

The Kindness Imperative

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The “Kindness Imperative” has been around for a very long time. It seems that virtually every religion tradition has some version of the biblical verse with which we are most familiar –

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Christians are not alone in that exhortation. Who does not want to be treated with love?

A Buddhist text says: ***Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.***

In Zoroastrianism: ***Human nature is good only when it does not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.***

Among the Sikhs: ***Be not estranged from one another for God dwells in every heart.***

The Bahai say: ***Blessed are those who prefer others before themselves.***

In Jainism, it's: ***In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, regard all creatures as you would yourself.***

And in Islam: ***No one is a believer until you desire for another that which you desire for yourself.***

And, perhaps most interesting to me, the great Jewish Rabbi Hillel, who according to tradition, died just after Jesus was born,

***What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.
That is the entire Torah. All the rest is commentary.***

In other words, we could say that being kind to others is the whole of the law. Everything else flows from that general principle.

I'd like to share a few stories to illustrate that principle, and I'm sure you will have stories of your own.

Let's turn first to the great storyteller, Shakespeare. Our phrase “the milk of human kindness” comes from Shakespeare, but you might be surprised to learn the source and the context. It was Lady Macbeth, and she was accusing her husband of having too much of it!

Can you be too kind? Can you have too much kindness?

In the murderous heart of Lady Macbeth, kindness was a weakness. So that should tell us that for the rest of us, far from murder or villainy, kindness is a no brainer. But is it?

There's a verse from the Psalms that says,

"Kindness and truth shall embrace."

And one from Proverbs:

"Those who pursue justice and kindness will find life and honor."

Are those good principles?

We're all familiar with the "permission" we give ourselves to tell little white lies rather than hurt someone with the truth, right? When someone is clearly thrilled (or anxious) about a new hair style or a new garment, and we don't quite agree, we don't hurt their feelings by telling them it's ugly or unflattering

No, we find some "wiggle language" like, "I think it's great, I can see how you really love it."

That kind of "divorce" between truth and kindness doesn't trouble our sleep. However, in much of life, things are seldom that simple.

Sr. Mary Lou Kownacki, a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania, tells a story about a bishop in Texas in the 1970s, who denounced the plans to add manufacturing of new and monstrously hideous neutron bombs to an existing nuclear bomb factory in his diocese. He advised (*maybe even urged*) his the members of his flock to resign from their jobs if they worked there.

Peace workers there applauded his willingness to take on the nuclear weapons industry. (*a kind of bravery, we know, that is fairly rare among Roman Catholic bishops!*)

However, one man, a Mexican-American and a deacon in his parish, told a reporter:

"This job was the first good thing I ever had. I quit school to help support my family but later got a GED, and then this job."

He said he felt trapped and couldn't sleep at night, wrestling with the need to support his family and the moral advice of his bishop.

What is the kind thing to do in that sort of situation? And if we engage with that question for this man alone, what do we do with the fact that 500 other Catholics in that diocese worked in the plant too. Could the Church provide re-training and a paycheck until these workers were able to get new jobs? Where is the kindness when a religious leader declares that one must choose between morality and supporting one's family?

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And what about the tens of thousands of scientists, engineers, and assembly workers who depend on jobs at nuclear bomb manufacturing sites across the country? As Sr. Mary Lou says, "are we as peacemakers so intent on our truths" that we can't see the unkindness that will burden so many people with the unintended consequences?

We see some churches and traditionalist organizations pronouncing their "truths" about, say, abortion ... without thinking about the very real pain in the life of a woman who cannot see how she will provide for another child.

Or – closer to home – there was recently an episode at A Baby Center – a local charity that no doubt many of you know and many of you support.

In my church, for instance, we call the first Sunday of every month "Swaddling Sunday" and we are all invited to bring diapers, wipes, and other baby supplies to church. We pile it up under the altar, and at the end of mass, we pile it all into someone's car, and A Baby Center gets a monthly delivery of baby supplies from us. Many other churches and civic organizations work similar efforts.

The diapers, of course, are the disposable type. A couple years ago, someone thought we ought to be applying sustainability principles at A Baby Center. Maybe there was even a grant involved, if I recall. I am sure the advocates of this approach had the best of intentions – worry about all those disposable diapers in our landfills – and they saw this as a reasonable step to address the very real problem that the diapers themselves do not decompose very quickly.

Women who are served by A Baby Center have to qualify on the basis of low income before they can get diapers and other supplies there. So in this sustainability initiative, women were invited (on a voluntary basis, if memory serves) to try using cloth diapers, which of course also entailed a commitment of washing and reusing the diapers.

The project failed, utterly. Women whose incomes are low enough to qualify for this charity typically live in apartment buildings, which rarely have washing machines in the apartments. They may or may not have laundry facilities in the basement of the building. Maybe the only choice is to go to a Laundromat.

So here are the choices: put yourself in this woman's life. When you have enough dirty diapers, you trek to the basement (taking the baby with you, of course, and possibly other children). Maybe you don't have enough quarters. Maybe the machine is broken and now you have no clean diapers for the day. Maybe you've got a job and you have to get your mother to care for the children and the infant, and wash the diapers while you're at work.

Maybe you have to find someone to give you a ride to the Laundromat – with a bucket of dirty, smelly diapers.

Would you do this? Remember Rabbi Hillel again --

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.

Maybe marrying kindness and truth is not such a good idea after all! Maybe mixing justice and kindness doesn't always work.

What if our truth is ending the use of pesticides, and so then, what do we do with the mosquito carrying the Zika virus that threatens pregnant women and their yet-to-be-born babies?

