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The Temperature of Kindness

with thanks to Piero Ferruci

Two weeks ago yesterday, Lizzy Mun, a junior at Concord Academy, spent the night at a Valentines' party and sleepover with classmates. Early Sunday morning, she walked out of the house, wearing shorts. When her friends realized she was gone, they went out to find her, to no avail. They called the police, who responded with dogs and a helicopter. A few hours later, her body was pulled from a frozen pond.

Because Kem and I live at Concord Academy, where Kem teaches, we were at the epicenter of the grief as the news broke. I headed for the counseling center, to make myself useful. The boys, for the most part, came in and headed right into the gym downstairs, where they worked out to deafening music, not even bothering to change from street clothes. With only a few exceptions, the rest of them gathered in front of a movie, eating slice after slice of pizza. They did not want to talk. The girls, on the other hand, were disconsolate. They gathered in big piles, keening and sobbing, sitting close together or lying with their heads in each others' laps. They talked and cried and talked.

It was obvious that the girls were both literally and figuratively leaning on each other, even as they learned to grieve and to comfort one another. And if you looked closely, you could see that, in their own subtle way, the boys were also comforting each other. Their shared workout, even without words, was companionable. Their shared movie and shared food, even with minimal conversation – and certainly nothing referencing their dead classmate – was mutually supportive.

The common ground was that no one wanted to be alone. It was just too much to bear alone. The untimely death cut a deep wound in the student body, shocking them with the full catastrophe of the fragility of life. It was hard to fathom the redemption in their suffering, but I was lifted up when, even at their darkest hour, with every reason to lash out at life, the students responded with warmth and kindness toward one another, and affirmed the preciousness of their lives, and their life together. Life trumps death. Love is winner take all.

In his book, *The Power of Kindness*, Piero Ferrucci writes, “How do you imagine hell? Smoke, fire, glowing pitchforks...? We have ... been told it was a hot place. Even a rationalist like Voltaire, when on his deathbed and seeing that a curtain had fallen into the fireplace and caught fire, exclaimed, with a mixture of irony and despair, '*Déjà les flammes!* – Already the flames!’

“But are we really sure?” Piero Ferrucci asks. “Dante's *Inferno* describes the lowest, most terrible point in hell as a silent, *icy* place. The [damned souls of the] traitors, stained with the most evil of sins, ... are incapable of emotion, and think nothing of betraying family, ... friends ... country. Hell is the total absence of all feeling. It is the negation of warmth....

“For Dante, warmth is the potential for all emotion, and therefore makes life itself possible. Warmth for him is also the prerequisite for transformation. As usual, a poet understood what scientists and researchers discovered centuries later. We cannot live without the warmth and closeness of others.... Physical warmth ... is not a luxury, but a necessary condition for life. If babies do not get it, they die, and if they do not get enough of it, they do not thrive....”

Piero Ferrucci concludes, “Like babies, we adults also need warmth – psychological warmth. Physical, too.... But, mostly, we need someone to talk to, someone who knows and appreciates us. Someone who cares about us. Warmth, then, become a metaphor. It is no longer just a biological necessity. It is a quality we see in someone's eyes, hear in [their] voice, sense in the way [they greet] us. It is at the very heart of kindness.”¹

The temperature of kindness is warm.

We have been deluded into believing that warmth is a commodity that can be bought. “On a huge orange billboard ... is a gorgeous bowl of steaming vegetable soup, and underneath are the words, *That's amore*. [This]... is a multinational frozen-foods ad....” Are you feeling warm inside? “Warmth is included in the price: *that's amore*.”²

I don't think so. I want to talk about the temperature of kindness – kindness, which shares a Middle English root with the word *kin*, as in *kindred* – kindness, not virtual kindness, not reheated kindness, but kindness that is, by its very nature, warm.

1 Piero Ferrucci, *The Power of Kindness*, p. 24

2 *ibid*, p. 24

Nowadays, more than half of Unitarian Universalist ministers are women; in the mid-1980s, we were still quite scarce. My ministry began in a district in which there were only four women in pulpits.

