



The Art of Kindness

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Earlier this summer, I received what appeared to be an open letter from an influential member of one of our kindred congregations in which he criticized Unitarian Universalism for what he described as a “profound commitment to the Cult of Niceness.” Setting aside the question of whether or not being nice can be described as somehow cultic, with its pejorative connotation, I found myself at once amused, puzzled and annoyed by this accusation – and it was intended as an accusation! In a letter from this same correspondent last December, he suggested that he could not imagine “large numbers of people rushing to join UU congregations so they can be treated nicely and [be] spiritually uplifted.” I found myself wondering then if he was proposing, by extension, that Unitarian Universalism could become a force to be reckoned with if we would only learn to treat people in a manner sufficiently disagreeable that it served to induce spiritual depression.

I would suppose that this correspondent is really trying to suggest that we sometimes resort to being nice to one another in an effort to avoid facing hard truths together. When niceness is a technique of avoidance rather than a genuine appreciation of the other, then I would agree that it is unhealthy and undesirable. But to be perfectly honest, I do not see much evidence to support the position that Unitarian Universalists are pathologically nice to one another. Quite the contrary – while I find most of our congregations and their members to be genuinely warm and friendly, I have also worked with a few congregations that could be fairly characterized as contentious, unkind, unwelcoming and – in one or two extreme cases – even cruel. If we have been guilty of undue niceness at all, it has been in our willingness to tolerate individuals and groups who are insufficiently kind and respectful of one another. So I reject the idea that our faith is somehow dominated by a “Cult of Niceness,” although I almost wish the accusation were true!

My personal experience of Unitarian Universalists – and of people in general, irrespective of religious affiliation – is that we mostly seek to be kind to one another, despite our occasional failings and shortcomings. And this is something that we should celebrate rather than lament, for kindness is a virtue – and an ancient one, at that.

“What does the Lord require of you,” asked the Old Testament prophet Micah, “but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Do *you* love kindness? I know that I do!

So did Robert Ingersoll, the American statesman and orator who was known by his friends as the ‘Apostle of Freedom’ and by his detractors as ‘The Great Agnostic.’ Possessed of a brilliant mind and a critical awareness of the great issues of his age, Ingersoll was unsparing in controversy – but friend and foe alike remembered him as having been a kind man. And he valued kindness in others. “I divide this world into two classes,” he said when addressing a gathering of New York City’s Unitarian Club in 1892, “the cruel and the kind; and I think a thousand times more of a kind [person] than I do of an intelligent [one]. I think more of kindness than I do of genius; I think more of real, good, human nature in that way – of one who is willing to lend a helping hand and who goes through the world with a face that looks as if its owner were willing to answer a decent question – I think a thousand times more of that than I do of being theologically right; because I do not care whether I am theologically right or not.”¹

These words ring as true to us today as they did to Ingersoll’s audience more than a century ago. They are at the heart of our way in religion, which seeks to bring together people of goodwill, irrespective of belief – whether or not we think one another “theologically right.” We are more concerned with how people treat one another, as well we should be. It is more important to care for one another and help one another than it is to be theologically correct, or *merely* knowledgeable.

It would be tempting this morning to reflect on the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania – events still fresh in our minds and weighing heavily on our hearts – but these cowardly deeds are so far removed from kindness that they can scarcely be mentioned in the same sentence without profaning it. Such depraved indifference to human life and well-being is devoid of basic human decency, let alone civility. And while kindness may be thought of along with civility, it is much more than that, for it implies *active* goodwill, not just tolerance or even cordial relationship. Such kindness is among the great human virtues.

The words kindness and kinship both derive from the same Old English root. So when we treat one another kindly, we are treating one another as though we were kin. And, in a very real sense, we are. If we genuinely believe that all people are members of one human family – that we are all sisters and brothers – then this belief should have consequences for how we relate to other people. Our everyday acts of kindness – easily forgotten, unnamed and unremarkable, extended to friend and stranger alike – are the best evidence that we do believe in our hearts that we belong to one great human family.

