

Be Kind

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October 14, 2007

Some of you may recall that the protagonist in Kurt Vonnegut's book *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, is at one point preparing a talk to give on the occasion of the baptism of his neighbor's twins. It goes like this:

Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies—God damn it, you've got to be kind.

I've never used that little speech at a child dedication. But you know, it wouldn't be bad. And it might be enough.

“One rule... you've got to be kind.” (My whole sermon!)

Of course Kurt Vonnegut did not make up this sentiment!

Today is my mother's birthday. And she didn't make this up either. But she has told me that her favorite Bible verse is a simple one: “Be ye kind to one another.” It is in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 32:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another...

The verse continues “...as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

You see, for the writer of Ephesians, the ethical injunction to be kind and forgiving derives from our gratitude to God for having, in his kindness, forgiven *us*, and for having sacrificed his son for our benefit.

Now... that's not my theology. But I do understand the part about gratitude. When I am feeling grateful – for a beautiful day, for someone I love, for so many things – kindness is easier, feels more natural.

But there may be other days... when we may need a little help, some reminders, when we're just overwhelmed or just plain busy with our to-do lists, or when things aren't so rosy – and we sure know that they are not always rosy...and sometimes quite a bit less than rosy.

Guidance from the wisdom traditions and religions is one form of that help – *injunctions* to be kind to begin with, since maybe it isn't always so natural to be kind.

We heard the words of Paul.

We can also hear the words of Mohammed (from the Hadith, the collection of his sayings):

Do you love your Creator? Love your fellow-beings first.

Kindness is a mark of faith; and whoever hath not kindness hath not faith.

And Buddhism – loving-kindness is considered to be one of the highest virtues. Hear this oft-repeated verse from the Metta Sutta (the sutra on loving-kindness):

Even as a mother watches over her child, so with boundless mind should one cherish all living beings.

That image says it all. We know what that means.

And, good news, Buddhism goes beyond telling us we *should* be kind, and actually offers tools that can help us to become more kind. Mostly it is just a matter of paying attention. First paying attention to the suffering of others. The Dalai Lama (in *Ethics for the New Millennium*) writes of our human capacity for empathy. He shares a Tibetan phrase, *shen dug ngal wa la mi so pa*, which literally means “the inability to bear the sight of another’s suffering.”

And if we cannot bear the sight of another’s suffering, won’t we be moved to be kind, to help, to meet another’s needs – not just those closest to us but those more distant, those we don’t even know, maybe those we might even find distasteful.

Buddhism also invites us to pay attention to our own feelings and emotions, noticing for example when anger arises (*not* kindness) – and then discovering that in that space which opens when we *pause* to *notice* our anger without *acting out* our anger... in that space the anger may soften, our heart soften (we may become more tender-hearted to use Paul’s phrase). In that space we maybe even begin to experience that actually we are in the same boat on this (“round, wet, and crowded”) earth – so: Be kind.

And some of this is, after all, folk wisdom.

Count to ten... before you say something you will regret.

In a recent letter to the “Friends Journal,” a Quaker monthly I receive, the writer describes a 95-year-old friend who not long ago moved into her son’s home when fire destroyed hers. And her son’s home is right next door to his twin brother. Well, this woman marvels over how well her large extended family – in-laws, children, grand-children, great-grand-children – get along. But she knows it is not magic. Because she writes that she has *decided* “not to say anything negative, ever, to anyone.” And if some situation elicits the impulse in her to say something negative? She says she just waits for a moment until she “can turn it around to something positive.” And she says she is surprised by how easy this ends up being! And, she writes... “Maybe that’s why we all get along so well.”

Well, I would add that it may also have to do with the fact that all but the in-laws in this big family are descended from this wise – and kind – woman. (I asked my mother how is it that she learned about kindness, learned to be kind. Quick answer (not from Paul’s letter...) – “I was raised that way.” And to think, her parents hadn’t even read *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*”).

My grandfather, a Presbyterian minister, had however surely absorbed Paul’s letters and Jesus’ call to love even our enemies. But my guess is that these religious underpinnings simply reinforced and gave voice to what he – and my grandmother too – had absorbed by teaching and example from *their* parents, and on back through the generations. As Antoine de St. Exupery once wrote, “love, like a carefully loaded ship, is passed from generation to generation.” Kindness, too. So the words from the religions *remind* us of what one hopes we have learned from generation to generation:

Be kind.

And what *is* kindness? To begin with I would simply describe it as the “little bit more” that we can add to any interaction: the smile, the word, the gesture. And then we go from there.