I showed up at my first ministers' retreat, with no clue about what to expect. As I was signing in, the registrar looked up at me and asked, "Who's your roommate?" I didn't have a roommate. In fact, I didn't know anyone. I ascribe no malice to that question, although it was certainly no way to welcome a newcomer. Suddenly, I felt very alone. I was the only openly gay person. And in those days of guilt by association, no one would want to be my roommate.

Just then, a colleague, came through the door, and extended her hand in welcome. "Do you want to be roommates?" she asked. I was flooded with a sense of relief.

That evening, back in our room, she shared with me her grief at the recent death of an elderly family member, and all that had followed from that loss. I listened long into the night. Whatever combination of pity, bravery, and defiance had led her to risk extending herself to me dissolved in the unforgettable warmth of mutual kindness. We are friends to this day.

I want to thank our own Professor Alan Helms for directing me to author Henry James' instructions to his nephew, Billy, his psychologist and philosopher brother William's son. There are, said Henry James, three most important things in life. They are, he said, "To be kind, and then to be kind, and then to be kind."³

The temperature of kindness is warm.

"The benefits of warmth, if we include touching and talking, are enormous. [Anthropologist] Ashley Montagu, in his classic book, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*, ... demonstrated how touching boosts the health of all mammals....

"Another classic study, conducted in forty-nine cultures by neurophysiologist James W. Prescott, shows that, in societies where physical affection is lavished on infants, invidious⁴ displays of wealth; incidence of theft; [and torturing and killing] of

3 Miranda Seymour, *A Ring of Conspirators: Henry James and His Literary Circle, 1895-1915*, reviewed by Helen Bevington in *The New York Times*, 7/16/89

4 See dictionary.com: 1. calculated to create ill will or resentment or give offense; hateful: invidious remarks; 2. offensively
or unfairly discriminating; injurious: invidious comparisons; 3. causing or tending to cause animosity,

enemies are all low. In societies where infant physical affection is low, instead, slavery is present; the status of women is inferior; and the gods are depicted as aggressive. [James W.] Prescott sees warmth during infancy, and openness to bodily pleasure, as the best and easiest way to transform our psychobiology of violence into one of peace.”⁵

During the height of the AIDS crisis in Provincetown, I often rode in the hearse, with a shotgun seat's view of the townspeople's response to a body being transported to the graveyard. Invariably, as we passed by, the elderly Portuguese gentlemen would take off their hats, and bow their heads. This sign of respect was transmitted to the next generation, and everyone would stop and face the street as a sign of honor and sympathy. I'm not sure it even registered with the bereaved family members, but it helped me more than I can say, the sense that others understood, and, in their simple, compassionate gesture, were helping me to bear the grief.

When I moved to the city, one of my first graveside services was at Mt. Auburn cemetery in Cambridge. It was mid-afternoon, but there was a lot of traffic, and people were irritated at having to wait for the funeral cortege to pass. At one intersection, the light turned green, but not everyone had made it through, and so the car in front remained stopped to allow us to pass. Despite the fact that everyone had one of those little funeral home flags on the hood of their car, and their headlights on, someone in the stopped line began honking in impatient irritation. I was painfully aware of the family members riding in cars toward the back of the line, and hoped they weren't even taking it in. I took it in, and it was painful. The difference – small town, big city – was jarring. Now if I am out running or walking and a funeral passes by, I stop, face the mourners, and bow my head until they pass. Maybe someone will feel a little comfort. Maybe, just maybe, a young, lonely minister is riding shotgun.⁶

I want to close with an excerpt from one of my very favorite stories, written by Dr. Richard Selzer in his book, *Mortal Lessons*.

“On the bulletin board in the front hall of the hospital where I work,” Dr. Selzer begins, “there appeared an announcement. 'Yeshi Dhonden,' it read, 'will make rounds at six o'clock on the morning of June 10.... Yeshi Dhonden is Personal Physician to the Dalai Lama.' I am not so leathery a skeptic that I would knowingly ignore an emissary from the gods. Not only might such sangfroid be inimical to one's earthly well-being, it

resentment, or envy:
an invidious honor.

