up for what is right. It

means sometimes raising up our umbrella, and chasing an unruly shopkeeper down the road. It means standing in solidarity with the small and shy outsider, standing up to bullies. It means paying attention to those on the margins who are so often overlooked. It means seeing them. Really seeing them. And with our whole being, saying “I acknowledge your presence; you matter to me.”

Deep down, what we truly long for is kindness. Small kindnesses: to be handed our cup of coffee hot, and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile at a stranger and for them to smile back. Deep down, we long for these brief moments of exchange, of solidarity, of presence. They are the true dwelling of the holy: fleeting temples we make together, whenever we extend a kindness to our neighbor.

The choice is ours.

Every moment of every day we can choose to be kind to others, kind to ourselves.

May we have the courage to choose kindness,

and dare to see every stranger as a friend.

So be it. Amen.

Sources:

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