

Unitarian Church of Montpelier
**“Kindness: Our Best Tool for Personal and Collective
Wholeness”**
by Ginny Sassaman
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“Nothing,” wrote Tolstoy, “can make our life, or the lives of other people, more beautiful than perpetual kindness.”

You might be surprised to know, an ongoing exploration of personal and collective happiness can cover some pretty rough territory. It’s not always fun. Genuine happiness – which can be described as wholeness, growing into our most thriving selves -- must be built on reality, not on the shifting sands of denial or suppression. If we want to be whole, if we want to contribute to a more whole world, we must honestly face what needs to be done, systemically and individually, to cultivate happiness and well-being for all.

Fortunately, we have kindness to help us. Piero Ferrucci, an Italian psychotherapist and author of one of my all-time favorite books, [The Power of Kindness](#), says it may seem absurd to consider kindness in a world so “full of violence, war, terrorism (and) devastation. And yet,” he observes, “life goes on precisely because we are kind to one another.”

The Dalai Lama, in his preface to Ferrucci’s book, wrote, “If we stop to think, it is clear that our very survival ... depends upon the acts and kindness of so many people. ... On the

other hand, the more our hearts and minds are afflicted with ill will, the more miserable we become. Therefore, we cannot avoid the necessity of kindness and compassion.”

I agree. Of course, who am I to disagree with the Dalai Lama? Still, it seems worth emphasizing: kindness is not only one of the loveliest tools in our happiness toolkits – kits we all have as a birth right – but also a necessary one.

[HOLD UP SIGN] A little show and tell ... I keep this sign in my bedroom window. Many of you are no doubt familiar with this saying: “In this house, we believe: black lives matter, women’s rights are human rights, no human is illegal, science is real, love is love, kindness is everything.”

Kindness is everything. I used to puzzle over what that meant, but have come to see, as both the Dalai Lama and Piero Ferrucci point out, that without kindness, how could we even live? How could civilization survive, much less move toward healing and wholeness? Every day the news brings dreadful stories of humans behaving in ways totally devoid of kindness, behaviors that are wrenching and horrifying. The bleakness of a world where kindness is completely absent is beyond imagining.

Clearly, on every level -- self, community, nation, the planet – we all need more kindness in this world. And, to paraphrase Ghandi, we all need to be the kindness we wish to see in the world.

Let's look a little more closely at what that might mean, starting with my positive psychology teacher, Tal Ben-Shahar. Tal says, "There is so much benefit to the person who gives that I often think there is no more selfish act than a generous act."

Tal also stresses paying attention to what we pay attention to. The world is too vast and complex for us to observe more than a fraction at a time. Thus, what we see often depends on what we're looking for.

We can keep our antennae raised for annoying behavior, or worse – and we'll see it. I would never suggest ignoring real concerns – but at the same time, we can consciously choose to be on alert for kindness. Sometimes it's hard to see – kindness can be so normal, it's almost invisible. Other times, it's a bit out of the ordinary, and therefore more visible. On occasion, the kindness is truly extraordinary, like a nurse I know who gave a month of her life to care for Syrian refugees who survived the perilous ocean journey to Greece.

You all know how to be kind, in ways large and small. Even smiles and waves can be meaningful acts of kindness – but we would do well to pay attention. This allows us to savor the good in others and reminds us to be kinder.

We need those reminders. In our hectic lives, we often know the right thing to do, but we don't always take action. Buddhist meditation teacher Katy Brennan says kindness needs to be a moral discipline. "Although human kindness is

deeply natural and instinctive," she writes, "it can also be shaky and unstable. In our present mode of existence, selfishness and mindlessness compete and often trump kindness and mindfulness."

I know what she's talking about. This is a piece of turtle shell, a turtle I could have been kind to, but wasn't. It was trying to cross a quiet country road. When I saw it, I thought the turtle might not make it, that I should maybe carry it get to the other side. But ... I kept driving. Selfish? Mindless? I don't know. The next day, I came upon the flattened turtle. Pieces of shell were strewn over the pavement. Of course, I felt terrible. If I had heeded my kindness instinct, that turtle presumably would not have died. I picked up this shell and keep it as a reminder: when the opportunity to be kind arises, seize that opportunity.

