

## Kindness<sup>1</sup>

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading

Kindness<sup>2</sup>

Naomi Shihab Nye

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 I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you every where  
like a shadow or a friend.

### Sermon

When I was ten, my younger sisters and I all got chicken-pox at the same time. My mom helped to keep us entertained at home by playing with us the board game Monopoly. My sister Nita and I were great little capitalists, and played the game to win. We would try to get as many properties and houses and hotels as we could, so we could charge huge rents when the other players landed on our spots. The goal was to bankrupt the other players until one of us was the last player in the game.

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2 From *The Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*

But my mom and my sister Vonnie had a totally different approach. They were tenderhearted, and didn't want anyone to have to leave the game. So if someone was about to lose all their money, my mom and Vonnie would loan them some of their own Monopoly money to keep them in the game.

I remember this now and think—what a picture in miniature of the conflict of values in our larger society! One message we learn, even as children, is to try to get as much as we can, and try to win out over all the other people. Compete and consume. But my mother was bringing us another value, one that many parents want to teach their children, the value of kindness. She was mindful of keeping all of us at the table, so that everyone had a good time while we played our games.

But what exactly is *kindness*? Sometimes the most common words can be the hardest to define. I started with the dictionary. In that obscure dictionary way, it called it “the quality of being kind.” Okay, so I went over to the word *kind*, which was defined as: “Having or showing a friendly, generous, and considerate nature.” That's a start. But I also happened to see there another definition of the word *kind*, as a noun: “A group of people or things having similar characteristics.” Now, these two meanings might seem to have no relationship to each other, but it turns out they do—they both have roots related to the Old English word for *kin*.

So that got me thinking—maybe kindness is rooted in the understanding that all of us are *kin* to each other, that underneath our differences, we are really the same *kind* of being. When we can remember this, we are more likely to be *kind* to other people. When we can see another person as we see ourselves, we find it easier to treat them with friendliness and consideration and generosity. We find it easier to imagine how we might hope to be treated if we were in their shoes. Kindness calls us to care for others as if we were kin to them.

How do we learn kindness? Especially in a culture which applauds competition, self-centeredness, and greed? The other day I saw a letter to the editor that was complaining about people who needed unemployment insurance or medical assistance or any type of government help. They proudly ended the letter claiming that they could take care of themselves. I remember thinking—I guess you have never had a serious illness in your family, or a bad car accident, or got laid off from a job despite your skills and long tenure. As Naomi Shihab Nye tells us, “Before you know what kindness really is/ you must lose things.”

Perhaps we best learn the true value of kindness when we need the kindness of others during times of loss or debility. During the last few weeks, I have been sick with shingles, and Margy has been dealing with a flair up of fibromyalgia symptoms and a hurt foot. I have experienced the kindness of this congregation when people have cooked meals for us, and sent friendly wishes and prayers for my recovery, and reminders that you want me to rest and heal, even though it meant I couldn't come to church for a while.

It was difficult to feel like I couldn't do my job, that I couldn't just get up and come to meetings or create a sermon or visit someone in the hospital. My body had lost its ability and energy. Kindness meets us in that place of need and loss, with tenderness and gentleness. Kindness reminds us we are part of the family. And through this experience, I find my own compassion grows deeper for those who are going through illness.

According to Aristotle, kindness is "helpfulness towards some one in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of the helper himself, but for that of the person helped".<sup>3</sup> I like that definition, but it feels somewhat incomplete—because it doesn't acknowledge how much we receive when we are kind to others.

Scientists are now showing that practicing compassion brings us greater happiness and also greater health. Whether we are giving or receiving compassion, it can lower stress in our minds and bodies; so can the practice of loving kindness meditation, in which in the quiet of our own thoughts we extend positive feelings toward ourselves, our friends, and our enemies.<sup>4</sup> The Dalai Lama has said, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." Kindness brings us together and nourishes community.

