

From "Kindness" by Naomi Shahib Nye

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 was someone
Who journeyed through the night with plans
And the simple breath that kept him alive

Kindness as a Religion

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“My religion is kindness.” This is something that the Dalai Lama repeats again and again, like a mantra, wherever he goes. The 80-year old Nobel Laureate entitled the Dalai Lama, whose actual name is Tenzin Gyatso, is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists. So he *is* a Buddhist, but he is not *at all* a missionary for Buddhism. He is a zealous, radical missionary for kindness—by any means necessary. If atheism helps you to be kinder toward your fellow living beings, then he is happy to encourage you. If prayer to Allah, the Merciful, or to the Lord God in Heaven, or to Mother Earth, helps you to become kinder, then he is happy to encourage that. Whatever it takes. For that reason, he has prayed with Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Jews, and even taught Bible classes—even though he, personally, does not believe in any sort of divine creator *at all*.

We tend to think that *kindness* means being nice or gentle. But it is darker and more intimate than any code of manners. Primordially, it means treating one other as kinfolk—which, in fact, of course, we really are. Hamlet says, “I must be cruel only to be kind,” in reference to the well-intentioned harshness he directs *at his own mother*. Speaking of brotherly love and so forth, we take our kinship to one another as a fluffy spiritual metaphor rather than as a literal fact. But of course it IS a biological fact, a genetic fact. We *are* kin.

The word “kind” and the word “kin” both derive from the ancient word *kunjam*, which means “family.” Two thousand years ago, *kunjam-iz*—literally “family-ish”—already meant a natural sense of care or compassion (in Proto-German). It is fascinating

to notice a similar word development in Chinese, where the character for “human” and the character for “two” were combined more than 2500 years ago to create the word “*ren*,” meaning human-hearted, humane, the natural care of one human for another.

Now we understand *kindness* rather as Aristotle and the New Testament use the Greek *kharis*: not just a compassionate motivation or an empathetic feeling, but actual behavior intended to help another, and to help another *for the sake of another* rather than for the sake of repaying a debt or improving one’s own reputation.

In considering the idea of kindness as a religion, I want to make this claim: *The only worthwhile measure of spiritual growth is our dedication to effective kindness.* Spirituality is not some special experience or private inner condition. Some of us get a good warm feeling by singing together in church. But what makes this “holy”? We could dance together, as we here in church once when we had a sermon on the spirituality of dancing, or we could dance at Rubbles. People can also get intense good feelings by having great sex. Or, at times, by meditating. Or: by taking heroin. Samuel Coleridge, utterly blissed out on opium, wrote “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree.” It’s a great line, but is this a spiritual thing? What could justify calling some of these good feelings *spiritual* and others NOT? William James’s answer is that *blissful experience is religious only insofar as it is morally helpful.* He said this specifically to make clear that opiates and the like are not a spiritual path.

And I agree. Because really: If we are not becoming more kind, then aren’t we wasting time? Jacking off, so to speak. It is sad to think about getting older and older and attaining only to snarling, bitter jealousy of those younger or richer or healthier. A Mary Oliver poem says, “Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me keep my mind on what matters . . . “

Like Aristotle, Confucius said that the rare virtue of true kindness (*ren*) does not mean being well intentioned. Rather, he specified that it means exerting oneself in the consideration of others just as much as most people exert themselves in matters of sex—and hence its rarity. Such exertion is directed toward converting kind feelings into actions that actually help. Thus I have suggested that the measure of spiritual growth is our dedication to *effective* kindness. To be *effectively* kind, we must tune in to others, be fully present for them and skillfully responsive. In this way, caring propels us ever into the terrain of new skills, new information, new insights, according to our circumstances. As someone wrote:

“The man is a father now. He knows the names of all the neighborhood dogs.”

So as to be kind, we keep learning things we never thought would matter, things we need to give better care to certain people in certain moments: We learn about changing diapers, *Roberts Rules*, and the latest research on cancer treatment, or even such arcana as the institutional structure of the Unitarian Universalist Association. And we can be alert to the ways the things we already happen to know, the talents we already happen to have, may better be deployed for the benefit of others.