Again, it's not just for the real or metaphorical turtles we come upon – giving kindness is good for us, too. Pierro Ferrucci's uncle is the English writer Aldous Huxley, who studied many ways to develop "human potential, including ... Vedanta, psychedelics, bodywork, meditation, hypnotic trance, and Zen." In the end, according to Ferrucci, Huxley said, "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. So simple -- when we pay attention.

The science of happiness has also chimed in, with this sweet news: “Kindness Makes You Happy... and Happiness Makes You Kind.” According to Alex Dixon, writing in *Greater Good Magazine*, “new research suggests that once you start doing nice things for other people, you might not want to stop.” He says, it’s almost as if “you could walk into a store and buy lifelong happiness” because your “kindness might create a virtuous cycle that promotes lasting happiness and altruism.”

That’s not all kindness does for us. In [The How of Happiness](#), Sonja Lyubomirsky ticks off multiple ways practicing kindness makes us feel better: we perceive others more positively, we nurture cooperative communities, we feel thankful for good fortune, and our improved self-perception as good people leads to greater confidence, optimism, and usefulness. Also, kindness “promotes a sense of meaning” in life and can create “a cascade of positive social consequences.”

Here’s more from the *Daily Good*, where writer Birju Pandya lists “5 Ways Science Says Kindness Will Change Your Life.” One, “kindness rewires our minds for greater health.” Two, even “small shifts can grow our capacity for kindness. Three, “kindness can help the bottom line” because “The single greatest advantage in the modern economy is a happy and engaged workforce.” Four, “Your social community benefits from small acts of kindness.”

And five, Birju Pandya writes, "Change yourself with kindness, change the world with kindness. ... As we are increasingly in a world where most are unhappy in their day-to-day life, kindness offers an alternative for both personal benefit and potentially greater social benefit."

But what is kindness?

Irish writer John O'Donohue has a poetic answer: "The word kindness has a gentle sound that seems to echo the presence of compassionate goodness. ... Kindness has gracious eyes; it is not small-minded or competitive; it wants nothing back for itself. Kindness strikes a resonance with the depths of your own heart; it also suggests that your vulnerability, though somehow exposed, is not taken advantage of; rather, it has become an occasion for dignity and empathy."

A perhaps more useful definition comes from psychoanalyst Adam Phillips and historian Barbara Taylor in their 2009 book, On Kindness. They say kindness can be "sympathy, generosity, altruism, benevolence, humanity, compassion, pity, empathy ... they all denote what the Victorians called 'open-heartedness,' the sympathetic expansiveness linking self to other."

Here's a third definition from *Psychology Today* blogger Karyn Hall: "Kindness is defined as the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate. Affection, gentleness, warmth, concern, and care are words that are associated

with kindness. While kindness has a connotation of meaning someone is naive or weak, that is not the case. Being kind often requires courage and strength. Kindness is an interpersonal skill.”

Wait a minute – Hall says kindness is seen as naïve or weak??

It gets worse. Phillips and Taylor also assert that, in today’s “outrage culture,” “kindness ... has become a sign of weakness (except of course among saintly people, in whom it is a sign of their exceptionality).” They write that contemporary society believes “kindness requires a dangerous crack in the armor of the independent self, an exploitable outward vulnerability – too high a cost to pay for the warm inward balm of the benevolence for which we long in the deepest parts of ourselves.”

This is heartbreaking. As Phillips and Taylor note, “In giving up on kindness – and especially our own acts of kindness – we deprive ourselves of a pleasure that is fundamental to our sense of well-being.”

I read the Phillips and Taylor book with eager anticipation, on summer vacation. It did not make me happy. Rather, their history was deeply upsetting, detailing politicians and philosophers through the ages who found kindness too subversive for their winner-take-all and dog-eat-dog economic and governing structures. Over time, kindness

became marginalized as a quality for women, especially mothers, and a few outlier professions like ministers.

