

## **Kindness Over Niceness**

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, July 30, 2017

### ***Reading One***

“Kindness”

- by Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is

you must lose things,

feel the future dissolve in a moment

like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand,

what you counted and carefully saved,

all this must go so you know

how desolate the landscape can be

between the regions of kindness.

How you ride and ride

thinking the bus will never stop,

the passengers eating maize and chicken

will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness

you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho

lies dead by the side of the road.

You must see how this could be you,

how he too was someone

who journeyed through the night with plans

and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.

### ***Reading Two***

“Anger” - a Buddhist tale

- retold [Sarah Conover](#)

- from *Kindness: A Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents* (Condra Enterprises, 2005).

One day, the Buddha and a large following of monks and nuns were passing through a village. The Buddha chose a large shade tree to sit beneath so the group could rest awhile out of the heat. He often chose times like these to teach, and so he began to speak. Soon, villagers heard about the visiting teacher and many gathered around to hear him.

One surly young man stood to the side, watching, as the crowd grew larger and larger. To him, it seemed that there were too many people traveling from the city to his village, and each had something to sell or teach. Impatient with the bulging crowd of monks and villagers, he shouted at the Buddha, "Go away! You just want to take advantage of us! You teachers come here to say a few pretty words and then ask for food and money!"

But the Buddha was unruffled by these insults. He remained calm, exuding a feeling of loving-kindness. He politely requested that the man come forward. Then he asked, "Young sir, if you purchased a lovely gift for someone, but that person did not accept the gift, to whom does the gift then belong?"

The odd question took the young man by surprise. "I guess the gift would still be mine because I was the one who bought it."

"Exactly so," replied the Buddha. "Now, you have just cursed me and been angry with me. But if I do not accept your curses, if I do not get insulted and angry in return, these curses will fall back upon you—the same as the gift returning to its owner."

The young man clasped his hands together and slowly bowed to the Buddha. It was an acknowledgement that a valuable lesson had been learned. And so the Buddha concluded for all to hear, "As a mirror reflects an object, as a still lake reflects the sky: take care that what you speak or act is for good. For goodness will always cast back goodness and harm will always cast back harm."

### ***Sermon Reflection***

It is not unusual for me to wake up on Sunday mornings with some element of the sermon reflection I am about to present to be whirling about in my brain. This morning was no exception. I came out of my slumber with the phrase "the milk of human kindness" dancing about with elements of "The Milk Story" I shared with you as our meditation this morning. Then I found myself trying to remember what the ghost of Christmas Present had Scrooge drink from the golden goblet...didn't he say it was the milk of human kindness? Then I started wondering about the origins of the phrase...where did it come from? Well, of course, my nearly always faithful friend Google led me straight to the answer – William Shakespeare coined the phrase in his play *Macbeth*, where in Act I, Scene 5 Lady Macbeth complains that her husband "is too full of the milk of human kindness" to kill his rivals. The actual text reads "***Yet doe I feare thy Nature, It is too full o' th' Milke of humane kindnesse.***"

I share with you the peculiarities of my early morning subconscious brain functioning because in the very sharing of today's meanderings lies a bridge to the message for today...a bridge that had eluded me all week. While I realize that Lady Macbeth was advocating for actual murder rather than the mere overcoming or defeating of a rival, I think she may have been confusing "niceness" with "kindness," because there is a power in kindness that has nothing to do with acquiescence, passivity, or complacency. Which is exactly the distinction drawn by Kimberly DeBus in her recent UU World essay "Kindness Over Niceness" where she argues that "valuing being kind and prophetic over 'being nice' would help Unitarian Universalists speak more powerfully to the present times."

I look forward to the dialogue her words will likely inspire.

### **Kindness Over Niceness**

- by Kimberley Debus 4/3/2017 SUMMER 2017

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/kindness-over-niceness>

There are people in our Unitarian Universalist faith who believe that “being nice” is a must for us as religious people. I don’t have much that’s, well, “nice” to say about that suggestion.

Seriously, niceness is not what our Principles call us to.