If our truth is sustainability ... or the elimination of weapons of mass destruction ... or the closure of nuclear power plants ... do we make the price of our kindness (i.e., charity) that the recipient must embrace our truth?

Not all kindness, however, entails such difficult dilemmas. Simply being kind to one another doesn't cost anything, does it?

The "milk of human kindness" – if we take it in a different way than Lady Macbeth – is a great lubricant for human relationships.

Maybe some of you recall a column I wrote about this a few months ago, and this example--

While in England, I observed a British lady walk up to a counter in a London department store – apparently to return something – and I heard her say, "I'm terribly sorry ... but I'm afraid I have a complaint."

So interesting – layers of buffer in her words to soften the blow of the complaint. Wouldn't we all do well to emulate that sort of kindness?

Remember the old adage: "They won't remember what you said, and they won't remember what you did. But they will remember how you made them feel."

And nothing feels more heartwarming than a bit of kindness from someone, known or unknown, who has nothing particular to gain from it.

And then there's kindness even in the face of loss --

Sr. Joan Chittister, also a Benedictine Sister of Erie, PA, tells a story about a young man from Chicago who had spent time in Cape Town, South Africa, working there among the poor. When she met him there, he recognized her American accent and struck up a conversation.

One of his eyes was bruised and swollen shut, and Sr. Joan inquired.

"I was beaten up on the street," he told her, "and they stole the shoes right off my feet."

Sr. Joan was understandably concerned, but he waved off her concern. "It's healing," he told her, "but when I called to tell my mother, she was furious." Those shoes cost a lot.

"But I told her," he went on, "Mom, you don't understand. Those shoes cost more than most people here make in a year."

"I just hope the shoes fit him," he added.

What a lesson in compassion and kindness. The young man forgave his attacker, and he may have lost his shoes, but he certainly gained a measure of self-respect, didn't he?

We can see another example of this in a Christian legend, that of St. Veronica.

Now there is no historical record at all that a woman named Veronica actually lived in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus, yet the legend has been embedded in the Catholic devotional practice called "The Way of Cross."

The "Way of the Cross" chronicles Jesus' steps through 14 incidents (or "Stations") from the time he was condemned to his death on the cross. At the 6th Station, legend has it, a woman named Veronica stepped out of the crowd and wiped his face with a cloth – a face no doubt dripping with sweat, blood and tears.

She had nothing to gain, and perhaps much to lose. Don't forget, the crowd was portrayed as ravenous for his condemnation and death. Yet, she stepped out and performed this act of mercy and compassion, an act of kindness that tells us that we must be kind, even when the risks are great.

Whether the story is myth or fact doesn't really matter. There's a saying in storytelling circles: *"This story is true, whether it happened or not!"*

What matters is the lesson of compassion and kindness.

Be kind, even when the cost may be great.

I can't circle around this topic without turning to our current political season. No I will not belabor this, for I know how shocked and troubled we all are by the extraordinary political climate in this presidential election cycle. However – I feel compelled to point this out:

We have one candidate who is said to be driven by religious principles learned as a child and honed as an adult. These principles are encapsulated in a quote attributed to a religious leader in the founding of one Protestant denomination (John Wesley): “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

On the other side, we have a candidate who delights in inventing unflattering labels for opponents; who demeans women, immigrants and Muslims; who insults a disabled reporter and the mother of a crying infant.

Shouldn't we consider kindness when making our political decisions?

In the words of Franklin Roosevelt:

“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.”

And Roosevelt also said, "I think we consider too much the good luck of the early bird and not enough the bad luck of the early worm."

Once again, I turn to the Benedictine Sr. Mary Lou Kownacki, whose prayer we will offer together at the end of our service. According to Sr. Mary Lou, the Cheyenne people believe that the Great Spirit gives each person this gift at birth: a certain number of words. When the last of the allotted number is said or whispered or traced or written, the person dies.

If we were to believe this, think how careful we would be to not waste our words on gossip or meanness. Sr. Mary Lou guesses that we would use most of our words telling people how much we love them.

This Cheyenne creation story shows us the way to the “kindness imperative.”

If, in the Cheyenne tradition, we choose our words carefully and use them sparingly, then I think we will be living the kindness imperative. That “use words sparingly” is another important principle – A former boss of mine used to like to say, “Sometimes, at the end of the day, it's what you **don't** say that's most important.

I am reminded of a poem by Ted Kooser. He is my kinsman, really, for he hails from Nebraska and he draws his inspiration from the people of the prairie.

For decades, he wrote his poetry in bits of time here and there, while he worked for an insurance company to earn his living. Then, in 2004, he was named Poet Laureate by the U.S. Library of Congress, a post he held for two years, and his poetry became, deservedly, more well known. This particular poem, I think, reflects our capacity for kindness as we search for kindness in each other...

Mourners

After the funeral, the mourners gather
Under the rustling churchyard maples
And talk softly, like clusters of leaves.
White shirt cuffs and collars flash in the shade:
Highlights on deep green water.
They came this afternoon to say goodbye,
But now they keep saying hello and hello,
Peering into each other's faces,
Slow to let go of each other's hands.

It is in each other, after all, that we find and express the kindness imperative.

In the words of Pax Christi, the Catholic peace organization, who recently posted this to Twitter:

We are a work in progress.
Story, community, and spirituality are what create the beloved community.
We must share ourselves and connect.

Let me end by sharing with you this **Short Prayer of Kindness** which I found on the website *Belief.net*

Dear God, xc

If I cannot be brilliant, let me be kind.
If I cannot change the world, let me inspire just one other to do so.
If I cannot give away riches, let me be loving.
Let me be known for kindness, for it is the greatest glory.

~Amen