Intellectually, I believe what Phillips and Taylor reported – but their conclusion is completely unacceptable to me. If kindness is subversive, let me man the barricades! This concept is also wildly divergent from our UU faith, and our belief in the inherent worth and interconnectedness of all beings. Our principles endorse compassion in human relations, and peace, liberty and justice for all. We *are* a people of kindness.

I have to admit, the United States these days does seem to be substantially less kind, though I personally experience kindness frequently. Maybe that's Vermont. Maybe the fact that I am a middle-class white woman also has something to do with that.

Ta Nehesi-Coates, a contemporary African American writer from Baltimore, opened my eyes to the privilege aspect of kindness. In his book, Between the World and Me, he writes of moving to Paris, where a new friend was kind to him. Nonetheless, Nehesi-Coates remained guarded. “Was this all some elaborate ritual to get an angle on me? My friend paid. I thanked him. But when we left, I made sure he walked out first. He wanted to show me one of those old buildings that seem to be around every corner in that city. And the entire time he was leading me, I was sure he was going to make a quick turn into an alley, where some dudes would be waiting to strip me of ... what, exactly? But my new friend

simply showed me the building, shook my hand, gave a fine *bonne soirée*, and walked off into the wide open night. And watching him walk away, I felt that I had missed part of the experience because of my eyes, because my eyes were made in Baltimore, because my eyes were blindfolded by fear.”

This passage taught me that both giving and receiving kindness involve a certain degree of vulnerability – and that is just not something that is always available to, or safe for, everyone.

This is dreadfully sad. When even the capacity to give and receive kindness can be limited by skin color, well, that’s tragic. It’s yet another reason to work towards dismantling white supremacy.

In the meantime, those of us who are less vulnerable and can practice kindness more freely might try being even more generous with our kindnesses, and even more grateful for the opportunities we have to be kind.

And we can all exercise greater care. For starters, we can consider that *a lack of kindness* – not sending a card, not inquiring after a family member’s health – might be inadvertently hurtful. Not that we can always be there for everyone -- it’s just something to be aware of.

Indeed, kindness can take discernment. Is this the right thing to do, at the right time? Even though giving makes us feel good, kindness is really about the other person. Certainly,

we don't want to be patronizing. Giving someone something they don't want or need might feel good to the giver, but it isn't actually kind.

We also need to be kind to ourselves. We can't keep saying yes when we are depleted, and/or the kindness needed is just too hard. Sometimes we have to give anyway – say, when there's a newborn baby to take care of, or a grieving friend needs extra attention. Kindness can take courage, perseverance, even a strong stomach. But be mindful. Is it the appropriate choice?

Here is a kindness truism I don't believe: "tis better to give than to receive." Actually, both are necessary. If we're all intent on giving, who will receive our kindness? A couple of winters ago, a passing stranger saw me struggling to get my car out of an iced-over driveway. After my car was unstuck, and I thanked him, he replied, "No, thank *you* for giving me the chance to do something nice today." My receiving was actually also giving to him.

Another kindness cliché I don't believe is, it is better to be anonymous in your giving. There may be occasions when that is the right choice, but anonymity means the recipient doesn't know who to thank. It may feel like the high road, when really, we're depriving someone else of the opportunity to express gratitude.

Once while walking, I found five one hundred dollar bills in the grass next to the road, along with several pieces of mail

that presumably identified the owner. This was just down the street from a middle school, so I went there and learned that, yes, the name on the mail was one of their parents. When I handed over the money, the secretary asked for my name. I demurred, saying my identity wasn't important.

But maybe it was. I didn't need to be thanked, but maybe *they* needed to thank me.

That story illustrates another point: there can be a lot going on with any single act of kindness -- so many decisions, choices and layers. Piero Ferrucci actually says there are 18 qualities involved in cultivating true kindness: honesty, warmth, forgiveness, contact, sense of belonging, trust, mindfulness, empathy, humility, patience, generosity, respect, flexibility, memory, loyalty, gratitude, service, and joy.

Paradoxically, though, kindness can also be quite simple. In the words of Nkosi Johnson, a South African boy who died from HIV when he was 12, "Do all you can, with what you have, in the time you have, in the place where you are."

The Dalai Lama says, kindness is his religion. It seems fitting to give him the final word. He advises, "Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible."

Amen.