You may remember that, when George Bush (the elder) first ran for president, he

called on our American neighbors to create a “kinder, gentler” nation. Some of you may also remember that, since then, I have been given to making occasional satirical – even cynical – comments about this particular catch phrase, which to me seemed a better campaign slogan than definitive policy statement. But whether or not the Bush administration could claim to have been kinder or gentler than any other in recent memory, and whether or not my particular assessment is even fair or reasonable, the former president himself is widely regarded, by those who know him, as a kindly individual. I have no reason to doubt it. One incident illustrates this as well as any. It was during a pleasant summer day like this one that Bush invited some members of the press, along with their families, to a barbecue at his summer home in Kennebunkport. At one point during the afternoon, the president noticed a young girl crying near the pool, so he went over to console her. He learned that she had lost a tooth while swimming and quickly realized that the evidence necessary for filing a claim with the Power that Compensates for Dental Loss – the Tooth Fairy – had quite literally been washed away. Taking a note card with an illustration of his home on the cover, Bush marked an “x” at the appropriate spot and testified on the inside of the card: “Dear Tooth Fairy – Katie’s tooth came out where the x is. It really did – I promise ... George Bush.”² In this small and spontaneous act of kindness, the former president was fully present, if only for a moment or two, in response to what is admittedly one of life’s smaller tragedies. But he was present ... and he was kind ... and that young girl is sure to remember (or at least be reminded of) the day that her childhood expectations were salvaged by the kindness of a president. I am even inclined to say that the world itself is a tiny bit better off for that day when the president of its most powerful nation knelt before the tears of a disappointed child.

Many of you have shown me great acts of kindness through the years, but I won’t embarrass any of you or offend your collective sense of humility – or possibly expose the lack of it – by chronicling those kindnesses here. Instead, let me tell you about my good friend “Barbara,” who leaps immediately to mind as one of the kindest people I have ever known. Barb is kind in nearly everything she does. For those of us whose capacity for benevolence is less well developed, it can almost drive us to distraction, since Barb reminds us of our own shortcomings. She is married to a man whom *some* would consider “difficult,” but her capacity for kindness allows her to look deep within his heart and see his genuine tenderness, compassion, and hunger for righteousness. So she loves him, as well she should, and is able to see his inner beauty and generosity. At their core, they mirror one another’s values more than most people know, though most are distracted by image rather than substance. I have seen Barb offer gifts to near strangers – small tokens to brighten their day. I have watched her take care to find the thoughtful, delicate word that eases the hard truth of criticism. I have witnessed her deal gently and respectfully with individuals with whom she disagreed profoundly.

I assure you that I am not idealizing or romanticizing the character of my friend. In fact, I would guess that each of you knows someone like Barbara. The very fact that my account of her is entirely unembellished is what makes her such a challenging acquaintance, for her genuine kindness forces me to look squarely at myself and summon the courage to change. On one occasion, as I watched Barb going about simply being herself, it dawned on me that the quality of kindness she shows must require tremendous discipline. And this, perhaps, is what most distinguishes kindness from love – kindness is *love's active form*. Kindness is the discipline of *acting* on our love for others – the manner in which we make love *real* in the world. In this sense, kindness is an art.

Surely you have seen those bumper stickers that admonish us to “practice random acts of kindness and senseless beauty.” It is a modern paraphrase of the Golden Rule, somewhat extended. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you – and then do more.” The key here is the word practice. My friend Barbara has practiced kindness so often and so well that it is now second nature to her. In his book *The Art of Loving*, the late psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm argued that love is not so much a state of being as it is an art. Upon reflection, I have come to believe that love is, in fact, a state of being, whereas kindness is an art. It is the discipline of affection, the art of making love tangible in the world. It is the recognition that we are all kin – a recognition that is at the root of the central moral teachings of each of the world’s great religions. As an art, kindness requires decision, cultivation, discipline, and practice. Consequently, it is, as my late colleague Deane Starr claimed, a virtue. Love *is* – but kindness *we choose*.

