

EDITORIAL

Non-Random Calls for Kindness

In 1982, instead of merely lamenting the “random acts of violence and senseless acts of cruelty” occurring in Ronald Reagan’s America, author and activist Anne Herbert was the first to scrawl “practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty” on a placemat in a restaurant in Sausalito, California. Yet today, enduring the apocalyptic hyperbole, vicious ridicule, and savage insults hurled by the American political far-right in public is nigh impossible. Far beyond its blatant untruthfulness, the brazen spitefulness and bodacious rudeness of MAGA Trumpists may no longer be shocking, but it is far beyond cringeworthy because it is far beyond embarrassing. It is cruel. Disgracefully—lacking any grace—they are many miles away from earlier American president Franklin D. Roosevelt’s assertion and exemplification that “human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fiber of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel to be tough.”

Just as cruelty is one type of anti-social aggression, kindness is one type of pro-social altruism. More than helping behavior, which could simply be job performance in human service employment, altruism is voluntary helping intended to benefit another with no expectation of material, psychological, or social reward to self. Conversely, social psychologists deem helping enacted primarily for self-gratification to be egoism, not altruism. True kindness is an end in itself, not a means to an end. Nevertheless, ample research from positive psychology confirms that practicing kindness also provides mental and physical health benefits to the altruist, and positively impacts third party observers as well. Witnessing kindness can enhance people's mental health, affective well-being, and perceptions of humanity. Thus, like stress, kindness is emotionally contagious, and inspires others to pay it forward.

Furthermore, there is a significant difference between sympathy (feeling merely sorry *for* someone) and empathy (feeling deeply sorry *with* someone). Yet both fall short of compassion, which is actively doing or saying something kind to someone. Moreover, kindness can be principled, not only emotional, “the right thing to do” regardless of feelings. “Kindness is in our power, even when fondness is not” (English writer Samuel Johnson). Whether individual or collective, kindness in Latin is *humanitas*, the recognition that we are all kin, one of a kind, called to the “kind”ness of human solidarity that embraces our super-ordinate human identity. Kindness is already normative in a wide range of social frames from parenting and teaching to friendships and civil interactions. But while there have been sub-cultures of normative kindness, such as the Amish, there has never been an entire culture of normative kindness. The chances of ours becoming the first may be infinitesimal, but there is no higher calling.

Even wisdom must defer. “What wisdom can you find that is greater than kindness?” (philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau). “Kindness is more important than wisdom, and the recognition of this is the beginning of wisdom” (psychiatrist Theodore Isaac Rubin). Yet “a mistake made by many people with great convictions is that they will let nothing stand in the way of their views, not even kindness” (social media influencer Bryant Herbert McGill). They may say or do the unkindest things in the nicest manner, but “kindness is not deference, not conflict-aversion, not niceness or politeness. It’s a quality of grounded, dignified, powerful warmth” (Academics Taking Action). Indeed, “you can accomplish by kindness what you cannot by force” (classic Latin writer Publilius Syrus).

While acts of kindness are usually performed by an individual and directed at a person or small group, pro-social behaviors can also be performed by or directed at entire organizations, or even at much larger entities such as communities, nations, or society at large. In *Kindness Wars: The History and Political Economy of Human Caring* (2023), sociologist Noel Cazenave unpacks how kindness challenges the logic of capitalism, as he seeks to ignite a kindness revolution meant to shift power relations in pursuit of societal change. “Kindness must be considered as something much larger than just random acts of benevolent individuals. We must recognize that kindness is a multidimensional phenomenon involving thoughts, feelings, and actions, and it exists at many different levels, from the self, to the interpersonal, to the group, to the formal organizational, to the institutional, to the societal, to the inter-societal, to the universal.”

Multiple initiatives calling for kindness have emerged recently, including National Random Acts of Kindness Day (February 17). In 2019, a collection of social scientists founded the interdisciplinary UCLA Bedari Kindness Institute “with the goal of empowering citizens and leaders to invest in building more humane societies. The mission of the UCLA Bedari Kindness Institute is somewhat unique in that our goal is two-fold – we’re committed not only to engage in best-in-class research on kindness, but to strategically turn that learning into real-world practices through education and dynamic local, national and global partnerships. Said more simply, we don’t just want people to learn about kindness, we want people to DO kindness.” Indeed, more than a passing emotional state or a permanent personality trait, kindness is a habituated social practice.

Meanwhile, how can we be kind to malicious Trumpists? Well, ask them about the bases of their beliefs and loyalties. Listen attentively and empathically. Smile gently. But don’t try to reason with them. Leave it at that. The Dalai Lama got his priorities in good order when he prudently shared that “I’d rather be kind than right. You can always be kind.” And as Confucius cautioned, “Act with kindness, but do not expect gratitude.”

For Christians, the call for kindness is unequivocal, despite what MAGA Christian nationalists might think, feel, say, or do. In Micah 6:8, to love kindness is listed at the center of the three foundational requirements of God. In Galatians 5:22, kindness is listed at the center of the nine fruits of the Spirit. And while all people other than psychopaths and sociopaths are capable of kindness, in Colossians 3:12, Christians are commanded not merely to practice random acts of kindness, but to clothe themselves in kindness. Metaphorically then, kindness should be what others constantly see first when they meet Christians in everyday life. And in truth, kindness may well be definitive of Christlikeness.

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) wrote a piece entitled “Christ Has No Body” which Brian McLaren adapted as the lyrics for the song “With Kindness,” one of the Songs for a Revolution of Hope which was part of The Restoration Project:

Christ has no body here but ours
 No hands no feet here on earth but ours
 Ours are the eyes through which he looks
 On this world with kindness.

Ours are the hands through which he works
 Ours are the feet on which he moves
 Ours are the voices through which he speaks
 To this world with kindness.

Through our touch, our smile, our listening ear
 Embodied in us, Jesus is living here
 Let us go now filled with the Spirit
 Into this world with kindness.

[With Kindness | Brian McLaren, The Restoration Project | Brian McLaren \(bandcamp.com\)](#)

Dennis Hiebert, PhD
 JSC Editor
 Professor of Sociology
 University of Manitoba
 CANADA
 Email: dennishiebert28@gmail.com

“When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I’m old, I admire kind people.”
 (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel)