

## Kindness

### (Everyday Spirituality, Part 5)

Rev. Roger Jones  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento  
Budget Stewardship Drive Kickoff Sunday,  
February 9, 2013

Hymns: #126, *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*; handout of *If I Had a Hammer*; #299, *Make Channels for the Streams of Love*.  
Ross Hammond, guitar accompaniment.

Special Music: *Man on Fire* by Edward Sharpe (Sonia & Erik Baily). *Consider Yourself* by the UUSS Choir for Rev. Roger's calling as minister.

### Sermon

In what ways have I been kind today?  
In what ways have I shown the gift of presence?  
In what ways have I shown patience?  
In what ways have I been generous?

When was I not as kind as I aspire to be?  
For what can I forgive myself today?  
For what can I forgive another person?

In the day to come, may I practice kindness.  
May I be grateful for the kindness of others.

These questions came to me this week as a way to conclude a day in spiritual reflection on kindness.

As an expression of spirituality, kindness is available to us all the time. No prayer books, prayer rugs or cushions needed. You don't need a timer or bell to end a silent meditation. No pen and paper for a journal, though writing down answers to these questions might be a good way to reinforce the practice of kindness.

At the same time, kindness can seem *so* everyday, so ordinary, that *making special* what should be a *normal* way of acting might not feel

necessary. Well, kindness is accessible, but it's not always easy. Our political and media cultures promote name calling, interrupting conversations, and pursuing self-centered gains at the expense of generosity and respect. Families can too! I grew up in a loving family, but it had sharp edges: sarcastic humor, put downs, and making fun of people who were different—though behind their back... so as not to seem unkind. But my family changed--or died off or moved away from one another.

The discipline of kindness is one way to live into the first Principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association. *We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.* We affirm kindness, respect, and understanding.

However, just talking about kindness is not enough. Two years ago on Easter Sunday our former minister Doug Kraft gave an Easter sermon with an emphasis on kindness. Within minutes of the end of the second service, two of our members came to me saying they had broken up a fight in the parking lot. It was an argument that started as a misunderstanding and switched to accusations and shouting. They brought one of the aggrieved parties to me; the other had left. I asked a lot of questions. I could tell this account was one-sided, and I didn't wish to take sides. So I replied: "I'm sorry that happened. It sounds painful and scary."

Talking later, Doug and I marveled how a disagreement between strangers had flared out of control so fast. And we joked that our sermons *may not be* so transformative after all.

But we *were* concerned as well that some people were not expressing the values of our congregation's covenant. I looked up the names of both parties in our database. They were not there. They had been attending on and off for a good long time, but had never been members or contributing friends of UUSS. I was relieved! That's because it's my belief that being part of a congregation like this one can make you a better person.

Knowing *all of you* makes *me* better in my day-to-day encounters... in the store, in random conversations, with friends and relatives, even in traffic, or looking for a parking space. When I have the urge to be unkind, I remember you. I remind myself that I never know when a church member could be nearby, so I am on my best behavior. You help me in this way.

Something else that helps with kindness is *the law*. Last weekend I had a whirlwind visit to see two sets of friends in Arizona and my two nephews, in Denver, after having scrapped my vacation plans. But both nephews have work schedules that kept me from spending much time with them at all. Denver was cold and wet. I was lonely. Sunday evening, as one of them drove me to the airport, I felt sad and edgy. Walking in the airport security line, I removed my belt, shoes and laptop and put it all in tubs on the conveyor belt.

I pulled a wad of Kleenex out of one pocket, and some coins out of the other, and held my hands above my head in the imaging machine. The TSA officer motioned me forward, out of it, to wait for clearance. I put my things back in my pocket--right when he said, "I need to pat down your pocket. Take that stuff out." He wanted me to cup it all in my hands and show him every tissue. I thought I could put them back one at a time as I showed them. "What are you doing that for? Pull them out and show me."

I whined: "I'm trying to..." and he interrupted: "It looks like you're doing magic tricks." I didn't understand that he wanted me to put *nothing* back till all was examined.

