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one

Compassion in Action

Kindness is compassion in action. It is a way of taking the vital human emotions of empathy or sympathy and channeling those emotions into a real-life confrontation with ruthlessness, abandonment, thoughtlessness, loneliness—all the myriad ways, every single day, we find ourselves suffering or witnessing suffering in others.

Yet growing up I had the impression that a kind heart ranked awfully low in cultural desirability, well after a sound head, a sharp wit, invulnerability, power over others, a fine sense of irony, and countless other qualities. The hero I saw displayed in the movies was fiercely resolute; the sidekick, trailing after the hero, picking up the pieces, might have been

kind. The overwhelmingly popular girl on TV was striking, imposing, amusing; the second banana was usually kind and a lot less magnetic or interesting.

Today as well, when we think of adventure, going out on a limb, being bold, or being on the edge, it is rarely in the direction of caring, of compassion. Usually we externalize our sense of adventure and think of climbing mountains or jumping out of airplanes. Our idea of taking a risk is to be more ambitious, maybe more competitive. To be bold translates as being more hard-bitten and not noticing the consequence of our actions on others. To be brave has no gentleness or sensitivity associated with it.

On the face of it, kindness can seem wimpy, a cop-out, an excuse to do just a little bit to try to make a difference when so very much needs to be done. We might see kindness as the rationale for feeling good after speaking nicely to a homeless person we meet on the street, without having to consider basic injustice and what steps have to be taken to help that person and others like him or her to not suffer anymore. We might delegate kindness to the category of a quaint, old-fashioned virtue—not very effective, and certainly not very powerful. We might disdain kindness as a way of promoting separation and a hierarchy of distinctions: “I, who am superior and untouched by your problem, will help you, who are inferior and in a bad way.” We might dismiss kindness as the last, frail stand of righteousness—the lesser state we turn to in some

dismay when wisdom, clarity, incisiveness, and intense love all have seemed to fail us and we haven't been able to make any substantial difference in someone's life.



A commitment to kindness can be the thread that twines throughout our various successes, disappointments, delights, and traumas, making our lives seamless, giving us ballast in a world of change, a reservoir of heartfulness to infuse our choices, our relationships, and our reactions.

Many of us long for an underlying sense of meaning, something we can still believe in no matter what happens to us, a navigational force to pull all the disparate pieces of our lives together into some kind of whole. Perhaps we find ourselves feeling helpless when even a little too much of the unexpected occurs. Or we feel defenseless when we find we don't have control over a situation and can't fathom what might happen next, unsure of where to turn when we aren't having the positive effect we want with a troubled family member or a friend. In any of these circumstances, and in so many more, we shut down. Then we go through the motions of our day, day after day, without much dynamism or spirit.

Many of us experience ourselves as fragmented, perhaps as confident and expressive when we are with our families but a

completely different person when we are at work, frequently hesitant and unsure. Perhaps we take risks when we are with others but are timid when alone, or we are cozily comfortable when alone yet are painfully shy and withdrawn when with others. Or maybe we drift along with the tides of circumstance, going up and down, not knowing what we might really care about more than anything else, but thinking there must be *something*.

To explore kindness as that thread of meaning requires finding out if we can be strong and still be kind, be smart and still be kind, whether we can be profoundly kind to ourselves and at the same time strongly dedicated to kindness for those around us. We have to find the power in kindness, the confidence in kindness, the release in kindness—the type of kindness that transcends belief systems, allegiances, ideologies, cliques, and tribes. This is the trait that can transform our lives.

Kindness is the fuel that helps us truly “walk our talk” of love, a quality so easy to speak about or extol but often so hard to make real. It helps us to genuinely care for one another and for ourselves as well. Kindness is the foundation of unself-conscious generosity, natural inclusivity, and an unfeigned integrity. When we are devoted to the development of kindness, it becomes our ready response, so that reacting from compassion, from caring, is not a question of giving ourselves a lecture: “I don’t really feel like it, but I’d better be helpful, or what would people think?” When we are devoted to the

development of kindness, we are no longer forcing ourselves into a mold we think we have to occupy; rather, it becomes a movement of the heart so deep and subtle that it is like a movement of the sea close to the ocean floor, all but hidden yet affecting absolutely everything that happens above. That's the force of kindness.

