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ONLY KINDNESS

Did you know that there's a difference between kindness and being "nice"? All religions teach kindness; what are they really saying?

When the song I just played for you first came out, I was MUCH younger than I am today and I had different ideas. My reactions to the words when I first began considering offering it had shifted considerably from my reactions 18 years ago. Noticing those changes in me became part of the sermon planning process.

For example, 18 years ago, it would never have occurred to me to tell the world that we're all okay! I thought that "faith" had something to do with "belief" and I was uncomfortable with that idea. But I think the biggest change is what I notice about the lines about the singer's hands. When I first heard Jewel sing "my hands are not yours, they are my own", I thought--**good for her**, she's standing up for herself against people who want to claim some part of her as their own. Now, I feel that that reaction, though fine for a younger me, was a little defensive. Now I hear the line as Jewel claiming **responsibility** for what her hands do. She says, in essence, that whatever other hands do, she is responsible for what her hands do.

You can go to YouTube and watch the video associated with the song. In it, Jewel is driving at night and comes upon the scene of a neighborhood reeling from some natural disaster, possibly an earthquake. Gradually, she begins to help sort through the rubble to find survivors; a woman discovers her husband, alive and well though buried under a collapsed house, then two men break down a wall to find survivors and Jewel herself discovers 3 young children, one still clutching a teddy bear.

It takes Jewel some time to put aside her bystander status and begin to help. There is a quality of uncertainty in the way she moves through the scene that gradually disappears as she becomes more involved in the rescue

community. Her demeanor, even taking into account the demands of a music video, reflects her character's journey into kindness.

When I began reading and reflecting on the nature of kindness, I noticed that kindness is frequently used interchangeably with the word "niceness". Sometimes, it is made clear in a text that the author DOES NOT think they're the same thing, so I thought it would be worth my while to explore this idea. Is there a distinction to be made? If so, is it important for us to understand this distinction?

I used a research tool that I've grown fond of: I entered the words "nice" vs "kind" into my computer's search engine and found that there are about 176,000,000 articles on the subject! I restricted myself to the top 45 websites and at that, disregarded those that clearly had something to sell or that I found otherwise not credible. Most of what I found can be boiled down to 2 distinctions: nice behavior is ultimately focused on self and is rooted in fear and kind behavior is focused on the other and is rooted in love.

Humans have survived as long as we have, evolutionarily speaking, partly because we can recognize a threat and respond appropriately. Way back in time, when you perceived someone more powerful than you, it seemed most prudent to change your behavior in relation to that person. Until you knew for certain that you weren't going to be killed or eaten or beat up, it made sense to ingratiate yourself and stay on that powerful someone's good side. It's less common nowadays for us to fear being killed or eaten, but we still fear rejection, shunning, disapproval, outbursts of anger and the like. Think back over the last month: how many of you have changed your behavior because

you didn't want someone to yell at you or express their disapproval of something you did? That's the fear part.

Nice behavior is prompted by the desire to benefit one's self. It is the need or desire to avoid an undesirable thing or behavior or get a desirable thing or behavior. There is awareness of the other, but positive regard is not the first thought on the nice person's mind.

Kindness, on the other hand, is motivated by love of the other. We need to step back a little and talk about the love that leads to kindness. The love I mean today is what Buddhists call *metta*. *Metta* is often called "lovingkindness", or benevolence, or good will. Some people think of it as compassion, but there is another word, "*karuna*" that comes closer. *Metta* is a general positive regard that seeks the welfare of others without any expectation of the other to reciprocate.

Just because the focus of kindness is on the wellbeing of another doesn't mean that it always feels good. That focus can mean a time of "tough love" or risking the negative emotions of the other so that in the longer run, something can be better. The person offering kindness may not be appreciated in the short term. But as a person offering kindness is motivated by love rather than by fear, this possibility is less consequential than it would be to a person offering niceness.

It is possible to have a genuine desire to benefit the other and not know how to do it. Italian psychiatrist Piero Ferrucci recalls holding a fine 18th century violin in his hands and sensing the excellence of its making. He felt the instrument resonating with passing traffic, vibrating with sounds in the

room.¹ Part of the reason that great violinists today still seek out those old instruments is their property of vibrationally interacting with their surroundings. It is considered desirable to have a sensitive instrument; cheaper instruments too often are simply inert hunks of wood. Instruments made by today's good craftspeople play with accuracy and precise tuning, but there is something extraordinary about these fine old instruments, like Stradivarius or Guernari. Ferrucci compares this characteristic of old violins with the empathic resonance needed to understand others and be genuinely helpful.

