

SEEKING CLARITY ABOUT KINDNESS

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SMALL RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS - TWO TESTAMONIALS

An episode from the life of Bernie O'Connell, published originally in *The Sun*

One of my earliest memories is of the annual trip to upstate New York to the bungalow my family rented for the summer. The six of us kids piled into the rusting station wagon, along with three months worth of luggage and two tense parents. The trip always began with the rosary or, if we were in a hurry, a single Hail Mary, which ended with "now at the hour of my death, amen." In my young mind, I presumed this to mean that I was going to die in the car -- if not on this trip, then on the next.

My fear of dying in a car accident never entirely went away. As a newly licensed driver, I was anxious behind the wheel. Tunnels and bridges caused me the most apprehension. I felt trapped, with nowhere to go. Driving to and from Manhattan to work, I had regular bouts of anxiety on the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge. Then, after I married, I had a severe panic attack on the Triborough Bridge. It's a miracle I made my way across without killing anyone. After that, I vowed never to drive on a road I couldn't exit from quickly: no more bridges, tunnels or even Interstate highways, because the exits were often too far apart.

Even when we moved to Long Island several years later, I refused to use the expressway. I knew every back way and side road, and could get anywhere - given enough time. Still, I felt ashamed, like a child who could swim only at the shallow end of the pool.

One gorgeous summer day, I took the kids to visit my husband at work. He had a construction job on the south shore of Long Island, with free access to a number of beaches. We spend the afternoon building sand castles and bodysurfing. When it came time to leave, I considered whether to go back the way I'd come - over an hour on winding side roads - or take the scenic Ocean Parkway and cross a bridge just south of our home - a forty-five minute, traffic free ocean-view ride. I told my husband I was thinking of taking the bridge.

We worked out a plan: he would follow me in his truck, communicating by hand signals and light flashes, and we'd

make a final stop just before the bridge. I took my two-year-old daughter in my car, convinced I wouldn't drive off the bridge with her in the back seat.

On the way I prayed aloud to a Higher Power for help. As the bridge loomed large, I prayed louder, begging for a sign that I was not alone on this journey: a neon beacon, a bright light - something.

As planned, my husband and I pulled over before the bridge for a final pep talk. He said all the right things and hugged me tightly. In the midst of our embrace, he heard him say, "Uh-oh." A state trooper had pulled up behind us.

"Everything all right here?" the trooper asked.

My husband explained that I was afraid to drive over the bridge because of an irrational phobia.

"Would you feel better," the trooper asked, "if you had a police escort, lights and all?"

The lights seemed an answer to my prayer and I gladly agreed.

We crossed that span at a speed of forty miles an hour, with the trooper behind me, his lights flashing and a line of cars following him, none of them daring to pass this strange convoy.

Tie Tack, a reflection by UU minister Gordon McKeeman
(slightly adapted)

There are many relics in our home -objects to which important memories are attached.... Each recalls some journey, event or person that is a part of your life's experience. They're precious on that account - religious objects that summon up powerful recollections. One of my favorites is my tie tack. It's an opal, full of fiery iridescence.

The tie tack was an unexpected gift. Its former owner, the donor, came out of the church's worship service on Sunday, and as I greeted him, I noticed the tie tack he was wearing. "What a beautiful opal!" I exclaimed to him. On the spot, he took it off and gave it to me. I was both delighted and chagrined. I took off my own tie tack - a UU flaming chalice, and gave it to him. It was far from an equal exchange.

But more important, what he did in that fleeting moment was very typical of this man. He is a person of whom it could be said without exaggeration, "He would give you the shirt off his back." He lived quite an ordinary life. He was a salesman of advertising novelties, so he spent much

of his time traveling from client to client. He spent a significant portion of his driving time thinking of ways to improve the community. He could be counted upon to suggest some modest and simple change that would make a positive and a very real difference in people's lives. Some of his ideas were real winners, saving much public money and touching many lives with joy and opportunity. My life was one of those.

One of my joys associated with wearing a necktie is to put on my tie tack. I have quite a few of them, but the opal is always my first choice. It's a ritual. I put it on and remember the man who gave it to me, and I resolve to find in this day some opportunity to continue what was his real life's work: doing something simple, modest and useful to improve the life of the community.

Over the many years I have worn my tie tack, many people have admired it and I have told the story of my acquisition of it many times and what it means to me... Someday I know that I, too, will give it away, along with its story. Meanwhile, I keep wearing it and it keeps reminding me of its meaning in my life.

Reflecting on one's relics now and then is a useful spiritual discipline - remembering the events, the persons, the occasions when ordinary things were somehow transformed into religious objects. All around us are reminders of...the people whose touch was a blessing, a balm, an invitation, a beckoning to be a better person... My tie tack does much more than hold my tie. It also holds me to my sense of purpose as a person.

** REFLECTIONS **

For all the callousness and cruelty we find in the world, there is also an abundance of fellow-feeling. People really do care about each other and often as not respond to adversity in surprisingly open-handed ways.

For instance, when the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America took place, people in some out-of-the-way parts of the world didn't hear the news until months later. A tribe in South Kenya, in an area remote from Western technology and with little knowledge of life across the Atlantic were among those who were oblivious to the event. But when they were told what had happened, they quickly grasped its implications. They realized a tragedy had occurred and the elders gathered for a solemn meeting. They decided to send the tribes most precious possession - sixteen cows - to the people of New York to help ease their distress.

These people, who had themselves suffered from privation and hunger, were prepared to give up their food in a show of solidarity with other human beings whom they had never met. The contributions the average American made to the victims of Katrina, of the Southeast Asian tsunami, of African famines, of Central American earthquakes pale before such a simple, heart-felt gesture. "When you are generous," **Pierro Ferrucci** advises, "do not spare yourself." To be meaningful, kindness needs to cost something.

Capitalist theory may hold that human behavior is ruled by raw self-interest and the maximization of personal gain, but for those with a spiritual focus, kindness always takes precedence. Some, like the 18th century Hasidic **Rabbi Nachman of Braslav** have argued that kindness is one of the original, albeit invisible, building-blocks of our universe. "God's whole reason for creating the universe was to make a place in which his compassion could be made manifest," **Nachman** wrote.

Pierro Ferrucci would agree. We are kind already, he argues, "and merely have to give ourselves permission to be so." Kindness is wholly natural, not an acquired trait somehow at odds with our basic selfish nature.

There appears to be little relationship between the sophistication and technical prowess of a civilization and its commitment to kindness. Its value has been recognized by wisdom teachers throughout the planet for untold centuries. Nearly three thousand years ago the author of the book of Deuteronomy wrote.

You shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be... You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him.

Jesus of Nazareth was surely familiar with this ancient Biblical teaching, which probably inspired him to say, "If someone asks you for your cloak, give him your coat as well."

Comparable advice can be found in the sacred texts of Islam. In the **Hadith**, which records sayings and actions of the Prophet and his early followers, a man approaches Muhammad and asks, "What is the highest, the best, principle in Islam?"

The Prophet responds, "It is to feed the hungry and to give the greeting of peace to those one knows and also to

those one does not know." Passages like these are far more representative of the spirit of Islam than those quoted or mis-quoted by the militant Jihadists.

Likewise, the great religions of the Far East make frequent mention of kindness. "Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world," the **Bhagavad Gita** counsels, "for by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal in life. Do your work with the welfare of others always in mind."

Writing at about the same time, the Taoist sage **Chuang Tse** insisted that "We must find room in our lives for the interests of others, for to those who lack fellow feeling, all men and woman are strangers." Indeed, thousands of years of spiritual and ethical instruction could be aptly summarized by the phrase printed at the top of your program. What is the key to human transformation? "just give yourself permission to be a little kinder."

Sounds simple, doesn't it? But significant complexities crop up when the general principle of kindness is translated into actual practice. Indeed, it could be argued that the faulty application of kindness is responsible for a significant portion of the world's suffering. The **Catholic Inquisitors** of the 16th and 17th centuries executed Jews, Muslims and Christian heretics by the thousands -- not out of spite, but because for them the fate of the immortal soul took precedence. Perhaps some church leaders took perverse pleasure in scourging and burning their victims, but most sincerely believed that burning a non-believer's body was preferable to the alternative: eternal damnation.

So when we counsel people to be kind, its wise to remember how easily kindness can become contaminated by ideology. To be truly kind we must strive to acquire a more open and less dogmatic mind, otherwise our gifts are likely not to be received in the spirit with which they are intended.

So how do we know we are being genuinely kind, kind in the right way - in a way that is most likely to produce positive outcome?

Just pay attention - that's the first rule. Don't make assumptions, let go of preconceived notions, be fully present for the person and tuned in to the situation. "Attention is the medium through which kindness flows," **Pierro Ferrucci** says. Without open-minded attention, and an unbiased attitude, our kindness is likely to be interpreted as an attempt to be in control.

One common example of misguided, inattentive kindness is the tendency we all have to play the "rescuer" on occasion - providing a pat solution to someone else's problem. Long ago I ran across an articulate statement from an anonymous writer who had endured such treatment.

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving advice, you have not done what I asked. When you feel you have to do something to solve my problem, you have failed me. And when I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings. Listen! All I ask is that you listen. Advice is cheap. Fifty cents will get me "Dear Abby" and Billy Graham in the same newspaper...

But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I can quit trying to convince you and get about the business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling. And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I don't need advice... So please listen and hear me; and if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn, and I'll listen to you.

Lack of attention, **Piero Ferrucci** reminds us, is the greatest form of rudeness. "Inattention is cold and hard; attention is warm and caring." People are almost immediately aware when they are being closely attended to, not just humored or being force-fed facile advice. Most of the time friends and family who approach us with a problem or a painful feeling are just looking for a sounding board, not a ready-made strategy from some "higher and wiser authority." The goal of kindness is to produce a solution without imposing one.

Attentiveness is enhanced when we possess two other qualities: patience and humility. The more anxious we are about the items on our own "to-do" list, the more possessed we are by the demon of haste, the less mentally available will we be to someone who simply needs our steady presence. Kindness, **Ferrucci** says, has a slow pace.