The TSA officer patted my pocket again, and I pulled out a toothpick. I felt like a misunderstood 9-year-old boy.

I felt shame, and that led to anger. I had a sarcastic thought: *Yes, I'm hiding a lethal toothpick. A real danger, I am. But I didn't say that, because it's against the law to make a joke like that around the TSA. As I sat on a bench and put my shoes back on, I felt an urge to report him, to demand his name and badge number, to put him in his place, just as he had put me in mine!*

My urge to be unkind was really an urge to vent the frustration I felt, which had little to do with a 30-second examination of my pockets. "Wow," I thought to myself. "This is a pretty strong reaction." I put on my belt and let the strong emotions be, and watched what they felt like. In a few moments, I gave up on my plan of retaliation.

This near-brush with an outburst reminded me that sometimes you *can* legislate kindness. Laws regarding how you talk to the Transportation Security Administration discourage us from giving in to the hot flares of emotion that shoot inside our bodies when we're stressed.

Even if you get there by following the law, showing patience and restraint is part of being kind. So is empathy. I'm not a person who loves to hate the TSA staff. They are following orders to protect our safety. That's important work. For me, it would be tedious work, and they are doing it. It would be tough to bear the unkind words and unreasonable attitudes I've heard from travelers. I wonder how many of us, as travelers, feel stressed, in a hurry, or sad? How many of us are poised to *lose* our poise after an agent's blunt instruction? Most of the time, what I witness in the TSA is clear communication, thorough professionalism, personal restraint, and good manners. And I am grateful.

In all parts of life, I am grateful for all expressions of kindness, generosity, hospitality, and care that show up. Like...

When a café owner says, "It's on the house!"

When I get a handwritten note in the mail.

When I see one of you introducing yourself to another person.

When a vendor at the farmer's market throws an extra orange into my bag after I've paid.

When people on Facebook click "Like" on a post I've written. (I never thought I'd say that, but after this congregation voted to call me, seeing that little Thumbs Up icon many times over has lifted my spirits.)

*Appreciating* kindness may be as just as important as being kind! I wish for everyone the ability to reflect on the deeds of kindness that make life better.

Kindness is the highest form of intelligence. These words are attributed to Brother Wayne Teasdale. But I first heard them here, from David Lust, one of our late beloved members at UUSS, beloved for his kindness and spirit of gratitude, among other gifts. He liked these words so much that the order of service for his memorial had them on the cover: The highest form of intelligence is kindness. Being smart by itself doesn't make you kind, but if you strive to show kindness, you are showing the highest form of intelligence.

In my early thirties, I became friends with a man who had recently earned a Ph.D. in an esoteric field from a top university. And the experience had hurt him. To hear him talk, his department seemed full of cutthroat politics and mean personalities. So did his entire academic field. He was in no emotional shape to pursue a teaching job in it.

Moreover, he felt cynical and angry about the world in general. He worked as an administrative assistant in a field other than the one for which he had earned a Ph.D.

For some reason he was curious about the Unitarian Universalist church to which I belonged, and came with me for a visit. Perhaps I was the lay leader one Sunday, or he was just interested. He came along, and he loved it.

What struck him was the genuine interest the people there showed in simply knowing him and spending time with him. He was bowled over to find kindness again. He had forgotten that people could be kind!

This young man lived on the other side of town and had no car. It took over an hour for him to make it for services, by train, bus and walking, but he kept coming back. Weeks later, he stood in front of the congregation on a New Member Sunday. He told that congregation that he had found the church through me, and he liked our minister, but he joined it because the people were so

kind. Then he made a generous monthly pledge out of his hourly income, and he attended for as long as he lived in that city. Encountering that religious community surprised him. It helped him to let go of the cynicism he had been holding. It made him happier. It changed him.

As a congregation, we cannot predict all the ways that we can change people's lives. As individual people, we cannot know all the ways that everyday kindness can be a force for healing in the world.

Two keys to kindness, it seems to me, are presence and patience.

