

Kindness as a Virtue
Erin Margit Dajka Holley
June 21, 2015

I think it was the mid-nineties when “Random Acts of Kindness” became a thing. There may have been a book or two or many little stories of strangers doing nice things for others that made us feel better in our hearts. There is a website now (randomactsofkindness.org), which is apparently run by the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, which was, indeed, founded in 1995, and its mission states that it “inspires people to practice kindness and to pass it on to others.”

One story published on their website was submitted by Susan Pritchett from Jacksonville, Florida:

“My husband and I own a small business. We were on the way home after working and found ourselves stranded with a small leak in our car’s radiator. We suddenly saw a truck stop, and a young man offered his help. Without hesitation, he hopped back in his truck and went to buy several gallons of water. He returned quickly and said simply:

‘You’re welcome . . . it’s good karma to help.’

The next day was Mother’s Day, and I said an unspoken thank you to an unknown mother for raising a wonderful son.”

Much of the “Random Acts of Kindness” approach is focused on passing it forward. Someone did something nice for me. I should do something nice for them, or another complete stranger. Or, as with the young man who got water to help with the leaky radiator, there’s a sense of good karma. Do something kind, gain points on your cosmic “good person” score-card.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with making someone smile by paying for the coffee of the person behind you in the drive-through at Starbucks, this is not the type of kindness I want to talk about this morning. I want to take kindness deeper.

I want to talk about the kind of kindness with which poet Naomi Shihab Nye grapples.

“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 everywhere like a shadow or a friend.”

Kindness that is part of your soul. Virtuous kindness. I anticipate that you’ve heard at some point in your life, possibly from an older relative or parent or teacher, “Kindness is a Virtue.” It’s downright a cliché. You hear it, you nod, yep, that’s a good thing, I guess, and you move on with your day. The truth behind this response of ho-hum is that we don’t really talk about virtues anymore. They’re somehow related to outdated

Christian stuff, in dusty confirmation books somewhere.

I want to bring virtues back.

In the study of Ethics, virtues are one of the approaches to having a good life. They are qualities recognized as being present in other people who have lived good lives. "If I nurture these qualities within myself, I will be a good person."

The concept of virtues came about with people who care about ethics (starting with Aristotle) looking at the examples around them of who seems to have lived a good, ethical life. The difficult thing when you do this is that the stories of these people are often vastly different.

Harriet Tubman's life was completely different from Ralph Waldo Emerson's life. Where might we find commonalities between the firefighters that ran into the Twin Towers as they collapsed and Mother Teresa? Their actual stories seem disparate, but when analyzed, common threads come forward.

These people (and so many more) made certain decisions in their lives that fall under common themes, qualities. Virtues.

This is not to say that certain people are simply born with virtuous qualities, leaving everyone else in the dust. Virtues must be practiced. The idea is that we establish patterns of behavior in our lives; we form habits. When you do something enough times, it becomes a part of

you. You just naturally do it, whether it's brushing your teeth daily or being kind.

So, practice being kind. Think of it as another spiritual practice. Bring your awareness to your own behavior, to the needs of those around you, see the ways in which you might nurture kindness. Become intentional about bringing kindness into your relationships. This applies to our life-long partnerships, as discussed in the article from which Matthew read this morning, but we can extend it far beyond marriage.

Through kindness you can be attentive to other people around you, recognize who they are, their value, and respond to them and their needs out of deep caring. It is

easier to smile, nod, and go on with whatever you were doing when someone interrupts you with news or a question. What if you begin to stop what you were doing, see them, hear what they have to say, and respond through kindness?

It starts small, with just that little reminder you give yourself in the back of your mind that you really should respond through kindness. Day in, day out, live it, breathe it. Remind yourself. Make kindness a spiritual practice. Take inner kindness breaks to reflect, journal about it, whatever it is that helps you to keep your awareness focused on that which is outside of yourself.

It's really hard. I struggle with this every day. I have developed patterns and habits that I know are not based within the virtue of kindness. I get so wrapped up in how what another person is saying to me relates

to me and my own experience that I stop hearing them; I'll even interrupt to make that connection, bring myself into the conversation. I've been doing this most of my life, and in all honesty, friendships have ended because I do this. But, I've also now become aware of this non-virtuous habit, and I keep reminding myself to step back, to see the other person, to make them and their needs in this moment my focus. I'm trying to practice this as a virtue, to form a new habit that nurtures my soul and the souls around me.

Once a virtue is practiced and attended to, you find, like a habit, that it gets easier. It becomes natural. Making the decision toward kindness again and again becomes part of the story of who you are, forming your personality, edging its way into your soul. The goal is for it to become wholly a part of you, so that when it matters most in your life, you won't have to think about it. You will respond in kindness just as you breathe air.

"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 everywhere like a shadow or a friend."

Those who engage in the "Random Acts of Kindness" thing express that they are spiritually filled by the kind actions of others and their ability to pass it on. Take it

beyond the “random,” and turn it into a lifestyle. “The more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite.” “Upward spirals of love and generosity.” Practicing the virtue of kindness.

I need to shift gears now. The downside of modern preaching schedules is that the church needs to publish a title and a short blurb about your sermon in advance of

your preaching date, so a week and a half ago, I was thinking deeply about the article about kindness in marriages and finding that I was called to share that with you this morning. And then yesterday morning I was able to catch up on the news for the first time since Wednesday (I spent Thursday and Friday re-enacting the 1870s - not worth going into detail now, but it’s a thing I do now) and learned about the shooting at

Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal. My heart dropped, the sadness hit me, and I knew that I could not let it rest.

