

Kind or Nice?

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

April 14, 2024

I want to talk today about brave kindness. The power of and need for kindness is real. Kindness brightens people's days and affects lives in ways we may never know.

Kindness knows no boundaries.

A person's earning power, physical prowess, and talent do not determine how kind they are.

We all need kindness, and we all benefit from being kind.

Everyone needs kindness, even those who think they don't, or act as though it doesn't matter. Bravado and arrogance often cover pain and insecurity, both of which can stem from a lack of loving kindness.

It is important that we dispel myths about kindness, myths that can lead people to diminish the power of kindness or to confuse its intentions.

For example, kindness is not weak; it is a demonstration of strength.

Being kind does not mean that we look the other way from wrongdoings or absolve people of responsibility for acts of malice. Kindness is not a free pass or an attitude of "anything goes." Our partners at the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute are kind. They are in no way saying that gun violence is okay.

So too, being kind is not always synonymous with being nice. Sometimes the kindest things we do don't feel nice to others, especially not at first. It may take years for us to realize that what we thought was someone acting in a harsh or uncaring way, was actually and ultimately very kind.

You may be thinking of "tough love" right about now. Let's think more deeply.

Last week I defined kindness as the act of putting ourselves in another's shoes, to try to understand their experience and what they might need or appreciate. This "other" can be a person or people. It can be four-legged or winged creatures. The other can be a field of grass or a drying riverbed.

I want to take this a step further this week and say that *kindness is when we put ourselves in another's shoes and imagine what they need, want, and deserve in order to thrive.*

To be kind is to support another in thriving. Plants need oxygen, soil, and sunlight. People need to be safe, to be warm, and to be fed. People also need to have autonomy and personal agency. They need to be seen and valued for who they are, and they need to belong.

We are being kind when we support or help to ensure those needs are met for others.

Being nice, on the other hand, often has ulterior motives. Examples of such ulterior motives include avoiding conflict, trying to ensure people like us, or choosing to be comfortable over feeling discomfort.

A simple example: It is kind and nice to bring a casserole to a neighbor who just had surgery. It is a loaded gift and not kind, however, when we bring that casserole expecting some kind of accolade; a written thank you note for example, or being repaid for what we did.

Mind you, I am all for thank you notes and for returning a favor. However, when those actions drive us and our own behavior, we aren't being kind. We are being nice. And it can be dangerous. Expectations can be a setup for resentments and are disingenuous. When we are nice to serve our own ego or appease our own insecurity, we are selling the other person and the relationship short, and we are hurting ourselves as well.

We all act this way at times. I am not pointing fingers. Being continually nice without the motives of kindness is exhausting and people will pick up on the difference. I encourage us to be honest with ourselves, to watch our motives, and to find other ways to get our own needs met. Doing for others to quell our fears of being vulnerable or needy won't work; whereas, having safe and loving people with whom we can share those fears will.

If being kind is about helping others thrive, then it is also about empowering them by helping

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them to believe in themselves and take healthy risks. It doesn't always feel good at first to others when we act this way; for example, telling a hard truth, choosing not to enable harmful behavior, or letting someone know that you are concerned about them. Being kind sometimes feels the opposite to the other person. It may be days, months, or even years later before the person appreciates the kindness you gave them.

A woman shares with me that the day her partner said he could not be her therapist was the day the rest of her life began. She says, "What I thought was rejection was the greatest gift he could have given me. It led me to make choices for myself including getting support, developing community, and questioning things I had been taught that were not helpful or true."

Harvard professor, author, and happiness researcher Arthur Brooks describes a similar situation in his own life when his wife was bravely kind to him.

Ever since Brooks was a child, he dreamed of being a world class musician playing the French horn. He was incredibly talented; thus this dream was founded on some reality.

This was true until surprisingly his playing abilities began to decline in his early twenties. This is unusual. There are occasions however when a person's abilities begin to decline at an early age despite their commitment and practice.