To share your presence with another is a simple gift, but a deep one. Especially if another person is grieving or going through a rough patch, just having a cup of coffee or making a phone call, inviting them to go for a walk or to sit together in a worship service can make a difference. Maybe take some cupcakes or flowers along on the visit.

But we can be uncomfortable with sadness or distress in other people. Instead of a few minutes of listening or, even better, walking in silence, we can feel the urge to fix things. Or perhaps a distressed person *wants* us to fix things, wants us to spend all our time listening as they dump out all their stuff. Or they want us to give them *the* answer to the problem. But really, the kind answer is "I hear you." "I see you." "I'll be thinking of you." "I care about you."

The answer may be to say little at all. This kind of kindness is not an answer, it is the gift of presence.

Once upon a time, a little girl was sent on an errand by her parent. She took a long time coming back. When she finally did return, the parent *insisted* on an explanation. Well, the little girl said, on her way home she had encountered a friend who was crying because she had broken her doll. "Oh," said the parent. "Then you stopped to help her fix her doll?" "Oh, no," said the daughter. "I stopped to help her cry." The gift of presence.

Another form of kindness is patience. It helps us through discomfort or disagreement. Patience can mean waiting. Waiting for others... to show up, make a decision, say what they really think, reach a goal, or find a lost glove or their set of keys. In sitting with a person in trouble or in pain, patience helps us wait after we ask the question: "Tell me what it's been like for you?"

There's a secret about patience. The secret is, what looks like patience on the outside, what feels like patience to others, often does not feel on the inside like patience to you. At least not to me. This is when we know patience is not a virtue, it's a discipline. It's an exercise. Sometimes a workout!

When I became friends with the man with a cynical and hurt attitude about life and people, it took a little patience. I didn't try to convince him that people *can* be kind and open-hearted. You can't be talked into a new outlook on life. But the congregation that we came to share as members did ease him into a new outlook on life and people. Among *them*, he discovered kindness again.

But--he didn't know their history. That congregation had a history of being *unkind* with one another. Cranky, mistrustful, easy to take offense and slow to forgive, even intolerant of some expressions of spirituality and theology. In the name of personal freedom, they would let unkind words and behavior go unchallenged. Well, they changed. People softened. As a congregation, they learned better ways of being together. Just in time for a young person who needed a church that knew how to be kind. Just in time!

That place was far away from here, but here in California some congregations have reputations for unkind behavior. This one, in fact, had such a reputation. But things have changed. Things began changing, of course, years before I arrived, long before I became one of you, one of us. We are more gentle, generous and welcoming than before.

We keep learning better ways of being together, like trust, openness and curiosity. We speak from the heart, and strive to listen.

But I dare not idealize our congregation, lest a fight break out in the parking lot after the service. Also, we have a challenge coming up to test our kindness. Our lay leaders are now wrestling with higher costs than expected for our construction and renovation project. We must face the disappointment of a pause in our progress and the challenges of cost-cutting, obtaining loans, and raising money.

Anxiety will rise. Frustration will be understandable. This means is that we have new opportunities for spiritual practice. An opportunity to practice patience under stress. By the ways we deal with our challenges, together as a community, we will be changed as people. By kindness, we will be changed.

Kindness is a spiritual discipline:

Presence and attention.

Restraint and respect.

Apology and forgiveness.

Gentleness with ourselves and with others.

Generosity and gratitude for all good gifts.

Sometimes kindness can be as easy as a smile and a thank-you. Sometimes kindness is an effort, a practice, a workout. But kindness is the highest form of intelligence.

In the days ahead I invite you to practice your own kindness reflection, on any schedule you choose. Do it alone, do it with family, or do it with congregational friends.

Make an inventory of the kinds of kindness, given and received in your life. Give thanks. See if it makes a difference.

Every day is a new opportunity to show kindness, to let go and start fresh. We need more kindness. We know the world needs it. Kindness is the highest form of intelligence. As much as we can, let us pursue the heights of our intelligence.

So may it be. Blessed be, and amen.

Namaste.