I want to be clear that, for me, this violence, in the milieu of so much violence against persons of color, is a clear call to action. I am furious, have been angered too many

times seeing the violence against black people in this country, and must do something.

In 1963, after four little girls were blown up inside their church in Birmingham, Dr. King began significant protest action in that city. And, he was arrested. And, while he sat in Birmingham Jail, he composed a letter, which was smuggled out bit by bit on scraps of paper,

to the white clergy in that city. He expressed his disappointment in them, for they had published in the paper a statement condemning Dr. King's "extreme" response and action for civil rights. They wanted to maintain order, to keep the status quo, and this infuriated Dr. King to no end.

"I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church . . . When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery . . . I felt we would have the support of the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows."

It feels as though little has changed. The words continue to ring true, as we, and here I am talking to all of us who are white, continue to be afraid to charge headlong into change. It's long past time. We can no longer sit back on the laurels of the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. Fifty years after Selma, we keep wearing blinders.

All we offer to our brothers and sisters of color are platitudes, prayers, the shaking of our heads. As a people (acknowledging exceptions), we who are white,

even white liberals, do not want to be challenged to see our complicity in systemic racism.

Unitarian Universalists reject the idea of original sin as Augustine formulated it in the fourth century, but theologian (and one of my theology professors) Eleazar Fernandez points out that oppression is original sin.

Systemic Racism. We were all born into this system of oppression, this system set up over centuries and millennia by people, a system of who has power and resources and who does not, a system that espouses that some people are inherently better than others. We were not given a choice, being raised in this system, this society. We merely learned that this is how things are.

Racism in this country runs so deep that we have to intentionally learn to see it constantly around us.

I didn't see it. I am part of it, was part of it raised here in Rockford, attending the Rockford Public Schools during the process of court-ordered desegregation, bused to the West side of town every day to go to school in oppressed neighborhoods. But, as I was in special programs (Gifted, Creative and Performing Arts), my classes were still made up of other middle and upper class white children, with a couple token children of color, all of us bused all the way across town. I remember being frustrated when the court instilled quotas for children of color in my special programs, feeling that the quality of the program dropped, that the kids weren't as talented.

I did not even begin to understand all of the devious ways in which poverty and oppression shaped the new children in the program, the uphill battles they and their families were fighting. That they were not the problem, but that our society was, that I was for not seeing things through the eyes I have now.

The game is rigged. The house always wins, and we white people are the house. It's our job to change the rules. We cannot sit back, shake our heads, mourn the nine who died on Wednesday, and make ourselves feel better by telling ourselves that this was the act of an unstable young man who had been taught terrible things. A mentally ill person, who is nothing like us. We are complicit in the society that formed that young man. This is on our shoulders, as well, because we, like the white clergy to whom Dr. King wrote in 1963, are not willing to upset the status quo from which we benefit. We are steeped in the original sin of oppression, although we may not see it, and it is time to open our eyes.

As a guest preacher, I do not know the ways in which this congregation is involved in anti-racism. You may already be doing all of the right things, maybe you've heard all of this before, have had your eyes opened, are actively working for justice with people of color. But, I want you do it. I want you to commit yourselves to anti-racism. Being anti-racist is a virtue. It isn't something that you're born with, or experience a sudden conversion event and can hold for the rest of your life as truth. You can't simply say "I have friends who are black." Or, "I don't say racist things." Or, "I

get this oppression thing.” and not be a racist. You can’t just tell yourself that you’re not a racist.

You were born into racism, it is the air that you breathe but cannot see. You must practice being anti-racist. Do specific things to inform yourself, to be deliberate in your actions, to join with those who are dismantling racism in this country to practice being anti-racist. Over time, my hope for myself and all of you, is that the conscientious effort to be anti-racist will become a part of our souls, and through our actions will spread into the souls of those around us.

This takes everything we have, all of the virtues we may have been nurturing throughout our lives. We need to bring with us great courage, justice, compassion, kindness . . . the list does not end, for challenging the racial status quo of this country is the hardest thing we face. It is at the top of the list of things that must be done for our souls to become whole.

If you haven’t already, start by educating yourself. Read a book or two or five or ten about racism, about how white people can fight racism. Step back from your ego, acknowledge your complicity, but don’t get wrapped up in white guilt. It is what it is, and if we become trapped in our own feelings of guilt, we do no good. Swallow your pride and show up at meetings and events that are working for racial justice. Don’t lead, but follow those leaders who are people of color.

Just like every virtue we practice, we will not always get it right. I'm going to make mistakes. I'm betting that there are things I've said in this sermon that aren't quite right, that are mistakes in talking about racial justice. You're going to make mistakes. We will be scolded for our ignorance. And we can't give up. This is too important. People are dying because we have been silent. Because we haven't been willing to take the risk.

Kindness is a virtue. Extend it beyond yourself, practice it every day among all of those around you, and be fed.

Anti-racism is a virtue. May it be a reward in itself for all of us, as well. It is time to step up, to practice doing the right thing over and over and over again.

Today we mourn with those who mourn, as the funerals will take place, and our spirits will be with those who were hurt, who died, and who lost loved ones.

Tomorrow, we accept the call to action.