

Finding Kindness - reflections on learning the importance of being kind to oneself
Thoughts for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sheridan

Last week, Victor spoke to the conceptions of Kindness in different religious traditions. I really appreciated that context, as my religious education is somewhat lacking. I grew up without religious rituals and traditions outside of those which carry over into public school and our consumerist culture. My mother was raised Catholic - my father in the Mormon Church. Sunday mornings during my childhood were spent not in church, but in pajamas, with hotcakes on the griddle and NPR cranked way up on the radio - pretty ideal (in my memory, anyway).

The talk I will give today, therefore, will be rooted in personal reflection, since that is the foundation of my spirituality and whatever nebulous form my religious beliefs take. So, I will start by saying: the theme for this month, Kindness, contains so much. Kindness is linked to Generosity. Both of these concepts connote acts of giving - and when we think of giving, Gifts are often implied. There are different kinds of Gifts - this is the time of year when Gifts wrapped in pretty packages loom large in our imaginations. But, of course, Gifts aren't always physical & tangible. Neither is Kindness.

In addition to Generosity, Kindness is also Patience, Forgiveness, and - I hesitate to say it, but - Grace.

So, my whole life, I've been carrying around this name - Grace. From a young age, I tried to figure out what it meant, and despite the fact that I spent very little time in church, I heard it a lot in relation to Capital G God. I don't believe I have ever felt like I really understood what it meant in that context. 'God's Grace': I think perhaps this phrase sounded confusing to me. The Unexplainable always seemed to be explained away as a consequence of 'God's Grace' - maybe that has always translated in my mind to be something like 'God's Whims' more than anything else. So - God's Grace being so *mysterious* - that line of inquiry never led me anywhere very satisfactory.

Really, I had to explore my secular world for more meaning. As the youngest of four children, I learned a lot from watching my older siblings. From my brother Kevin, I learned about the Beauty of being Sensitive and Gentle and Silly all at once. My middle sister Meredith always had a talent for connecting with other people through Thoughtfulness and Compassion. My oldest sister Sage is good at getting down to business, leading in taking Responsibility and Action. Around the best examples set by these three, my values began to form.

And then, of course, there are the two people who gave me the name in the first place: my parents - both Joyful Storytellers and Astute Listeners - each of them Whimsical in their own ways.

So, how to pull all these things together? Sensitivity, Silliness, Compassion, Responsibility, Joy, even Whimsy... In seeking to embody something worthwhile and understand some larger definition of Grace, I looked for a common thread to connect it all, and I landed on Kindness.

If being a human is complicated and the experience of going through life guarantees challenges, then we must do what we can for each other to ease the passage and maybe even enable some enjoyment of the time we have here. It seems to me that Kindness is the key toward that end.

Kindness is an awareness of others and a search to make it easier on them - life, that is. Kindness is a commitment to dismantling the assumptions we can't help but make about each other.

Kindness is comfort and an invitation toward love, if people are willing to notice.

Kindness is rooted in a belief in the inherent value and beauty of each and every person.

But Kindness is also worth evaluating because it can be easy to think of it only on a surface level. I find that sometimes people sanitize Kindness.

For one of my jobs, I work up at the high school during Fall Drama season when it is time to bring a couple dozen students together to put on a play. Each time I pick a play for the Fall Drama Club, I try to pick something not that will guarantee to sell lots of tickets, but I want something that will give us something rich to talk about - something to deconstruct and reassemble - as well as a story that will represent an experience that is outside the rigid idea of normal in this community. Maybe there is a character who is gay, gender-nonconforming, or just a character who feels like a gigantic bug around all those closest to him.

This year, I noticed signs up around the high school building, in the bathrooms that say, "Be Kind." In these times, it's a great goal for us all to work at. But I couldn't help but shake my head to think that the intended message, which I could only assume had to do with addressing tension around mask mandates and living in a Covid-19 world, was likely not sinking in where it was most needed.

What does "Be Kind" in cheery, light pastel colors really mean? In some sense, it reads as "Be Nice," which is often a directive to not do unpleasant things - be not unkind. That's a lot of negatives to keep track of. In addition to that, there is a connotation that reads: don't ruffle any feathers or rock the boat. These are the most common encouragements given to protect the status quo. I have been told more than once that an artistic project I was working on was too risky, that I needed to defer to the preferences of the dominant culture and not make the people with conservative values uncomfortable - in essence, I should 'play nice.' Nevermind that the reason for rocking the proverbial boat through art is often to reveal the ways in which the culture at large is unkind, neglectful, or even cruel to underrepresented or vulnerable people.

There is certainly something to be said for remaining aware of the consequences of alienating people in a community when you're working to organize or have an impact on that community. But Scarcity Mindset and competitive culture falsely have people believing that there aren't enough human rights or resources to go around. Some people are threatened by the idea of

Kindness and Inclusion of certain people in certain forms seemingly because they think that that kind of expenditure can't be recouped.

My reaction to people insisting that my problem is that I just don't spend enough time thinking about or trying to understand what Conservative Christian people think and feel in a culture dominated by those values - is to get pretty worked up. And it makes me want to be really rigorous and relentless in my defense of the young people I work with, their pronouns and chosen names, their hopes and longings, and the space we create together when we create art together. Sometimes I work so hard at this, I deny myself the things I need - like just a little time to myself, time spent NOT thinking about the teens and everything they need me to do to help them put on the best possible show and have a meaningful life experience. 'No pressure!'

My counselor has to remind me: Boundaries, Grace - you need boundaries to protect yourself.