Brooks couldn't see his diminishing skills. It was too painful. It took his partner, who loved him dearly and saw what was happening, to be bravely kind and tell him. He said, "She taught me that I was not a French Horn player, I was a person."¹

Clarity is kind. Brooks' wife had that clarity and offered it in kindness. There is an important caveat with this kind of kindness, which is to remember that kindness is compassionate; it is not mean. We can say what we mean without being mean. Saying something with harshness or to "teach someone something" is not kindness.

Another common motivation for being nice that

differs from being kind is looking for acclaim and belonging. Common parlance calls this *people pleasing*. We are "nice" to people because we don't want them to be upset with us or we are trying to ensure that they like us.

When we live according to our values, we will stand up for things that others may disagree with and that includes standing up for people when we see them being mistreated or misrepresented.

Alan Seale recently shared a story with me and members of the Welcoming Committee about a client and friend of his, Jane Marquardt, who had the honor of being a source of emotional support for her stepson Jim when his two adult twin sons transitioned from being male to female.

She writes about this in her blog post entitled "Visible Transitions." Jane describes all that she learned, including the incredible respect she gained for families and people who make these brave choices. Compassion is kindness. Jane was being compassionate and kind.

She writes, "Through my regular lunches with Jim, I have had a front row seat to how a dad copes with such a significant transition." Jim's children's transitions started about three years ago...something Jim and his wife had not anticipated in their roles of raising children to adulthood.

Jane writes about sitting with Jim over frequent lunches during the years these transitions took place. She shared her immense learnings including how essential transitioning is for some trans people, and how ill-prepared most of us are to support loved ones through this process. Jane shared how Jim and his wife just kept showing up for their adult children, supporting them however possible, including going across the country to be of medical assistance during their surgeries and recoveries.

Sometime later, Jim traveled to support one of his daughter's friends as she went through this process and didn't have the support of her biological family. With all that he and his wife had learned, Jim could not bear the thought of this person going through this surgery alone.

Jim brought this young adult a stuffed bunny

1 Reference Sam Harris interview

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after one of her surgeries that she still sleeps with today. Jane writes, "By simply showing her an unexpected act of kindness, he may have very well saved her life. Why? He saw her, he heard her, and in doing so gave her a tangible ray of hope to hang onto."²

My stuffed bunny was a nurse's hand during the birth of my first child. That stranger's hand was strong and confident. It was warm and reassuring and didn't flinch or pull away no matter how hard I squeezed it. She got me through that birth. I never knew her name.

What is your story? Your stuffed bunny or stranger's hand? When was someone kind and brave in their support of you?

Learning to be kind requires people we trust and community. Ideally, we have trusted spiritual advisors, whether professionals, family, or friends. People who can be honest with us and who know their own blind spots too.

None of us will be perfect. That is not the goal. However, the kindness that we offer when we choose to support another so that they will thrive in their lives has untold promise and potential.

May we be kind to ourselves, to others, and to the natural world. May we pause and notice long enough to know what another needs to thrive, and may we help them experience the moon.

Amen.

In a moment we will sing our closing hymn, which is a song of hope written by UU songwriter Sarah Dan. Sarah wrote this song just after 9-11. She said, "I was so filled with despair, and I needed to channel that into some hope. The song has since taken on a life of its own. It was sung at a student vigil after the Virginia Tech shootings. It has been sung at rallies...camps, General Assembly and by youth groups.

2 Jane Marquardt, "Visible Transitions," *Really, Jane's Substack*, March 26, 2024. https://jane-marquardt.substack.com/p/visible-transitions?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=2228354&post_id=142969917&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=4z7u1&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email

Folks tell me they use it to 'sing' their kids to sleep...in meditation and in hospice choirs. It has even been used by a couple who had just bought two pigmy goats. The goats were unsettled driving to their new home in the car, so the couple began to sing this song. The goats immediately calmed down." Sarah says that's why she can legitimately say that this song is *multi-species*.³

I'll invite you to remain seated as we sing this through a few times. Use it as a meditation, an affirmation, a message of hope for yourself and the world.

Please turn now to Hymn #1009, "Meditation on Breathing," in the teal hymnal.

3 Kimberley Debus, "STJ #1009, Meditation on Breathing," *Notes From the Far Fringe*, November 27, 2017. <https://farfringe.com/2017/11/27/stj1009-meditation-on-breathing/>