

Kindness Is Also Possible

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Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister to North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) here in Woodstock, Vermont. Today is Sunday, the 14th of March and I'm very glad to see you this morning. It is good to be together. The title of this Sunday's reflection is Kindness Is Also Possible.

On the far side of all of the stories that we tell, kindness is always possible, always promising...but many times, we choose not to tell the stories of kindness. We don't always take the time to sing its praises. We tell the stories of rage and we tell the stories of war and tell these stories in tongues of men and angels—the drama, the action... We tend to be drawn to these things. They're fascinating. How did Shakespeare put it? "let us sit upon the ground. And tell sad stories of the death of kings." And we've done that...well, I think...but the story of kindness is also possible. Maybe it is time, finally, to sit upon the ground and tell some stories about kindness. Maybe it is time to sing its praises.

I'm thinking of kindness because I have been touched by the loving gesture of our beloved Wendy Ann Smith. Monthly, she would step into the pulpit and gently drive home the point that there are people in our community who are suffering, who are hurting, who are hungry. Monthly, she would encourage us to bring donations to the food shelf. She reminded us of the spirit of joyful possibility by living joyfully herself, just to see what happens, despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges of life. So, in her honor, I offer these words by David Wilcox. He sings a song called Kindness...this time, for Wendy.

I love your sense of humor
I love to see you smile
I love your sense of balance
I love your sense of time
I love your music in the morning
[that sounds all through] the night
But it's your kindness that shines so bright

I love your beauty
I love your [gentle] moves
More I love your honesty

You always tell the truth
I love your vision of the future
Your hope that never dies
But it's your kindness that clears my skies

I love your wisdom
Your knowledge of the past
Your willingness to listen
Your taste for what will last
I love your compassion for the suffering
And your solid happiness
But it's your kindness I love best
I love, I love, I love....

Went outside the other day because I had not in too long a while. I'd grown comfortable taking life in voyeuristically from the Zoom screen, from a station apart and like a spectator, tuning into the story of my own life...and not writing it. I needed to get back into the saddle and live life more directly. I realized that. I became aware.

It is a strange thing—slowly or suddenly—to come into an awareness of one's own life—to corner the market of self-conscious awareness, to truly step into oneself. These things are rather strange, aren't they? They are normal too—strange, normal and miraculous.

Went outside because I had not in too long a while and I climbed a slow mountain because it was there. I stepped inside of the poetry of life for a little while, just because I could...and I climbed a slow mountain and it toppled me. Iy toppled me and I fell down.

I started up the mountain. I went as far as I could and then I rested—panting, breathing heavy, surprised at how tired I was...and so very quickly. I'm not in shape, not as strong as I used to be. So, I fell...or rather, a part of me did. My ego fell down. I had to let it. My body needed me more than my boyish pride. I had to streamline. I was climbing the side of a good, slow mountain but it was fighting me, pushing me back down to earth. I was fighting back but losing. The mountain had the advantage. The fix was in. The deck was stacked. Gravity was not on my side and that made me mad, uselessly. All I had on my side was attitude and pretense but neither of these things help you climb a mountain. I needed energy. I needed strength and I didn't have it. All I had were storied about how strong I used to be.

The mountain didn't care about any of that. It just pushed me down...playfully, without even expending any effort. That's what

toppled me. That's what broke me...ego, pride and attitude and all. Once they had fallen away, the mountain asked me to be honest with myself. I was at the limit of my strength. I was tired. I didn't want to be honest with myself. I wanted comfort. I didn't want to listen to the mountain. I didn't want to be honest with myself. I thought, maybe I could lie to myself a little (convincingly, of course). I could persuade myself that I haven't gotten weaker over time, that I am stronger, more physically fit, more in shape than I actually am. I wanted please my ego and its attitude and pretense.

I didn't want to admit the truth and let my tender ego fall away but that's what I did. I just conceded. I told the truth and then, things changed. I took off my hat and I laid it on a frozen ridge-pile by the roadside, the ridge-pile left there by the plow last time it snowed. And I took off my Northface jacket—my technical jacket, as they say. They call it that because it has all of these zippers, vents and pockets...bells and whistles come in handy when you're on an excursion in the Himalayas. I wasn't on an excursion. I didn't need its technicality. Besides, I was burning up so, off it came. Zip, zip, zip. I hung the jacket on the branch of a nearby tree and I felt lighter.