I have been known in my life to give and give outwardly without stopping to assess what I am receiving or reserving. I think many of us have found ourselves in this position. When I was in my 20s, I was in a long term relationship with a person I loved - towards the end, I knew we were struggling. But I thought the solution was to pour out all I had into him, into our relationship. If I put all my love in - went the logic - it will surely be worth it - surely, I will surely get it back. Isn't that the logic of a story like The Giving Tree - or maybe that story is really a warning about that very tendency.

It turns out, I was wrong. I think of it now, and I realize what a great pressure I was putting on him - such great expectation without explanation. But also, my whole mental construction of Giving was built around the idea that the Gift of my Love and Kindness could come in the form of a denial of myself. That is false. That was unkind to him - and to me. Once the slow and painful unraveling of the relationship was complete, I felt like I had nothing left to build myself back up.

But, of course, I did. Because our love for ourselves and the world is not a bowl of soup. It is not finite. It can grow and regenerate in the most unlikely of circumstances. Love and Kindness is abundant within us.

That's a nice idea, right? I believe that - most of the time. Still - there are other times when I can't help but feel afraid that what I call Kindness manifests as weakness. When I bend over backwards to accommodate student absences and missed deadlines, or when I stretch real tall to see the other side of an issue to give a fair chance to a difficult person - I begin to wonder who I am doing all this hard work for exactly? Because in the end, I'm so tired.

But that is a dangerous trap to set for myself because it so often leads down a cyclical rabbit hole of self-doubt and self-blame for trying to be flexible and forgiving - to ease the passage for others.

Again, my counselor's voice in my head: boundaries, Grace, boundaries.

Sometimes, I have to set boundaries even between my heart and my own harsh words and fears.

In these moments that I let fear creep in that Kindness is a kind of weakness - I remember that phrase that seems to crop up in TV and movie scripts: "Don't mistake my kindness for weakness." Despite the fact that it is often uttered as a threat, it reminds me that the two are separate things - you can have one without the other. By the way, I googled this phrase - do you know that it's attributed to Al Capone?! I did not know this. I do not automatically associate Al Capone with warmth and kindness. But I guess it's really a threat, so...

There was even a line like this in the high school play we just wrapped. The main character who spends the beginning of the play acting like a scary dictator decides to let a group of outsider kids sleep in "her school building." When they thank her for this, she tells them, "Don't mistake my kindness for trust." But as the story progresses, she begins to soften and realize that the structures and standards she has set for herself are too rigid. She's been trying to protect the people around her with rules that almost no one can follow. Her impulse towards Kindness, though she resists it, is what saves her in the end.

So...

How to Be Kind can be complicated.

Kindness is warmth and vulnerability.

Kindness is not a blanket to hide beneath.

Kindness is honesty and boundaries.

As an adult, I have had to learn that even my most foundational relationships require a rigorous and critical approach to Kindness and Giving. There are people in my life, to whom I owe everything. They gave me life, they taught me about what love is, they supported me, guided me, put a roof over my head, bailed me out of jail, traveled hundreds of miles for me - their gifts are incalculable. It would stand to reason that I have a lot to return to them. And even as I put my heart and soul into caring for and loving them - there is a limit to what I can give them. In watching close loved ones go through harrowing difficulties in their lives - in going through those difficulties by their sides - it is painful not to be able to shield them from incredible hurt. But within a family, we can feel both unconditional love and sadness and disappointment. And when we are hurt by those we love, or when they demand more than we really have to give another human being on this earth, the kinder thing to do (rather than give so much of ourselves away that we begin to disappear) - the kinder thing to do is to say, "No, I'm sorry, I cannot give you that. I, too, have needs, and I am going to take care of them."

Those words again: Boundaries, Grace, boundaries.

Kindness is not always easy - not always sweet.

If Kindness is linked to the old idea we hold so high: "Love thy neighbor as thyself" - don't we have to ask, "How well do we love ourselves?"

What does being kind to yourself actually look like?

I asked myself this question, and came up with this wandering list:

Being kind to myself is...

Deep breaths

Turning my brain off by distraction

Seeking out laughter and close companionship

Taking a moment to be alone in the quiet

A hot tasty beverage

Savoring the delicious taste of my favorite foods

Getting to a place where I can see for miles and miles - be it a mountain range, a cityscape, or a giant lake

Telling a needy person in my life that / need to take care of myself first

Dismantling hierarchies bit by bit, but letting my contributions be enough when I'm low on energy - hard to do when the hierarchies still stand - to draw the line of enough

Fighting fatphobia in myself and brushing it off the best I can when I encounter it in the world around me

Being kind to myself can be asking for help

Giving myself the pep-talk I wish someone else would give me - or that I would give someone else I love and cherish

Taking time to notice the things for which I can be so grateful - I have so many things to be grateful for

Giving space to let myself cry when it needs to get out of me, even if I don't know exactly why I'm sad

Singing a song I love at the top of my lungs

Laughing at my own jokes... to myself

Understanding that life is made up of seasons - we go through phases - some when we have an abundance of patience with ourselves, as well as those when we seem to lack it!

That doesn't mean the dark and cold months *have* to be hard - nor that the warm and sunny months *have got* to be good

Simply - no one emotion is permanent

Kindness and self-love are not a destination - they are willful acts that sometimes are easier to carry out than others

Ultimately, as we strive to be kind to ourselves - to ease our own passage through the world - all the while, we must forgive ourselves for the times when we have not been so kind. It's that forgiveness, patience, compassion, silliness, sensitivity, and joy that lead the way back to sweet and serious kindness we owe to ourselves and the world around us.