When I am in my study, I am surrounded by reminders of my academic distinctions and achievements. In school and university, I studied earnestly and sought to cultivate the mind. I honour the intellect and respect rigorous scholarship. But intelligence is not what I really long for – after all, many a sociopath is extremely bright.

Like Robert Ingersoll, I affirm that, “I think more of a kind person than I do of an intelligent one. I think more of kindness than I do of genius.” Perhaps this is because I sometimes have to *work* at being kind. As I stand here today, I am reminded that, while preparing these very words, I interrupted the task at hand to scold my children unsparingly for the mess they had made in the living room. I am not always as kind as I aspire to be. As with most people, I find that kindness to strangers often comes more easily than kindness towards those who mean the most to me. And it is often the case that cruelty, however mild, is the shadow side of cleverness. It is in these moments, especially, that I would willingly sacrifice a little wit in return for some charm, a little pretentious intelligence in return for a portion of unpretentious kindness.

When all is said and done, what seems intelligent today may seem the height of

foolishness tomorrow, in light of the continuing march of human knowledge. But kindness lives forever in a world made more gentle and fair by our deeds. The outward appearance of knowledge has always come relatively easily to me – as perhaps it comes to a disproportionate number of Unitarian Universalists – but I struggle in my own efforts to be kind. Ultimately, it is kindness to others that yields the deepest satisfactions in my life and ministry.

I think that I can claim to be a loving person – even a “hopeless romantic.” But while kindness is an art, love is a state of being – what more traditional theologies might describe as a manifestation of grace. Such a gift can hardly be claimed as a virtue. No matter how intelligent or loving we may be, kindness calls us to practice and discipline. Intelligence and love mean little if they are not manifest in the world through acts of kindness. Whether we can be described as kindly individuals or not is the true test of character. The same is true for any society that aspires to genuine greatness.

May we ever strive to be kind and caring. May we ever seek to “practice random acts of kindness and senseless beauty.” May we ever try to live by the Golden Rule – to “do unto others as we would have them do unto us” – exercising our empathy so that we might be genuinely present to the needs of others. And when all is said and done, may it be said of us that we truly love kindness above all other virtues. Then we will come to the deep realization that has gripped the prophets of all ages, so eloquently captured by the poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox, who wrote:

“So many Gods, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind,
When just the art of being kind
Is all this sad world needs.”

First Reading: From *The Ideal* by Robert G. Ingersoll (1892)

I divide this world into two classes – the cruel and the kind; and I think a thousand times more of a kind [person] than I do of an intelligent [one]. I think more of kindness than I do of genius; I think more of real, good, human nature in that way – of one who is willing to lend a helping hand and who goes through the world with a face that looks as if its owner were willing to answer a decent question – I think a thousand times more of that than I do of being theologically right; because I do not care whether I am theologically right or not.

Second Reading: From “Kindness” by Deane Starr (1996)

Love seems to embody a suggestion of inconstancy and arbitrariness, like the ebb and flow of the tides. It is an emotion over which we do not always seem to be in control. In fact, it sometimes seems as though we have no control at all. ... So I do not regard love as the supreme value.

I opt for kindness. Kindness is not primarily an emotion at all; it is a deliberate and quite controllable act of will. No matter how we may feel, we can always choose to act kindly, even though we are provoked. Kindness is at the apex of desirable virtues. ...

Kindness need not be overly sentimental nor romantic. A person can be kind and gracious without being valueless. However, kindness does require restraint. ... Kindness respects the judgment of others and encourages it, regardless of personal opinion.

References

¹ Robert G. Ingersoll, “The Ideal,” a Toast at the Unitarian Club Dinner, New York, January 15, 1892.

² Fred Bauer, “The Power of a Note,” in *Heart At Work*, ed. Jack Canfield and Jacqueline Miller (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 169.