

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 30 March, 2008

Kindness

with thanks to Dean Sluyter, who tells a good story, worth repeating

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “Life’s persistent and most urgent question is, *What are you doing for others?*”

It’s a great question, once we learn that life is a lot sweeter when lived with an open mind, open heart, and open hands. It’s an obvious question, once we embrace the seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism, our covenant “to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part,” and really “get” the idea that “our every breath exchanges molecules with species [of which] we’ve never heard.”¹

But how do we engage that persistent and urgent question: *What are you doing for others?* George Leger, as some of you know, began with being so deeply moved by an article in the *Globe* magazine, he took a leap of faith into the streets of Guatemala and never looked back. That was some kind of Superman leap, George! For the rest of us mere mortals, the opportunity to be generous with our lives is actually just lying around, waiting for us to leap. We can choose to start small, and work up; or just stay small, and keep our gestures of kindness local. As George will attest, who knows when they – and we – might go global?

I say it starts with *Good morning*, extending ourselves beyond our own boundaries with a greeting to our sister and fellow earthlings. I never cease to be amazed by the power of little things.

One morning before sunrise this winter, Kem lost a glove out on a run. I went out after it was light and there it was, up on a bench where I couldn’t miss it. Someone had had to spot it, bend over, retrieve it, and put it there. How long did that take? That moment’s gesture cheered me up and on all day.

¹ Dean Sluyter, *The Zen Commandments*, p. 28

We can learn this from each other: paying forward acts of kindness. I've come back late to parking meters, only to find that someone's dropped in a coin for me, buying me time and saving me a ticket. Now it's over to me and a handful of quarters.

And a few times this winter, people cleared my car of snow. I love having no idea who it was! It made my neighborhood feel suddenly close and friendly. How could I help but allow a little extra time after the storms that followed, time to contribute to the kindness conspiracy?

Recently, while a friend and his 9-year-old daughter were in the grocery store, an elderly gentleman ploughed into their empty car and three others when he became confused trying to exit the parking lot. It was a freezing day, and everyone had to stand around waiting for the police to show up and take the report; our friend sent his daughter back into the store to buy him a hot coffee.

When his wife – also a close friend – arrived on the scene, she was furious ... not at the accident, but at her husband, who had failed to buy coffee for the other people and, especially, for the old man, who was distraught.

Educator Dean Sluyter writes, “[Whether or not] there's some kind of divine Santa Claus waiting in the wings, ... there's certainly plenty of need for all of us to be Santa's little helpers. It would be very nice to love everyone, and perhaps someday we will. But the great heroism ... we can practice right now is to be kind even to those we do not love.”²

“The word *selfless* can mean either altruistic or enlightened; eventually, they're the same thing.”³ Most of us are somewhere on a continuum, somewhere between altruistic and completely awake; our friend has a standard of kindness to which many of us only aspire. Buying coffee for the person who's just wrecked your car may seem far-fetched, but, as she said, “It's not like he did it on purpose!”

I'll return to the question of intention in a moment; for now, for those of us having trouble imagining how to begin, here's a wonderful meditation from Dean Sluyter: “... Sit down and think about all the people who have shown you kindness in your life – the ... teacher who took the time to

² op cit, p. 40

³ ibid, p. 31

encourage you, the friend who was there to talk you through a crisis or trauma – and imagine what your life would have been like without all those kind acts.”⁴ Then tuck yourself into the equation, and get busy!

But beware! I love the story of a young seeker in Nepal, who began having “intensely blissful meditative experiences, and thought they must indicate some kind of momentous spiritual progress.” When he proudly described them to his old Tibetan teacher, the lama cut him off with a single question: “Have they increased your compassion for all beings?” If not, “they don’t mean a thing.”⁵

So about intention: Sometimes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and no good deed goes unpunished. That’s just how it is, and the alternative – bad intentions, or some kind of aimless wandering – is worse. “If we could just refrain from unkindness, that would be a lot.”⁶ Buddhist teachings lean into this with a passion, saying that only if we intend wrongdoing, commit the wrongful act, and take satisfaction in it will our bad karma go nuclear. The alternative is to cultivate a pure heart.

Obviously, a pure heart is a beautiful thing ... beautiful, and rare by the time we reach adulthood. The world can be hard on the pure heart of childhood; part of the spiritual journey is growing back into a pure heart. And how do we do that? Hamlet said,

Assume a virtue, if you have it not....
For use almost can change the stamp of nature.⁷

Maybe it seems that only babies and saints have pure hearts. But we don’t get off the hook that easily! To think that saints are somehow different from you and me is completely un-Unitarian Universalist! “Saints,” writes Dean Sluyter, are “ordinary people who point themselves in the direction of goodness, and keep putting one foot in front of the other, till it takes them all the way. If [we’ve] made the commitment to keep going, it almost doesn’t matter how far [we’ve] gotten; the outcome is assured.”⁸

He tells a great story about his pilgrim’s progress: “I used to have an upstairs neighbor,” he writes, “an old, overweight, ex-boxer with bad knees,

⁴ *ibid*, p. 30

⁵ *ibid*, pp. 30-31

⁶ *ibid*, p. 40

⁷ William Shakespeare

⁸ Sluyter, *op cit*, p. 32

who worked as a janitor. [Big] Fred would generally come home with his groceries, a couple of six-packs, and a stack of lottery tickets while I was in the middle of my evening meditation. Through my door, I would hear his labored breathing and the clanking of his beer bottles as he struggled up the stairs.

“At first, I tried to ignore it. Then, as the contradiction got more embarrassing, came annoyance – I would jump up and help him, but resent the fact that, once again, my practice had been interrupted. Because I’m a slow learner,” he concludes, “it took a few weeks before I realized, This *is* the practice. If I have to sit cross-legged on a cushion to experience boundlessness, that’s a boundary. Hauling beer up the stairs is the meditation, and Big Fred is the teacher.”⁹

My spiritual companions, who but “we are the agency through which the kingdom comes, [as it were,] on earth as it is in heaven? [Who but] we are the ones who [will] transform the world, starting with ourselves?”¹⁰ This is our calling, and the good work of growing a soul: “Someone once asked author Aldous Huxley what he had learned from all his years of studying ... philosophy and religion. He answered, “Try to be a bit nicer to people.””¹¹

Let’s try, and let’s keep trying.

⁹ *ibid*, p. 42

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 40

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 42