Then, came the difficult work. I had to shed my ego. It wasn't as simple as shedding my hat and jacket but I found a way. It was something that I needed to do. They say that need is the mother of invention and I needed to shed my ego. I was panting. I was breathing heavy. I was surprised by how tired I was...AND I was hot. I was burning up on that warm, late-winter day. I needed to let go of what I was carrying and so, I did. I found a way to do it. I invented that possibility for myself. I left it all by the roadside—my hat, my technical jacket...and my ego. And I went on without them—catching my breath, accepting myself. I wasn't pushing myself to achieve something external anymore. I was being newly kind to myself.

I'm not always kind to myself. I'm outwardly kind but not inwardly. I can be brutal on myself. Do you make this mistake? Inwardly, I rage. I war. I fight within myself, so consumed with my shortcomings. I make great, big trouble of such small things sometimes...when I forget that kindness is also possible.

I went outside because I had not done so in too long a while...and I climbed a slow mountain up into the air, just because I could and it was there. I didn't see the world around me. All I saw was my own rage, my own war, my own fight within myself. I didn't even see the road right

beneath my feet...with its melting snows and mudslide textures squishing step by step. I didn't notice the stream-flow-tickle of the gullies on either side of me, the running water. There was a little beauty there and I didn't see. I was too caught up in myself at the time.

Some people believe that God resides in little, beautiful things. [soup] And maybe we miss out a bit when we are unaware. Alice Walker wrote,

More than anything, God love admiration. [God's not being] vain. Just wanting to share a good thing. I think it [angers God] if you walk by the color purple... ..in a field... ..and you don't notice it.

So, I didn't notice the running water. I was tied up in myself but when my ego fell away, when I finally shed its skin, I was newly aware of life. It wasn't just the snow that was melting away.

I am not always kind to myself and I'm beginning to wonder why that is. I'm hard on myself...and unforgiving but kindness is also possible. But will I choose it? And by kindness, I don't mean niceness, by the way. There's a distinction. As a meditation teacher named Kevin Ellerton points out,

People often use the words "nice" and "kind" interchangeably, assuming that they're "basically the same thing." The truth is, the difference between nice vs kind is night and day. "Nice" is a self-centered behavior pattern, where you are acting in a "pleasing" manner, to "be a nice person," and get people to like you. "Kind" is an other-centered behavior pattern, where you're acting in the best interests of others, out of a sense of love, empathy, and compassion.

I get what he's saying but I don't know. I sense a bit of tension. I think it's good to clarify things. I think that's useful but I think Ellerton goes to far. There are nice folks all around whose behavior can't really be described as "self-centered." And there are kind folk who are not exclusively focused on the needs of others.

I also struggle with the polarity, with the extremity of the opposites. That might sound funny but I think it's true that there are degrees of opposition. Aren't there. I mean, if there weren't degrees of opposition, why would we call some things polar opposites and not others. Our language obscures obvious truths. Few of us, if any, would disagree that the North and South poles are polar opposites. One in on one side of the world and the other is on the opposite side. They could not be more different in this respect but they're both pretty cold. Opposites are not always [...] opposites. Life is weird that way.

Nice behaviors and kind behaviors are not diametrically opposed. Sometimes, they overlap like shingles. Sometimes, they coexist. Most often, they are necessary to each other. They're different, of course—opposites, in a sense—but maybe they are different more like dusk and dawn than night and day. Maybe they are one and the same but facing in opposite directions.

...because they need each other—day needs night and dusk needs dawn. And more immediately, it's more complex. It's obvious when one looks closely. Day needs night but not quite right away. Day needs dusk...and dusk needs night and night needs dawn and dawn needs day. They are born of one another. They depend on one another. They really need each other and so do we.

It's messy. Maybe niceness and kindness are more like different snow-melt, mudslide roads that lead up and down the side of life's slow mountain. Maybe they intersect sometimes and maybe they combine...and other times, maybe they don't. I don't know. I'll have to sit with all of that. Maybe all these ideas will balance out. Maybe, that's what is wisdom, compassionate wisdom. Maybe this is what we mean by lovingkindness...by mindfulness.

What is the meaning of lovingkindness? What is the meaning of mindfulness? These are powerful questions. Defining our inmost experience... Now, there's a mountain to climb! It seems insurmountable to me...although I wouldn't mind spending a lifetime trying. Jon Kabat-Zinn makes a go of it and I think he does a wonderful job. He has been teaching mindfulness and meditation for many years. He explains that...

