

## **Kindness**

Despite the fact that I saw very little of it in my family when I was a child I thought I knew all about kindness. I knew what I was missing. Or I thought I did. I grew up with the usual childish determination to treat MY children better than I was treated and to treat other people with respect and kindness too. I also knew that, because of my experience, I found it almost impossible to accept it from other people or to hear and accept praise or gratitude.

I knew from a very early age that I wanted to teach and also to be a therapist and I set about achieving that, fuelled by a strong sense of justice and considerable outrage at what I witnessed going on all around me in the name of authority. Oddly I was myself a strange mix of authoritarianism and compassion which often put me outside the communities I was trying to be part of. However, I went on to achieve a high level of professionalism in the helping professions and was sought after as a teacher and lecture. I was exceptionally good at 'spreading the message' but, unknowingly, had absolutely no idea of what kindness really *felt* like. It took me almost seventy years and increasing physical infirmity to find out what I had been missing. It has been a very humbling experience.

Every day now I am blessed with the ability to experience and actually feel the many kindnesses that come my way, very ordinary experiences most of them but testament to the inherent goodness in people that it so often subsumed in the daily deluge of blatant greed and self interest that has become the overarching paradigm of our times. "How" we ask ourselves, "are they able to get away with it? Why aren't we on the streets with pitchforks and flaming brands crying them down!" Perhaps because most of us are quietly going about our daily tasks of survival and cooperation that give us some sense of control and attachment in the belief that, as Dawkins once famously said, 'Good guys always come first'. A very clever word play on the paradox of self interest. Its sad that he has somewhat lost his way since then but maybe he still believes in his hypothesis despite all the evidence to the contrary.

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Evidence. Ah yes. Let me tell you about some of mine that has stayed with me and decries the cynics on a daily basis.

I was in ASDA on my moby scooter looking for some suitable trainers for an exercise class I was trying to join. It occurred to me that my choices might be a bit limited as they would be mostly made on guess work. These days its a major undertaking for me to stand up and get my footwear off let alone try on more shoes, often requiring lacing up. Balance is not my strong suit at present. I'd been sitting pondering for several minutes, trying to manoeuvre the scooter close to the rack to reach the shoes I was interested in, always just slightly out of my reach, when a man and his wife stopped and asked if they could be of any help. I did not know them but it often happens in my experience that people stop to chat in supermarkets these day so I explained what I was trying to do. The man immediately but very quietly and calmly reached over to the shoes and brought three pairs to me to check over. I said I wasn't sure about size and fit anymore as my feet had changed over the years. I also, for this reason usually only get shoes with no backs so I can slide them on an off with no difficulty, which does limit choice. I'm getting a bit fed up with Crocks! This very kind man then dropped to his knee at my feet and took of my shoe, placing it very carefully on the bike platform (maybe to reassure me he wasn't going to pinch it) and tried the shoes on me one after the other. He made sure they were the type with velcro closings so the laces wouldn't be a problem and he became the perfect shoe clerk, treating me like a very honoured customer. After several attempts we decided on a pair that came closest to fitting the bill and he put the others back before putting my own shoe back on me as if he was the Prince to my Cinderella. Totally unpatronising, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to be fitting a stranger with shoes in the supermarket.

I was deeply moved by the whole thing. In those days I wasn't good at being helped, (see previous history) but I really *felt* his kindness and that of his wife who stood by offering help and advice in a very supportive way. I was almost in tears and did what I always do and turned on the humour to cover my feelings. I wasn't embarrassed but I was very inexperienced at at receiving and appreciating kind and helpful support with equanimity.

My family will attest to this. I said to his wife "Can I take him home with me?" and she replied, somewhat sardonically, "Well you'll probably get more out of him than I will", which made us laugh. It did highlight though how we often seem to be less able to identify - or interpret - the kindness of our nearest and dearest, eroded as that ~~skill~~<sup>quality</sup> is by familiarity. Perhaps 'familiarity does breed contempt', which is sad. We all went on our way, dropping back into the anonymity of strangers doing the Saturday shop, never to meet again. As I reflected upon it later at home I suddenly realised that I didn't even know their names.

That was really the start of it. It seems to me that Rupert Sheldrake's theory of 'Morphic Resonance' is a real thing because after that I began noticing and experiencing many, many incidences of ordinary - and very profound - kindnesses. Like Topsy, 'It just grewed!' You'd have to be of certain age to get that one!