The relationship between truly caring and knowing how to care well, the relationship between kindness and wisdom, is articulated in this passage from the *Education of Little Tree* by Forrest Carter:

Granma said everybody has two minds. One of the minds has to do with necessities for body living. You had to use it figure how to get shelter and eating

and such like for the body. She said you had to use it to mate and have young'uns and such. She said we had to have that mind so as we could carry on. But she said we had another mind that had nothing at all to do with such. She said it was the spirit mind.

Granma said if you used the body-living mind to think greedy or mean; if you was always cuttin' at folks with it and figuring how to profit off'n them...then you would shrink up your spirit mind to a size no bigger'n a hickor'nut.

That's how you become dead people. Granma said you could easy spot dead people. She said dead people when they looked at other people they saw nothing but bad; when they looked at a tree they saw nothing but lumber and profit; never beauty. Grandma said they was dead people walking around.

Granma said that the spirit mind was like any other muscle. If you used it it got bigger and stronger. She said the only way it could get that way was using it to understand, but you couldn't open the door to it until you quit being greedy and such with your body mind. Then understanding commenced to take up, and the more you tried to understand, the bigger it got.

Natural, she said, understanding and love was the same thing; except folks went at it back'ards too many times, trying to pretend they loved things when they didn't understand them. Which can't be done."

This Cherokee notion that "understanding and love" are, at root, the same thing is found in the Buddhist tradition as the ideal of the fully awakened being who embodies wisdom and loving care so thoroughly that they are utterly nondual, indifferntiable; they have interacted synergistically to the point that each can be seen as the expression of the other.

The Buddhist tradition also echoes Little Tree’s notion that kindness, or spirit muscle, grows through exercise. This is why the Dalai Lama and other Buddhists constantly use the word “practice.” It is not about bowing or praying to express some inner attitude of gratitude or devotion. It is more like practice, like weight-training, repeated actions that become habits which, when well established, constitute our character. Someone once asked my teacher Jeffrey Hopkins why he was constantly talking about *training* in compassion. “Just be natural; just be yourself!” she told him. Jeffrey answered, “Maybe that would work for you, but without this effort I would mainly care for myself, even at the expense of others.”

When we train ourselves to intentionally direct attention so as to help most effectively, then what do we see, what do we understand? Well, there is a great deal to see and many different ways of boiling the matter down. For one, we see that we are not always honest with ourselves, or with others, about the basic situation—what is going on right here. Effective kindness requires deep and sometimes painful honesty. Honesty is the way we teach our kids, and ourselves, the path to wisdom: to see and to present ourselves and others *as we are*, for better and worse, as best we are able.

Radical honesty about what is going on here leads us to *know* that we *don’t know* any final answers—and that likely no one else does either. Laurie Anderson put it this way:

This is a large room. Full of people. All kinds. And we are all asking ourselves the same question: *What* is behind that curtain?

Not knowing what is behind the curtain is terrifying and so we run to those who lie and claim to know, and we harm others who tell the wrong story. But when we take it that

that no one really knows, we grow humble, good humored—and more kind. We understand that we are *all* afraid. We are all vulnerable. We will die, like the Indian in the white poncho. We *can* be kind sometimes, but we tend to be selfish. And we are in pain.

And: we *all* have clever ways to avoid looking at these facts.

All of this stuff—our circumstances and our writhing this way and that so as not to face them—these are the very things that *bind us together*. We can never be alone in our suffering; and we are never alone in our desperate wish to avoid it. As Naomi Shahib Nye puts it:

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

When we have our turn to be terribly afflicted, to suffer loss beyond what we can bear, we may despair, or rage, or even exacerbate the situation by blaming ourselves. We might feel that unspeakable pain, of which no one else knows, isolates us from the rest of the world. But right at that moment, from this very position, we might be able to take a big step. Thoreau said it this way:

Not till we are lost, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves,
and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.

When the monk Tissa was dying of dysentery, he could not take care of himself; he was alone in terribly squalid conditions. Seeing this, the Buddha went to Tissa. He bathed him and dressed him in clean clothes; he talked to him and sat with him as he died. Then the Buddha told the other monks that they must always care for one another in this way. And he said to them: If *we* do not care for one another, then who will?