The quality of kindness gives us the ability to take abstract ideals like compassion, or "love thy neighbor," and make them authentic and palpable and vibrant each and every day, going to work or going to school or going home, or getting through a situation we would never in a million years have chosen. When we really examine kindness we find it is a deep and abiding understanding of how connected we all are. We see that kindness inspires a sense of ethics independent of any religious adherence, which can guide our families, communities, and the world we live in toward realizing greater safety and peace. I think this spirit underlies one of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's most famous quotations: "My true religion is kindness."

In 1997, while attending a conference in San Francisco called "Peacemaking: The Power of Nonviolence," I walked by the writer Alice Walker, who was having an informal conversation with a group of people. I overheard her say, "As I get older, I realize that the thing I value the most is good-heartedness." Intrigued, I reflected for some time on that statement. I thought of how we struggle and strive in life, of our craving for acquisitions and attainments and possessions and praise and glory. Then I

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thought of what in fact uplifts us when we are feeling down no matter how much we own, of what gives us a boost when it is so easy to feel weak or inferior because we are in mental or physical pain. I thought of what unites us when we could, instead, feel isolated or hurt because of some difference that we think sets us intractably apart, or one that others deliberately use to marginalize or diminish us. And I too found myself again and again coming back to good-heartedness, to the giving and receiving of kindness.



From birth, and in fact well before, we are dependent on someone's kindness. An infant who is being severely deprived of basic emotional sustenance, even though physically well cared for, can fail to thrive and can eventually die. We need affection, nurturing, and attention, not just to embellish our life or to have a somewhat better day, but for our actual survival. And in the absence of receiving this kindness, something in us does die, at least for a while, unless and until it can be restored through love.

When the adult daughter of a friend of mine had a child after several years of hoping and trying and had tended to the baby at home for about two weeks, she turned to her mother and said, "You did *this* for me!" The intensity of kindness

needed to consistently put a child's needs ahead of one's own desires can probably be weighed by how many people feel terribly scarred by their childhoods ... yet day in and day out, parents and caretakers wake up in the middle of the night or kiss boo-boos or play with Legos endlessly or read *Goodnight Moon* for the millionth time. A friend of mine, a very successful lawyer and an admired public servant, touched upon the awesome quality of this relationship when she, without a moment's hesitation, referred to raising her son as "the most important thing I will ever do in life."

Kindness points to the core of what it means to be alive, which is to be connected. When someone looks at us with the concern of kindness, the sense of connection expressed in her or his eyes reflects our own value. When someone treats us with the benevolence of kindness, the sense of connection informing their actions confirms our own right to be happy. And when someone feels connected enough to reach out to us in kindness, we hear the unspoken message of their efforts—that we are worth the bother.

One of the ways kindness affects us is through the development of "self-efficacy," a contemporary psychological concept that describes a certain kind of faith in ourselves, in our ability to meet difficulties. This quality influences our willingness to take risks, to face new challenges. Albert Bandura, a Stanford psychologist who has done much of the research on self-efficacy, says this: "People's beliefs about their abilities

have a profound effect on those abilities. Ability is not a fixed property . . . there is huge variability in it; people who have a sense of self-efficacy bounce back from failures; they approach things in terms of how to handle them rather than worrying about what can go wrong.”

This is the difference between pain and hopelessness, between distress and bitterness, between suffering and despair—sorrows or difficulties arise, yet we have some sense of confidence that we can find a way to work through them. What I found compelling about Dr. Bandura’s quotation is the understanding that a person’s belief about his or her own abilities has such a strong impact. If ability is not a preordained, limited commodity, then our potential to grow, to understand, to love, to connect is significantly nourished by what we believe about ourselves. This is one of the great fruits of the kindness we receive from others—it supports our sense of being someone deserving of love, someone who can in turn accomplish something, who can vanquish difficulties, who can make it through the travails of life, who can be a good person.