I was coming back from town, again on my moby scooter, when it ran out of juice. Not enough power to get me home and it was quite a distance. Cursing myself for not checking properly before I left home I got off and took it out of gear with the intention of pushing it the mile or so back to my flat. I was on a slight gradient which made it that much more difficult as it's quite a hefty beast. So am I which is why I need such a substantial vehicle, "My Porch" as I told the admiring twelve year old boys who often called out in passing, "Let's 'ave a go granma!" There were none around on this occasion so I was puffing my way very slowly up the lane when a male voice behind me said "Can I help you with that?" Again a very 'ordinary' man and his wife stepped up and checked out what was going on. I explained what a twerp I was, getting stuck this far away from home and he immediately said, "I can help you with that. You use your sticks and I can push it along for you. Just take your time. No rush". I was a bit embarrassed this time as I knew how far it was to my flat but after a bit of a conflagration with his wife they agreed that she would go on home to get their BBQ ready and he would come with me. It took a lot to let that happen but I had to admit it was a real life saver.

People who know me know that my sprinting days are long gone so we pegged along at snail's pace with me slightly in front leading the way. I opted for the shortest route

repeatedly apologizing for the imposition and, perhaps to ease my discomfiture, my rescuer (and I am ashamed to say I have forgotten his name so I shall call him Steve) Steve started to chat to me about his family who were coming over later for a BBQ in his garden which, thankfully for me, wasn't far from my flat. I got to hear quite a bit about them and shared some of my own family stuff gradually becoming less stressed and much diverted from our lengthy 'stroll'. When we eventually arrived at mine he helped push the Moby into its dock in the bin room and watched while I plugged it back into the charging point. I then expected us to part company but he insisted on seeing me up the 23 steps to my flat and indoors safely. When he was satisfied that I was settled in properly he did eventually leave to return to his party. At no time did I feel patronised or belittled as the silly little old lady I felt myself to be. I didn't know exactly where he lived or if we would meet again so I was somewhat overwhelmed when two days later I answered a knock on my door to find Steve standing there. He'd come to check up on me to see if I'd recovered from the walk! I call that going above and beyond but I recovered enough to invite him in and give him a bottle of Brandy left untouched from Christmas. (I only have it for guests - honest!) he was very reluctant to accept anything saying he was happy to help and had enjoyed my company but did so to please me. So again we parted and occasionally I see him and his wife around town and we always say hello and do a bit of catching up. Magic. Makes me feel I really belong in this community.

That's what kindness is, in all its many forms of which this is only two examples, a kind of magic, a golden glow of attachment and caring that we've labelled 'humanity'. Why do we need these labels? We do, in this country, seem uncomfortable with acknowledging these special feelings, often shrugging it off with comments like, "it's nothing. Anyone would do it". Well sadly that's not true but I've definitely noticed an increase in caring since the dreaded Covid and all the breaking down of societal bonds that caused. It's taken us millennia to learn how to hug each other on meeting or departing (much too Continental!) and now we have to unlearn it all again. However I see it creeping back incrementally. We don't seem to be able to stop ourselves. I am still very reluctant to engage in close contact but I have a wonky immune system so maybe I can be excused

but it makes me sad.

Now, in the little square where I live, there is a new Community bench on the central green which is dedicated to a past Chair of our Leaseholders Association. He was a kind man. Not that he would admit it. Now, when weather allows I'll go down and sit there enjoying being outdoors and I can guarantee that within the hour someone will be passing and come and join me sometimes bringing cups of tea or even cakes! It can get quite busy! Its a real magnet. Following on from that a neighbour has set up a whatsapp group for the five older single women of wit and wisdom who live here and we now look out for and catch up with each other on a regular basis. Its contagious, this kindness.

So far this has all been about me and two of the 'big happenings' I've experienced personally, but wonderful things are happening every day out there and we all benefit from the privilege of witnessing and experiencing them, often very small 'unremarkable' things we often don't notice. I have started keeping a log which, when read back is better than any medicinal tonic. And completely free. 'Paying it forward' as a way of being. Its certainly changed my behaviour for the better and in particular whenever I meet and engage with people these days I have a smile on my face and always make a point of introducing myself - and asking their names!

Suneith

Frome, 2024