But... we might ask... aren't there more important things to worry about than the too-short supply of kindness in the world or in our own lives: war, global warming, poverty, hunger, AIDS...?

Well, yes, there are these huge and important issues and challenges.

But what sort of world would it be if we solved global warming, ended war, eliminated poverty... and had not woven kindness, warp and woof, into our shared lives at the same time?

Seems to me, in fact, that kindness, loving-kindness, is both means and end. In a hard world kindness is *more* important than ever. In a hard world kindness helps soften our lives, helps us meet those big challenges, will in the end help to create a yet kinder world – the circle come ‘round.

Paul himself was writing in a pretty hard world. Things were, after all, pretty rough for those early Christian communities to whom Paul was writing. He himself was imprisoned. Yet he wrote about kindness, about tenderheartedness.

And note this important distinction: Though of course our *feelings* are intertwined with all of this, and kindness may often arise from our feelings and in turn give rise to lovely feelings, kindness itself is a *behavior*, not a feeling. We can't force ourselves to *love*, but we *can* force ourselves to be kind. Now, it won't last long if we're *always* having to force it. But sometimes we might have simply to *decide* in the moment that a *kind* response, a *kind* deed is better than the alternative. *This would be a moral moment, a moral choice* of the most significant sort. And indeed, the more stress we are under – again whether as an individual or as a global community, the more important is that moral choice to... be kind.

And though the religions all encourage kindness as a virtue, and likewise philosophers, in the end the admonition and the need transcend any religion or philosophy:

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.
Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919)

So wrote 19th century popular poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox, about whom it is written on a web site dedicated to her work, that “the art of being kind *was* her religion, and she lived it every day of her life.” I know some people like that very well.

And kindness *is* I would affirm a fundamental human virtue, a virtue which indeed does precede the religions, even though the religions can reinforce it (in spite of the fact that they too often fail!). The English etymology of the word reminds us of just how deeply rooted is kindness, rooted in our bones. Because the word “kind” comes out of Old English, the same root as “kin.” So kindness quite simply has to do with the fact that we are all related, we are all kin. Which means that – though sometimes we have to make the moral *choice* to be kind, have to give ourselves a moral kick in the buttocks to

be kind – the kindness which lasts is *not* the kindness we force, but is rather the kindness that grows from realizing and experiencing others as not so other after all, but rather as kin.

And not just *other* human beings, but the creatures, and not just the creatures, but the earth itself... all the circles of life... kin. So... let us be kind.

Well... how does this discourse on kindness relate to Association Sunday and to the importance of our congregations' covenantal connections and to the message of Unitarian Universalism?

Simple. And not much more to be said. If Ella Wheeler Wilcox is right that transcending all the religions and creeds, all the world really needs is kindness... if Kurt Vonnegut is right in the advice he has Mrs. Rosewater give to newborn twins... if Paul, if the Buddha, if so many ordinary and extraordinary people – my mother included, probably your mothers too – over the long and sometimes sorry course of human history have named kindness an essential virtue, perhaps *the* essential virtue...

...well, then, perhaps it ought to be good enough for us Unitarian Universalists.

If we believe that kindness can help to heal our troubled world... if we believe that kindness honors (in the words of our own Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes) the worth and dignity of each person, that kindness can help to create peace and justice... and that kindness toward the larger web of life is essential to our survival... in other words, if we believe that what we are about as Unitarian Universalists (whatever else we are about) is teaching and learning kindness, kindness, and ever kindness, then we must tend and strengthen our associational connections, that we might more effectively do this work, share this message.

It may well be even simpler, as simple as this. We gather together each week, and our congregations are gathered in associational covenantal relationship in order to remind ourselves that we are *kin* – all of us, not just UUs, but all of us, all the creatures, the earth herself. And our gathering together is a *physical* reminder and manifestation of all of this. A reminder, too, that though our lives are short, though we all suffer and lose so much that is dear to us, *yet we are kin*, linked to one another, and so – we ought to be kind.

Being kind doesn't guarantee kindness; but really knowing we are, knowing in bones that we are kin...

So, yes, it is in this spirit we arrive here each week (as the banner outside proclaims) to nurture our spirits and to learn better, together, how we might help to heal our world.

One more thing. I saw a bumper sticker this week. It said "Be an angel – practice random acts of kindness."

Well, if I were a bumper sticker sort of person, mine would read: "Be a human being – practice random acts of kindness."

So may it be.