How do we help our children learn to be kind? Children are under a lot of pressure. I remember school as a place of intense hierarchies, where having an expensive brand of clothing, or the right kind of body, could make the difference between belonging and being excluded or even bullied. Zoe Weil, who is a pioneer in the field of humane education, tells a story of one youth under such pressure.<sup>5</sup>

During summer vacation, twelve year old Julia became friends with a new girl in her neighborhood, Yoshiko, who had moved from Japan. They liked each other a lot, but when school started, Julia's other friends made fun of the new Japanese girl, who was shy and wouldn't look them in the eyes. Julia lied to them, "I have to be nice to her because she lives next door."

When she got home that afternoon, she was heartsick. She was afraid that if she was friends with Yoshiko, she would lose her other friends and her status as one of the popular girls. But she also felt very bad about betraying her new friend. When her mother Lauren asked about the first day of school, Julia told her what had happened.

Zoe Weil uses this story to talk about four tools parents can use to help their children learn to live by their values. The four tools are:

1. Providing information,
2. Teaching critical thinking,
3. Instilling reverence, respect, and responsibility,
- and 4. Offering positive choices.

<sup>3</sup> <http://rhetoric.eserver.org/aristotle/rhet2-7.html>

<sup>4</sup> "The Compassion Instinct: Research Shows that a compassionate attitude toward others improves mental and physical health," Larry Gallagher, *Ode Magazine*, Vol. 8., Issue 3, July/August 2011, p. 20-25.

<sup>5</sup> Zoe Weil, *Above All, Be Kind: Raising a Humane Child in Challenging Times*, (New Society Publishers, 2003), p. 32-35.

Julia's mother didn't scold Julia about what had happened, but asked her questions: "You like Yoshiko, don't you?" "Yes," answered Julia, "but I couldn't tell my friends that. And why didn't she even look at anyone else?"

Lauren asked Julia if she remembered how, when they first met Yoshiko's family, none of them made eye contact right away. "Customs are different in Japan," she said. "It can be considered very rude to stare into someone's eyes unless you know them." Lauren suggested they walk over to the library to find books on Japanese culture. In this way, Lauren provided information and helped Julia to think critically about why Yoshiko acted the way she did.

That night, Lauren asked Julia how she thought Yoshiko had felt about her day. "It must have been awful. I would've been so embarrassed to stand up in front of a new class like that. She was probably really scared, and then I was mean to her."

Lauren asked, "What are you going to do tomorrow, Julia?" "I don't know, Mom. I really don't want to lose my friends, but I'm not going to be mean to Yoshiko. I think I'll introduce her to Shannon. She's nice, and maybe she'll like Yoshiko."

By asking about Yoshiko's feelings, Lauren inspired Julia's compassion and respect for her friend. When she gave Julia an opportunity to think about her choices, Julia was able to take responsibility for her actions and she came up with her own positive choices.

Lately, while resting, I have been watching more television than usual. I happened to see *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* on Friday night; the cast built a house for the Walker family whose eleven year old son had committed suicide after being bullied. I wept with grief as the family told the story of this young boy who loved to read and play sports, who became discouraged and despairing after constant name-calling by his peers. I also wept with joy to hear how his mother went on to work tirelessly to stop bullying. The cast used the show to bring national attention to the problem. They made a commitment to gather one million allies to Stand Together against bullying.<sup>6</sup>

There are many groups of parents and teachers and students right here in Maine, seeking to build a climate of respect and kindness and safety for all students in our schools. There are programs to teach school staff and student bystanders the skills to intervene appropriately in bullying situations, to give support to children who are victims of bullying, and to work with bullies to help them change their behavior.<sup>7</sup>

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6 You can sign up too at [www.standtogether.tv](http://www.standtogether.tv).

7 Organizations such as GLSEN, TARP, and others are working in many school districts. For statewide resources, see <http://www.maine.gov/education/bullyingprevention/policy/index.html>.

