

A REVOLUTION IN KINDNESS
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Reading: Galatians 5: 22-23 (NRSV)

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”

The Metta Sutta – The Buddha’s Words on Kindness

**This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:
Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech.
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied.
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Nor proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.
Wishing: in gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born,
May all beings be at ease!**

The world has certainly gotten itself into a terrible mess! Financial markets are still reeling. Violence flares in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United Nations warns that the humanitarian aid efforts in Darfur are on the

brink of collapse, due to the continuing threat of the Janjaweed. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved the Doomsday clock two minutes forward to 11:55. Midnight is the metaphor for widespread nuclear conflict or the collapse of the entire biosphere. The scientists moved the clock forward for two primary reasons: (1) the standoff with Iran and North Korea on the questions of nuclear weapons; and (2) the rapid degradation of the earth's ecosystem due to global warming and our failure to respond to that degradation with determination and speed. Greed and violence corrupt every aspect of our lives, including commerce, politics, and entertainment.

St. Paul described these degradations as “works of the flesh,” including, “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and things like these.” (Gal. 5: 19-21.) At the international and personal level we are surrounded by degradation. I am reminded of the joke that is going around about the parable of the Prodigal Son. You know the story. The youngest son took his share of his father's inheritance and spent on wine, women, and song. The rest of it he just squandered away. The seven deadly sins are alive and well in the 21st century. In the words of 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich:

“It is not an exaggeration to say that today man experiences in his present situation in terms of disruption,

conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair in all realms of life. This experience is expressed in the arts and in literature, conceptualized in existential philosophy, actualized in political cleavages of all kinds, and analyzed in the unconscious.”¹

We human beings are deeply estranged from our selves, our neighbors, and our planet.

The question is whether there is another way of being. Is there a genuine alternative to lives of greed, fear, and violence? Does religion offer a new way of being? Tillich asked if there is anyone in whom this new being is manifest. He concluded that Jesus Christ was one who manifested this new being. St. Paul asserted that those whose lives are rooted in and directed by the Spirit of God manifest the qualities of a new being. These are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness and self-control. We would gladly include Gandhi and the Buddha as examples outside the Christian tradition. The Dalai Lama said, “My religion is simple. My religion is kindness.” And I think from what I know of the Dalai Lama, we would happily include him in the company of gentle spirits.

Kindness, like all of the virtues of Paul’s list, speaks to the general character of a person. Now are not just talking about right behavior or ethics. We are speaking beyond the minimum of moral law. We are

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), I, p. 49.

engaged in the temperament and quality of our relationships with others. We are reaching beyond common courtesy. We are digging deep into the loam of genuine concern for another person's well being.

You see, the word "kind" is from the root "gen," as in generate and genesis. You know what I am talking about – birth and family relations. We speak about our kith and kin. Negatively, consider Hamlet's bitter play on words when he calls his famous uncle, "a little more than kin, and less than kind."² Kindness is more than a gesture of charity. Kindness speaks to the timbre of our relationship with other members of the human family. Kindness resonates through our entire mutual relationships – or not!

Jack Doueck wrote about Rabbi Yehezkel Landau in "The Chesed Boomerang". One day Rabbi Landau was walking in the streets of Prague and he came upon a ten year old non-Jewish boy sitting on the street crying. Rabbi Landau asked the boy what was wrong. The boy told him that he father was a baker. Everyday the boy would sell rolls and give the money to his stepmother. On this day he had been mugged. His money and remaining rolls were stolen. Now his family would have nothing to eat. He was afraid to face his stepmother with the truth.

² Robert Claiborne, *The Roots of English* (Time Books: New York, 1989), p. 105.

Without batting an eyelash, Rabbi Landau reached into his pocket and gave the money the boy would have earned. The boy sat there astonished.