Those who do not receive enough care and kindness at home as a child are sometimes lucky enough to find it at school, later on with a friend or a beloved, or with a spiritual teacher.

This is the source of the pop-culture phrase “It’s never too late to have a happy childhood” and of clear insights, such as my own, that one’s spiritual teachers can basically re-parent their students. My teachers taught me, through their kindness, that I was capable of wisdom and love, perhaps more so than I had ever imagined.

In fact, this is the role of a spiritual teacher almost by definition: to serve as our mirror, reflecting back to us again and again, “Achievement is possible for somebody just like you.” There is a classical phrase in Tibetan Buddhism where someone will refer to his or her meditation teacher as having been “very kind to me.” I have heard several generations of Tibetans refer to their teachers first and foremost in terms of their kindness, before mentioning their scholarship or their meditative attainment, before commending their level of prowess at discourse or debate.

It is someone’s kindness that essentially affirms us, that conveys a sense of the wholeness they glimpse in us, a wholeness that we ourselves might barely realize. Yet that kindness is not necessarily at all passive or meek. The manifestation of kindness is not just in being nice and sweet—it has great forcefulness. The certainty of someone’s conviction that we can be happy, manifested through their caring, animates a potential within us that might otherwise just have lain dormant because we simply did not believe in it. If there is a fire within these spiritual teachers to be truthful, to wake up, to

not waste one's life, as they reach out to us in compassion and bring us close, it can light a similar fire within us as well. And if there is love and peace and humor within them, as they dissolve the apparent differences between us through their acts of kindness, their selflessness can return us to the best in ourselves and help us go on.

In 2004, I was fortunate to be able to join about 7,200 people from fifty-five countries in Toronto, where the Dalai Lama conferred the Kalachakra Initiation. It was an extraordinary eleven-day event that included meditation periods, teachings, and ritual practices. Manifesting his ecumenical spirit, the Dalai Lama liked to begin the afternoon sessions with chanting from the various Buddhist schools represented in the audience. He asked for a rotation that reflected the historical movement of Buddhism around the world and through the centuries, beginning with the Theravada school in India and Southeast Asia, moving through the Mahayana schools of China, Korea, and Japan.

On the initial afternoon, the first to chant were a Canadian monk and an American nun, both ordained in the Theravada tradition, and all went well. On the second afternoon, however, the monk wasn't there, thus the nun was forced to chant all alone in front of the Dalai Lama and all those thousands of people. Many of us would consider it amongst our very worst nightmares to have to sing publicly, facing massive crowds of strangers—let alone to sing right in front of the Dalai Lama.

Because most of my early meditation training was in the Theravada tradition, I more or less knew the particular chants the nun was attempting. I found her so brave as her little wobbly voice plowed through, sometimes reciting just once the refrains meant to be done three times, sometimes confusing the order. I felt so deeply for her. Then after a seeming eternity it was over, and a group representing another country took up the next round.

At the end of the whole rotation, the Dalai Lama paused to thank everyone who had taken part in the chanting and then went on to especially thank the nun who had chanted all by herself, commenting on how very difficult a thing like that is to do. His face beaming with humor and kindness, he went on to describe a time when he had gone to Japan and ended up being asked to chant the Heart Sutra, a fundamental Buddhist text, all alone. He complied, but now looking back, the Dalai Lama said that he feared he had made so many errors, he basically had made up a whole new Heart Sutra! Having told this story about his own imperfection, he burst out laughing.

Later in the afternoon, the American nun, whom I knew slightly, came up to me in the audience. She was radiant, transported from feeling embarrassed by her mistakes to a place of tremendous joy because of the Dalai Lama's comments. The openness of his compassion had freed within her a sense of closeness to everyone rather than the awful aloneness that coils round and round us when we have been anything less than perfect.