

# We Begin with Kindness

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*"The highest form of wisdom is kindness."* from the Talmud Reading: "If You Knew" by Ellen Bass

Sermon: One day a few years back, I was sitting in traffic. The light was red. (I think it was one of those "no right on red" intersections.) After the light turned green, the driver just ahead of me hesitated just a few seconds too long before turning right. And then, from behind us, came the sound. The driver just behind us sat on the horn, making that loud, and annoying, and all too familiar sound. Not an unusual occurrence in certain parts, I know, (and not at all unusual where we were at the time) but I felt sorry for the slow driver ahead of me. I had just made some off-handed remark about rude drivers when, from the back seat, a wise young person said something like: "Mom, how can you say that? You don't know what's going on with that guy behind us. Maybe he's had a rough day or maybe he really does need to get somewhere in a hurry." I could not argue. I had to admit she was right. How many times had she heard me say something like that?

"Be kind . . .," the saying goes, in words attributed to various sources, both ancient and contemporary, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." We never know the burdens another may be carrying, my kids had heard me say, both in sermons and at home. Don't you just love it when your child uses your own words against you? It can be both frustrating and humbling, but always inspiring, to have our words as parents come back at us from our young. My young teacher that day also echoed the lesson of Ellen Bass's poem: we are all human, all of us vulnerable, all of us in need of heat, touch, breath – all of us in need of understanding, kindness and love. On another day one December, we had been out running errands. We had stopped in a retail store to pick up something I had left for repair. There was some minor confusion about when I had left the item and when it was supposed to be ready when things suddenly changed. The clerk snapped at me, his tone too abrupt, his voice too loud. I didn't snap back or demand to talk to his boss. I could see it in his face: the weary exhaustion of working in retail during the month of December. I knew I was right, but I also knew that the facts that day didn't matter. What mattered was that all of us in that store were human – all of us tired and stressed, all of us in need of understanding, kindness and love.

After the clerk snapped, I smiled and said something, I don't remember just what, to try to bring some humor into the situation. And then he smiled, and it was okay. A few minutes later he placed a chocolate in my hand – small graces. We didn't get to this place of grace because I am an especially good person. I have plenty of human faults and foibles. What kept me from entering the fray and making things worse on that day was sorrow. Just days before, I had stood at a bedside of someone who died too young and left behind two young daughters. I was carrying a fresh reminder that our time here is short. Why waste a minute of it, sorrow had again taught me, quibbling over who is "right" when I could, instead, choose to offer kindness.

After we have walked in the land of sorrow, it is only kindness that makes sense, teaches another poet, Naomi Shihab Nye. She is a Palestinian-American poet who wrote a poem called "Kindness" after she travelled to Columbia and saw there a people and a land ravaged by violence. Listen to her words:

*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 mail letters and purchase bread, only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say It is you I have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.*

Words can have the power to save. In her book called, Saved by a Poem, Kim Rosen tells the story of how in 2008 she invested her life's savings with Bernie Madoff, just months before his fraud was discovered. It was Naomi Shihab Nye's words on kindness, she says, that saved her. The poet's words, Rosen explains, were like her meditation, her prayer, and helped her begin to let go of her anger and her bitterness and to move toward healing.

It is not so easy, Naomi Shihab Nye tells us, to know what kindness really is. Kindness is, in essence, a spiritual practice -- a way of learning to be fully human -- a way of living that none of us gets right, all the time. And even though sorrow can teach us about kindness, most of us in the pace of our days will sometimes forget sorrow's lessons. I know I do. It's almost like we need to carry a spiritual navigation device, an internal GPS, to remind us to re-direct, to change course, to tell us to "proceed to the route" and get back on the road toward being our best selves.

There are different ways to come back to our best selves, different words we can use to signal our souls that it's time to redirect both our words and our actions toward kindness. The practice of kindness is at the heart of the Golden Rule, an ideal common to all of the major religions of our world: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." As a mother, I've said it another way to our children: "Treat other people the way you would want to be treated." Or, as Jesus taught, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Near the end of our worship today, you will be invited to join saying words we, as Unitarian Universalists, try to live, words that speak the Golden Rule, words that can be our internal GPS of the soul - "Honor All Beings" – and honoring one another begins with kindness.

Kindness as a spiritual practice means looking for the good, the Divine spark or, as the Quakers might say, "that of God" in other people – all people, even the ones that annoy us, or disappoint us, or hurt us, and even those who may be different from us in some way. The word "kindness" comes from the same root as the word "kin," which, of course, means "of the same family; related; akin." The practice of kindness is rooted in the reality that, like it or not, for better or for worse, we are all family here on this earth. Indeed, our very survival as a species depends upon our ability to live with one another despite our differences. We are all in this together.

Kindness is about looking beyond our differences, differences of all kinds, like differences of opinion as well as other kinds of differences – differences of class, race, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual preference. Looking beyond difference can be harder than most of us want to admit. We might accept difference intellectually, as the “right thing to do” but we remain stuck in “us versus them” thinking until we have done the soul work of looking beyond our differences to see another human not all that different from you, someone in need of heat, touch, breath, to see someone who, like us, needs understanding, kindness and love.

Just as it is not easy to know what kindness really is, kindness is not so easy to put into action in our daily lives. The stress and anxiety too many of us carry these days is thick and real. When we’re stressed and anxious, when we feel pushed and stretched, our brains can get stuck in anxiety mode and when that happens, it can be harder to be kind to one another, so much harder to be our best selves. The practice of kindness can be especially hard when we are afraid. Hardly a week goes by without still another act of gun violence, and all summer, and this week, too, we saw it again, more reminders that our world is not as safe as we would like to believe, complicated and heartbreaking reminders that we’d better learn how to live together despite our differences.

Being kind to one another may not keep bad things from happening in our world, but we’ve got to start somewhere. There is much in this world neither you nor I can control. But we can start where we are, with our own lives, with our own words, our own actions. In the end, no matter what happens, it is our integrity, and the love we have given and received, that will matter most. In the end, even our best thoughts and our highest ideals will count for nothing if we haven’t put into practice what we believe, and those values we most cherish. As Abbot Pastor, a monk who lived and taught in the desert over 1700 years ago, once said, *“If you have a chest full of clothing, and leave it for a long time, the clothing will rot inside it. It is the same with the thoughts in your heart. If we do not carry them out by physical action, after a long while they will spoil and turn bad.”* This is timeless wisdom.

It’s a self-centered, “me-first” world out there. A good number of us on this planet need to get over ourselves and surrender to the spiritual truth that we human beings need one another to survive. Too many of us scurry around, our heads down, our eyes and souls never meeting those of another. It’s time to look up and around, to see one another as sisters and brothers, to love thy neighbor, to treat another as we would want to be treated, to honor all beings, to let kindness go with us, as the poet says, *“everywhere like a shadow or a friend.”*

We are just beginning our ministry together, you and I, and what’s most important now, as we begin, is the same as what will matter most when each of us comes to the end of our days on this earth: how we treat one another. *“The hardest spiritual work in the world,”* writes Barbara Brown Taylor, *“is to love the neighbor as the self – to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it. All you have to do is recognize another you “out there” – your other self in the world – for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself. To become that person, even for a moment, is to understand what it means to die to yourself. This can be as frightening as it is liberating.* (She concludes), *It may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.”* Our kindness toward one another, and our love for one another, no matter what, will be the most important work any of us here can do, more important than any program, policy or plan. We are here together, in this community, to do the sometimes hard spiritual work of learning to love. To learn to love, we begin with kindness.

We can start today. Today, with our loved ones and the people around us, we might choose to stop when we're ready to criticize and complain and instead offer kindness. Today, and in the week ahead, we might choose to meet strangers, even the ones that annoy us, even our sisters and brothers who may seem "different," with compassion and kindness. Today, and in the days to come, we might choose to see one another as we really are, as family, all of us in need of heat, touch, breath, all of us in need of understanding, kindness and love.