Eight years later, Rabbi Landau answered a knock at his door. A tall young man stood at the door. He said, "I know that your Passover holiday ends on Monday. The non-Jewish bakers in this town have decided that they are going to pay the Jews back for killing Jesus. So, they are going to poison the bread. I am sworn to secrecy. So Rabbi, please don't let your people eat the bread. Do not let anyone know why or the bakers will kill me."

Rabbi Landau looked at the young man incredulously. "Why? Why did you tell me?"

The young man replied, "Do you remember a little boy who sat on the street crying about eight years ago? Do you remember how you helped him? Well, I do. That little boy was me and I'll never forget you. You Jews are compassionate and good. I know that. This is my way of saying, 'Thank you!'"

Rabbi Landau issued a decree that there was a mistake in the calendar and the Jews must celebrate another day of Passover and not eat bread yet.

The Prague bakers lost money. They wouldn't sell the poisoned bread to anybody else. They complained to the local authorities that Rabbi Landau

had caused them monetary loss. An investigation ensued and the poisoned bread was discovered.³

Small acts of kindness can lead to acts of compassion that can save lives. There was no law compelling Rabbi Landau to give the child money to cover his losses. It was his heart that compelled him to feel the boy's fear and put money in his hands. He saw in the child not a goy but a frightened child. The child's religion was not the issue. Rabbi Landau embraced the boy's plight as if the child was his own, as if he was kin. It brings to my mind a verse from Alexander Pope's "The Universal Prayer."

Teach me to feel another's Woe;
To hide the Fault I see;
That Mercy I to others show,
That Mercy show to me.

Teach me to feel another's woe is the prayer of every kind heart. To such a heart has mercy been shown. This is the kind heart whose head has rested on the breast of Love, held warm and snug in the arms of song and story. The kind heart has known the healing hand of mother and father whose band-aids dressed skinned knees and broken dreams. The kind heart knows the kiss of blessing and forgiveness. The kind heart has tasted warm soup on cold days and the salty tears of failure shed by our mothers on our

³ Jack Doueck, "The Chesed Boomerang," at www.judaicapress.com. Reprinted in A Tradition of Kindness at <http://www.traditionofkindness.org/heroes-landau.php>. Downloaded 1/18/2007.

behalf. The kind heart is the one welcomed home when we have strayed long and far. You know the words, “You must be hungry. Come on in, sit down and let me get you something to eat.”

Kindness is not a commandment. It is not something one can order. Kindness is not something you ought to do because you joined a church. Kindness is the disposition of a soul that has known kindness. Kindness emerges out of the community of mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters that nurtures and loves people – you know the kind of community that sees you as kin, not members, clients, patients, or pledge units.

I submit to you that kindness is a revolution in a world dominated by consumerism, materialism, market shares, and militant nationalism. Gently and warmly kindness brings down the barricades of hatred. Kindness melts away the fortress of fear. Only by kindness are the boils of anger lanced. Only by kindness is the fever of revenge cooled.

Kindness is a new way of being in a world that so often can only be described as broken and wounded. I believe it would be a revolution if Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus practiced kindness first and foremost with each other. Image what a difference kindness would make between Sunni and Shiite in Iraq. Image a world where we treated one another as kin rather than illegitimate bastards. I tell you that would be a

revolution! In fact, I would say that there is no legitimate religion that is not a soul force of kindness, whose every member is not an agent of kindness.

William Wordsworth wrote:

That best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered
Acts of kindness and of love.

Would that religions everywhere – churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples – priests, imams, rabbis, and ministers – be that kindness that will heal the world. Before scriptures, rites, and dogmatics let kindness be the heart of our faith. May every sect that divides and damns those who are different melt before the fire of kindness.

Indeed, during this season of financial crises and violence everywhere, I am reminded of Jesus' words, "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines." (Mark 13: 7-8) It is my prayer that surrounded as we are by such catastrophe our faith may kindle kindness in every person we meet, every circumstance we encounter. That would be a real revolution of faith.

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