The development of empathy is critical to the success of any relationship, but it has a dark side. It is easy to empathize with a happy person, but empathizing with someone in pain may bring a person face to face with their own pain. The person may hide it with a big smile-“It's nothing” or they may be proud of it-“my headache is worse than yours”, they may love going over all the details of their suffering, they may play the victim, blame God, blame their parents, blame someone else, etc. All of these are ways to avoid facing suffering. When people haven't genuinely come to terms with their own pain, empathy may be impossibly difficult. Ferrucci notes that empathy is absolutely necessary to truly be kind. Like the fine old violin, with its resonance, we must allow ourselves to feel other's joy, AND their pain or our capacity to be fully human and kind, may never be completely developed. We must risk feeling other's and probably our own pain or accept being limited emotionally.

¹ Ferrucci, Piero. The Power of Kindness. Penguin Press: New York. 2006. P 81.

The Dalai Lama says that it is only natural that we don't like suffering, but that the patience to endure it without being undone can be developed. He says "there is nothing that does not get easier with practice".²

Ferrucci uses the example of the mythological figure of Chiron to illustrate how personal pain can be dealt with to allow for the development of empathy to others' pain. Chiron's father was Cronos, the king of the gods. Cronos had changed himself into a horse and raped a human woman and from this crime was born Chiron, half horse and half human. As Chiron was a reminder of her rape, his mother rejected him at birth. So Chiron's existence was the direct result of a crime and then he experienced his mother's rejection, making this story doubly tragic.

As Ferrucci tells it, Chiron's first fame-coming in the arts of medicine, was his attempt to deny the baseness and ignominy of his conception. Chiron became well known for many of the finer, more intelligent aspects of humanity, all, Ferrucci notes, a means of pushing down his past. Members of the royalty and nobility sought him out to teach their children.

The situation became challenging for Chiron when he was accidentally wounded in the knee with a poison arrow. Being half god, he could not die and so had to suffer for eternity. It is during this period that he acquired the reputation as the "wounded healer" for his work with the suffering poor.

² Gyatso, Tenzin. *Enduring the Fires, from Anger to Patience*. *Tricycle Journal*, Winter 1992. <http://www.tricycle.com/dharma-talk/enduring-the-fires-from-anger-to-patience>

According to Ferrucci, Chiron was ashamed of the wound to the “animal” part of himself and he could no longer work with kings and nobles. The original wound, the circumstances of his birth and the secondary wound, the poison arrow, were both resolved when he surrendered his immortality by renouncing his god half and was able to die. He had to “let go” of the side of himself that had allowed him to interact with royalty. A consequence of this decision was his death, but that isn’t the part that most needs highlighting. The most important part is that he accepts his suffering and the more vulnerable, human part of himself that feels pain.³ He no longer tries to deny it.

Less dramatic, but still effective ways of increasing empathy come through involvement with the arts and other disciplines that stimulate the imagination. The capacity to imagine yourself in someone else’s shoes is critical to the development of empathy, but the ability to tolerate the pain brought up by such empathy may well still be a matter of “letting go” of some critical part of identity. In Chiron’s case, it was the letting go of his identification with nobility that was necessary; it may be different for other people.

I think kindness is terribly misunderstood in our denomination. None of the 7 principles use the word “kindness”. None of the hymn categories in either hymnal contain the word “kindness”. It is to this church’s credit that our covenant emphasizes kindness as a value, and I hope that we can continue

³ Ferrucci, Piero. The Power of Kindness. Penguin Press: New York. 2006. Pp 87-88.

to use it in the way I have described today, with its focus on the other and with love rather than fear as its foundation.

In meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg's book "Lovingkindness, the Revolutionary Art of Happiness" she talks about how we bring many difficulties upon ourselves with our ideas of separateness. In the chapter "Breaking Open the Loving Heart", she talks about how to overcome that illusion. She begins, as you might expect from a meditation teacher, with a meditation. She suggests practicing the classic Buddhist *metta* meditation, which begins by extending friendship, caring and kindness to yourself. Then you extend the same to others. You begin with people to whom it is easy to send well wishes, but ultimately you must include even people you find difficult in your boundless outpouring of benevolence.⁴

We sang a version of this meditation as our meditation hymn. "May I be filled with loving kindness, may I be well. May I be peaceful and at ease, may I be whole. May you be filled with loving kindness, may you be well. May you be peaceful and at ease. May you be whole. May we be filled with loving kindness, may we be well. May we be peaceful and at ease, may we be whole."

And as the singer Jewel in the music video I mentioned at the outset of this sermon increases in her capacity to reach out in love, we too can do likewise. The Dalai Lama has given us our marching orders when he says both that his religion is kindness and that we can increase our ability to be kind through practice.

⁴ Salzberg, Sharon. Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness. Shambala Press: Boston. 1995. Pp 98-99.

May it be so.

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