Humility is important because without it we are likely to think that we know what's best for others and that our own approach to problem-solving makes the most sense. The humble helper is in a better position to work with others in identifying their own needs and interests and coming up with their own answers. Author **Anne Lamott**, a recovering substance abuser, sees the connection between attention and

kindness. "As someone who has been lifted from the swamp of chaos and...self-loathing," she writes,

I offer the orange juice and graham crackers of...love to everyone I come into contact with: I sit with people, listen, given them a shoulder and a glass of the living water."

Lamott has visited the depths, recognizes the limits of her own wisdom and come to appreciate how another person's open-hearted availability can serve as a catalyst for healing and transformation.

A second principle of kindness is reflected in the so-called "Iron Law" of the Industrial Areas Foundation: "Never do for someone what they can do for themselves. Never." To render gratuitous assistance, to provide people with resources they can supply for themselves, creates dependency, is demeaning and ultimately provokes resentment. In accordance with this principle, kindness begins with helping individuals and communities to identify their own strengths and assets and only then offers appropriate outside assistance. If one takes the time to make a real assessment, unrecognized and untapped resources become visible. Most of us have more assets than we think; we just need help to see them.

Although it seems hard-nosed, the "iron law" is really based on respect. As one disabled person put it, "Saying 'thank you' all the time makes you feel bad." When we suggest to someone that they are more potent and resourceful than they think, we are acknowledging their worthiness and challenging their victim mentality. As **Pierro Ferrucci** says again:

Our perception is like a ray of light falling on a plant - it makes it more visible, nourishes it, stimulates its growth. If a person's talents and qualities are acknowledged, they can be manifest. This is respect, and without it kindness is blind - superficial and distracted, unaware of a person's value, and therefore belittling.

Dane County United, the broad-based organization to which our congregation belongs, embraces the "Iron Law." Respectful of all constituencies with which it works, it strives for empowerment, not dependency, and that is why we support it.

There may, however, be one exception to the "Iron Law". A willingness to receive another's unnecessary kindness can itself be kind. When we pridefully brush off help, we deprive another person the pleasure of "doing the right thing." The "Iron Law" notwithstanding, sometimes it's better to accept assistance just because it reinforces the habit of being kind in others.

Proper kindness is unobtrusive. That's the third principle. It doesn't blow its own horn, it maintains a low profile and thus preserves the dignity of its subjects. "In giving," **Jesus** told his listeners, "don't let the left hand know what the right hand is doing."

The man who spontaneously gave **Gordon McKeeman** his opal tie-tack didn't make a big deal of the gesture, nor did he expect an extraordinary display of gratitude on **McKeeman's** part. He was simply the sort of fellow who "gave himself permission" to be kind on a regular basis. Over time, such behavior had become second nature to him.

Wendy Lustbader would say that this man had developed a real "genius for life," by which she means that the salesman "possessed the ability to generate warmth and well-being in others." In order to acquire a character of such quality, you can't be angling for some sort of special commendation or public recognition of your moral superiority. One's actions must be heart-felt, genuine and more or less free of mixed motives. **McKeeman's** parishioner was truly a "Genius" because he lived an ordinary life of extraordinary consideration.

Which is not to say that kindness shouldn't gratify those who express it. The **Buddha** himself suggested that kind people do reap intangible rewards: they feel significantly better about themselves, sleep better, awaken more easily, enjoy more pleasant dreams and deeper serenity than those who are self-absorbed. Studies have also shown that generous people tend to be healthier and to live longer.

But here we should add a caveat: those who possess a sophisticated understanding of kindness don't paint themselves out of the picture. They don't burn themselves out performing good works and are ambitious neither for sainthood nor martyrdom. They treat themselves, as well as others, with dignity and respect.

The Jewish **Talmud** teaches that while compassion is a key element of the spiritual path, the person who is excessive in its practice "has no life." Whether guilt-driven or overly-conscientious, they become so preoccupied with the welfare of others that they leave insufficient

time for study, for play, for solitary contemplation, for self-renewal.

Aside from the internal well-being that it fosters, there is also evidence that kindness produces external dividends and that it is ultimately in our self-interest to be kind. It appears that kindness and self-interest do, in fact, complement each other.

Within the commercial context, kindness is a major factor in customer satisfaction. Flexibility, friendliness and warmth, courtesy and respect, being appropriately helpful all impress a business's patrons and keep them loyal. **Wendy Lustbader** points out that one of the synonyms for kindness - the word "mercy" - comes from the same Latin root as the word *merchant*. "The concept of exchange underlies both usages," she writes, and "reciprocation replenishes both the helper and the person who is helped."

Furthermore, communities are stronger and more stable where people are less ruggedly independent and make a point of helping each other. By exhibiting kindness, we produce invaluable social capital, for as the **Bhagavad Gita** says: "What the kind person does, others will try to do as well. The standards such people set will be followed by the whole world."

But whether one sees the long-term utilitarian advantage of kindness over selfishness, or simply enjoys the warm sensation of selfless giving isn't really what matters. What matters less than motive is a growing, shared conviction that by leading kinder lives we unflinchingly create a more livable world.