Our Principles—especially the first one—do not tell us to be complacent, compromising, and conciliatory. Our First Principle tells us to affirm and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” not “affirm and promote every idea.” In fact, our Fourth Principle stops that one in its tracks, because let’s face it: there are some wild ideas not based in a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

**No, we are not supposed to be nice. Niceness buys into the gospel of comfort and says we don’t want to offend. Niceness is complacent. Niceness doesn’t make waves and lets people have their own version of truth. Niceness doesn’t want to bother anybody. Niceness says comfort is more important than doing what’s right.**

So why do we on the left side of the theological and political spectrum think we have to be nice? Why do we think we have to be conciliatory, and see all sides, and strive to be open to all points of view? **Why do we think being liked is more important than being right?**

The call to be nice is the theme of some recent articles running around the internet—in particular, a February 18 article from the *New York Times* asking, “[Are Liberals Helping Trump?](#) [1]” Articles like this suggest that liberals are too mean to Trump supporters—who are predominantly white—and that progressives across the theological, color, and gender spectrums need to be nice to them, to not shame them for hateful and harmful rhetoric, and to let their views prevail. Articles like this, as Kenny Wiley wrote on Facebook, demand that we “humanize people who are already seen as full and complex.” Meanwhile, black and brown folks and queer and female-bodied folks so often are not, and simultaneously are told to suck it up and that our gentle reasoning about the moral and theological problems make those who don’t care what we think even less likely to hear us.

Blech.

Now I’m not calling on us to be bullies—far from it; as former First Lady Michelle Obama famously said, “when they go low, we go high.” And we still must do that, because right now, because of all that Unitarian Universalists know about humanity and potential and how the world works, we do indeed occupy the moral high ground, and not being bullies is part and parcel of that occupation. **But occupying the moral high ground and building the beloved community are not the same as being liked, and our generally conciliatory manner, born from centuries of Protestant decorum, will win us neither friends nor justice.**

We need to shed that veneer of respectability in favor of our faith’s true call: to be kind.

Kindness sees a need and offers to help. Kindness stands up for the person being bullied, and then makes sure they’re safe. Kindness disrupts lawlessness and incivility. **Kindness goes out of its way.** Kindness recycles, kindness holds the door, kindness builds a ramp, kindness explains, and kindness knows its privilege and uses it to build justice. Kindness is not easy. Kindness is sometimes uncomfortable, because it requires us to not stay comfortable, to not stay nice and docile.

**Kindness doesn't sit still.** And kindness acts in big and small ways. Kindness calls elected representatives, and writes letters, and goes to protest marches, and makes sure everyone who wants to have a voice has one. Kindness donates to groups in need and stands outside of Planned Parenthood and escorts women seeking medical treatment. **Kindness puts on angel wings and shields a grieving family from a Westboro Baptist Church protest.** Kindness prays for the protection of sacred land and water and asks forgiveness. Kindness mourns hate-motivated deaths, and kindness works for racial justice because it knows that black lives matter.

Kindness mattered to an older white woman who stood in line at a deli one morning before Thanksgiving. As I approached the line, this woman asked for a grilled chicken salad she'd take for lunch; the clerk said it would take five minutes and happily began the preparation. As the clerk was bagging my items, a Latina woman came in and asked for a grilled chicken salad. "We can't do chicken right now," the clerk said in a curt tone. The Latina woman began to slump off, and that could have been the end of it, but the older woman insisted: "You did it for me, you can do it for her."

**Kindness isn't always easy. But kindness matters.**

Kindness - not arguing - is what's going to make the difference. Kindness means that we're working for equal rights and equal pay and safety and clean water and accessibility for everyone, even those who disagree with us at the tops of their voices.

Kindness answers yes. Kindness doesn't calculate the return on investment or the risk to reputation or the fear of comments. Kindness is present to the moment.

Our seizing the moment matters. Our call to be uncomfortable matters. Our giving out of love and compassion matters. **We can't stop to be nice and conciliatory, or the dream will never be.** We must stop being nice and answer the call of our faith.

Because our kindness matters.