So, if we are honest, we will see how utterly obvious it is that others' suffering is *just as real* and *just as painful* as our own. It matters *just as much*, yet we act as though it did not. If we are honest, we will see that while we pride ourselves on being *sensible* and reasonable, there is no objective reason to privilege our own welfare over that of others. We see that this is just a preference to which we are each powerfully genetically disposed and culturally conditioned. A narrow sense of self-interest is actually NOT rational—and the pretense that it is has led the planet to the brink of catastrophe.

Each of us is born with built-in confusions, apparently driven by our genes. It seems obvious to us that we are central to the universe; our personal story is the main and most interesting story, the *only* story, really; (2) It seems obvious to us that we are 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, you know, other people, and (3) most absurdly, it seems to us that we are permanent and somehow inevitable. We feel sorry for the Indian in the white poncho, but clearly our situation is *quite* different.

Honesty shows us that we “naturally” think in these ways even though all of this is *wrong*.

And that is not all: If we are honest, we see that helping others actually makes us happier. For example, people doing group therapy work tend to improve most dramatically when they believe (accurately or not) that their participation in the group is helping others. Matthieu Ricard, the man whose brain shows up in fMRI machines as the happiest brain in the world, says that this happiness is achieved by meditating on loving-kindness toward all living beings. As social animals, we naturally mirror the pain of those we see around us, unless we are given reason to see those others as “other.” So, if we are

honest, we will not resort to the claim that it is not in our nature to care for others, nor to the claim that it is the nature of others—such as Trump’s “losers”—to be stuck in misery.

Instead, if we are honest, we recognize our intimacy with others. Essentially, we are kindred not only genetically, but in the very, very core fact that we all want whatever we think will make us happy. Honesty is not to deceive ourselves about our often inconvenient but always inescapable relatedness to others. In fact, throughout the world, in addition to suffering caused by earthquakes and so forth, there is vast needless suffering that arises from our refusal to see this interconnectedness. We all suffer needlessly because we don’t see things as they are. Kindness is *fact-based* virtue. It involves turning away from confusions generated by our genes and reinforced by our culture.

Also: if we are honest, we see that our actions may actually make a real difference in others’ lives; justifications for apathy and nihilism don’t hold up. It is true that we don’t have any guarantees that we will help. And we know good intentions are not enough. But this is not an excuse for not trying to help and learning how to help more effectively. We like to say, but can’t be absolutely sure, that the long arc of history bends toward justice. Maybe it bends this way for a while and then bends back. Who knows? Maybe which way it bends depends on our choices. We *can’t* know, but what we surely *can* do is to commit ourselves to pushing in the right direction. The person who thus exerts herself with dignity, not giving way to discouragement at events beyond her control, represents our humanity in such a manner as to please Little Elk’s Granma.

Here is how George Saunders explained it in a commencement speech at Syracuse University:

What do I regret? Working terrible jobs, like “knuckle-puller in a slaughterhouse?” No. I don’t regret that. Skinny-dipping in a river in Sumatra, a

little buzzed, and looking up and seeing like 300 monkeys sitting on a pipeline, pooping down into the river, the river in which I was swimming, naked? Not really.

But here's something I do regret: In seventh grade, this new kid joined our class; she was small and shy. She was mostly ignored, occasionally teased and I could see this hurt her. Her eyes cast down, she looked gut-kicked, as if, having just been reminded of her place in things, she was trying, as much as possible, to disappear. 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. What I regret *most* in my life are *failures of kindness, moments when* another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded . . . *sensibly*.

Research shows that actually seeing images of individuals suffering powerfully motivates us to help. Consider how the image of one Syrian three-year old drowned on the beach changed the world's response to the refugee crisis—which had already been going on and was being ignored. So let us put ourselves out there, in places where our kindness is provoked—and needed. Each of us, looking carefully at her or his life, should consider what sorts of activities, practices, and situations have helped us to become more kind. Let's be intent on nurturing any tender sprout of kindness that we find within ourselves. Let's commit to caring for one another. We might do this because we are sure there is no one up in Heaven to do it for us. Or: maybe because we do it because we think some spirit or buddha would approve. *It does not matter!*

What matters is that we resolve, each morning, not to miss our chances to be kind this particular day. And if we do miss a chance, let us regret that and then resolve to be as kind as we can the next day, and the next day after that.

Some Sources

Note that herein I have edited without ellipses and a couple of times slightly adapted my source material. The list of three confusions derives directly, with minor adaptation, from George Saunders's *Congratulations, By the Way*.

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