Zoe Weil says that the most important way that parents can teach kindness to their children is to model it in their own lives. If children hear their parents putting other people down, calling them names, or acting in dominating ways, they learn that behavior for their own lives. But if they see their parents expressing respect for those who are different, being curious about other people's opinions, and acting in compassionate ways, they learn the skills for kindness.

Weil broadens the concept of kindness from a behavior in individual relationships, to a way of life that seeks to minimize suffering for even our most distant neighbors.<sup>8</sup> She suggests that being kind is not the same as being nice. Kindness means "that we attempt at the deepest and broadest level to assess what does the least harm and the most good in any given situation."<sup>9</sup> Many choices that we make have an impact on other people: the clothing we wear, what we eat, what entertainment we choose, what vehicle we drive, what products we buy.

In order to choose kindness in all these areas of our lives, we must gather information that is not readily apparent day to day. I think, for example, about how it takes some effort to learn that cocoa beans are often harvested using child labor. You won't hear that talked about in the ads for chocolate candy bars on television. Becoming a critical thinker, according to Weil, means "bringing both curiosity and a healthy dose of skepticism to all information, listening to many points of view, asking questions, and believing nothing until it has become true for you."<sup>10</sup>

If we have reverence for the inherent worth and dignity of each person, it is horrifying to realize that young people in Africa are being enslaved in order for us to have a treat. We, and especially our children, might feel despair or cynicism if there is no way to make a difference—that is why having positive choices is so important. We can have a positive impact in the world by purchasing fair-trade chocolates which are kind to the earth and kind to the people who grow them. This is just one example of how we can use Zoe Weil's four tools to bring kindness to our actions and choices.

It is not so important that we make all the right choices, or know everything there is to know. What is important is that we are engaged in the process—that we are modeling to our children how to gather information, and think critically about the information around us. That we have reverence and respect for others, and take responsibility for our actions. That we seek out and make positive choices.

Weil explores how different tools are important at different ages. For the youngest babies and toddlers, what is most important is to instill a sense of reverence in them, to nurture and support their natural wonder and awe for everything around them. In the early school years, we can foster an attitude of respect for other people. By middle school, children are ready to take responsibility for their actions.

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8 Weil, p. 56-57.

9 Weil, p. 14.

10 Weil, p. 39-40.

When I think back to that Monopoly game with my mother, I remember that at first I was confused by her approach. I was trying to play by the rules of the game, but she was challenging the rules. Now, I'm not saying people shouldn't play Monopoly. Competition can be fun, especially in games and sports. But without much fuss, my mom was teaching me that we can challenge the rules, that we can find different ways to play games that turn them around into even more fun. We can feel what other's are feeling, and take care of everyone. And I remembered. There were countless small lessons like that during my childhood that instilled in me the importance of caring for others.

Kindness can be as spontaneous as giving a smile and a thank you to a busy store clerk. Kindness can be as faithful as visiting an elder for tea and conversation every week. The practice of kindness is a spiritual practice: spirituality is that which awakens our awareness of our connection to the larger whole of which we are a part. Kindness given or received helps us to remember that we are all related to each other. And when we remember that we are all one family, it is easier to be kind.

As we enter a time of quiet meditation, I invite you to join with me once more in the Buddhist Prayer of Loving Kindness. I invite you to speak it within your heart four times. First let us speak it to our selves, then let us imagine saying it to someone we find easy to love. The third time, let us imagine speaking it to someone we feel neutral about, and finally, let us speak it to someone we find difficult to love.

May you be happy, as I wish to be happy.

May you know peace, as I wish to know peace.

May you be safe from inner and outer harm, as I wish to be safe.

May you be free from suffering, as I wish to be free.

*Closing Words*      Emily Dickinson  
If I can stop one heart from breaking,  
I shall not live in vain:  
If I can ease one life the aching,  
Or cool one pain,  
Or help one fainting robin  
Unto his nest again,  
I shall not live in vain.