⁵ *op cit*, p. 27

⁶ Thanks to Paolo Ferrucci for reminding me.

could take care of eternity, as well.

“Thus, on the morning of June 10, I join the clutch of whitecoats waiting ... for ... rounds. The air in the room is heavy with ill-concealed dubiety and suspicion of bamboozlement. At precisely six o'clock, he materializes, a short, golden, ... man, dressed in a sleeveless robe of saffron and maroon....

“He bows in greeting while his young interpreter makes the introduction. Yeshi Dhonden, we are told, will examine a patient ... [whose] diagnosis is unknown to [him,] as it is to us.... We are further informed that, for the past two hours, Yeshi Dhonden has purified himself by fasting, bathing, and prayer. I, having breakfasted well, performed only the most desultory of ablutions, and given no thought at all to my soul, glance furtively at my fellows. Suddenly, we seem a soiled, uncouth lot.

“The patient had been awakened early and told that she ... [will] be examined by a foreign doctor, ... so when we enter her room, [she] shows no surprise.... Yeshi Dhonden steps to the bedside while the rest stand apart, watching. For a long time, he gazes at the woman, favoring no part of her body with his eyes, but seeming to fix his glance at a place just above her supine form. I, too, study her. No physical sign or obvious symptom gives a clue to the nature of her disease.

“At last, he takes her hand, raising it in both of his own. Now he bends over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down into the collar of his robe. His eyes are closed as he feels for her pulse. In a moment he has found the spot, and for the next half-hour he remains thus, suspended like some exotic golden bird with folded wings, holding the pulse of the woman beneath his fingers, cradling her hand in his.... It is palpation of the pulse raised to the state of ritual.... After a moment, the woman rests back upon her pillow. From time to time, she raises her head to look at the strange figure above her, then sinks back once more. I cannot see their hands joined in a correspondence that is exclusive, intimate, his fingertips receiving the voice of her sick body through the rhythm and throb she offers at her wrist.

“All at once, I am envious – not of him, not of Yeshi Dhonden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I want to be held like that, touched so, received. And I know that I, who have palpated a hundred thousand pulses, have felt not a single one.

“At last, Yeshi Dhonden straightens, gently places the woman's hand upon the bed, and steps back.... [He] turns to leave. All this while, he has not uttered a single word.

“As he nears the door, the woman raises her head and calls out to him in a voice at once urgent and serene. 'Thank you, doctor,' she says, and touches with her other hand the place he had held on her wrist, as though to recapture something that had visited there. Yeshi Dhonden turns back for a moment to gaze at her, then steps into the corridor. Rounds are at an end.

“We are seated ... in the conference room. Yeshi Dhonden speaks now for the first time, in soft Tibetan sounds that I have never heard before. He has barely begun when the young interpreter begins to translate, the two voices continuing in tandem – a bilingual fugue, the one chasing the other. It is like the chanting of monks. He speak of winds coursing thorough the body of the woman, currents that break against barriers, eddying. These vortices are in her blood, he says. The last spendings of an imperfect heart. Between the chambers of the heart, long, long before she was born, a wind had come and blown open a deep gate that must never be opened. Through it charge the full waters of her river, as the mountain stream cascades in the springtime, battering, knocking loose the land, and flooding her breath. Thus he speaks, and now is silent.

“May we ... have the diagnosis?’ a professor asks.

“The host of ... [the] rounds answers. 'Congenital heart disease. Interventricular septal defect, with resultant heart failure.'”

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Dr. Richard Selzer concludes, “Now and then it happens, as I make my own rounds, that I hear the sounds of his voice, like an ancient Buddhist prayer, its meaning long since forgotten, only the music remaining. Then a jubilation possesses me, and I feel myself touched by something divine.”⁷

My spiritual companions, may we be so touched, so held, and so transform violence into peace. May we touch and hold one another – physically, emotionally, spiritually – and may we extend our open hands – open minds, open hearts, open hands – to the world. The temperature of kindness is warm. Love is winner take all.

7 Dr. Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*