What mindfulness is has been in dispute for thousands of years. Different traditions speak about it in slightly different ways. I came a long time ago to formulate [a commonsensical definition that was also a bit mysterious].

...something where you couldn't just get it by thinking, [a definition that is] designed to point to something beyond mere cognition.

[He says] mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally.

It sounds simple enough but it's a challenge to live this out. It can be difficult to cultivate intimacy with the here and now. Here and now is messy...and here and now is complex...and here and now is adventuresome, paradoxical, fantastic. Here and now dangerously alive. Exquisite. But we have to slow down in order to see it. We have to be honest with ourselves and let fall away what no longer serves us.

You know, I used to say that I didn't have time enough to meditate...with all of the other things I have got to do. It's hard to take the time to just sit around and do nothing. [Ugh. I remember being in that place. No judgments. I just know that I will not be returning.] No time to meditate. I'll bet that was funny for some of us, funny to those of us who regularly practice. Kabat-Zinn would have laughed at me. I really hope he would have laughed. I hope that he would have gotten right up in my face and smiled and quoted himself, saying, Leon,

You've got nothing but time. The whole question is: How are you going to use the time that you have? The stakes are actually extremely high. They are so high that it's important not to take this whole thing too seriously. We have to approach it with a sense of humor. It's too serious to take seriously...and I'm serious about that.

And then, I hope that he'd smile again his knowing smile, his big and embracing smile—to hold the paradox and confusion of life, to hold the fullness of the truth as beautiful and terrible as it is. When we are witness to the miracle, it is clear enough to see that life is like a mountain that is impossible to climb...and we do it anyway...because we can...and because it's there...and because it's fun. It's fun to love on each other. It's fun to show compassion to those who are suffering. It's really fun to do what some folks believe is impossible in life...for it seemed an insurmountable peak, this mountaintop on which we rest. When we think that it can't be done, when we fear it's bridge too far, when we believe in our heart that no-thing on earth is able to reach across the chasm, kindness is also possible.

We are met with so many stories, writers who do their best to describe the world...in the languages of rage and war and troubled waters. And yet, we reach over all of these with kindness. Homer tried to describe to world in his classic, The Iliad. He wrote,

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of [] Achilles, murderous, doomed, that cost the [Greeks] countless losses, hurling down to the Death House so many sturdy souls... Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed, Agamemnon, lord of men and brilliant Achilles. What drove them to fight with such a fury?

Death and doom and rage were most pressing for Homer but not for us. Not today. For us this day, kindness is also possible.

Williams Shakespeare tried to describe the world in his great work, Julius Caesar. Faithful Marc Antony, standing over the new-fallen body of that great leader, that leader who was slain by senatorial conspiracy. Shakespeare wrote,

Over thy wounds now do I prophesy—
Which, like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips
To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue...
And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry "Havoc!" and let slip the dogs of war,

Secrecy, high-conspired mutiny and war were pressing for Shakespeare but for us. Not today. For us this day, kindness is also possible.

We don't always have to make our great appeal to the classics. Antiquity is not the only source of wisdom. It's not so far away. Wisdom is all around us. We have only to open our hearts and look. Our own hymnal reads,

Seek not afar for beauty, [and here, beauty is also wisdom]
Lo, it glows in dew-wet grasses all about your feet

Beauty-wisdom glow in dew-wet grasses beneath our feet, in snow-melt-running waters along the roadside and in the view from atop the seemingly insurmountable challenges of life.

The stories that we learn are not nearly as powerful as the lives we live, the embodied wisdom. Shakespeare was the poet of his time but that was hundreds of years ago. Homer was the bard of his time but that was thousands of years ago. We have artful wisdom in our time as well—Hurston and Hemmingway, Cather and Collins, Baldwin and Banks, Frost and Laura Foley, Alice Walker and David Wilcox...who gently sings with his guitar...

I love your wisdom and your knowledge of the past
Your willingness to listen and your taste for what will last
I love your compassion for the suffering
And your solid happiness
But it's your kindness
...that I love best

No matter how steep, no matter the size of the mountains we choose to climb, even if they seem insurmountable, no matter the challenge, no matter the cost, may we choose to be beautifully wise. May we recognize and cast off what does not serve us on life's journey—ego, pride, privilege, pretense, impossibility. May we lay down what we no longer need gently by the roadside...where it can melt away in the strengthening sun and be transformed by light...into kindness...into possibility...into that which blesses the world. [kiss the soup]

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.