

Be Kind

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We were heading North on highway 25 after church a month ago, heading North for a day in the woods. Gus was driving. I fell asleep for a delicious little nap. When I opened my eyes, we were going through a small town. I slowly awakened, still in a deeply relaxed state, with a vagueness, a softness in my awareness. As we drove through town on that main street, past the large Catholic church on the hill, and the cemetery, past the gas station and the hardware store, the bank, the pharmacy, the fire and rescue, Sue's drive in, the bar, the grocery store, the veterinarian, the Food shelf, the clinic, and the ball room, but especially as we drove past the homes, some old brick beauties, some newer constructions, all modest in size, with simple well tended gardens, I felt such enormous tenderness for this town, for any town USA, for the people in their homes, trying to live as well as possible in this time that feels more fraught with danger and uncertain than ever, rather like wartime, I imagine... it was a kind of revelation I had, in this half asleep, half awake state of mind, about the fragility of humanity.. I felt a pang in my heart, an outpouring of lovingkindness for this little town of 270 people.

A couple weeks later, we were heading North again for a little sabbath break in the woods; going through the same fields of sunflowers, corn, hay stacks, and then approaching the small towns with their large Catholic Church spire on the outskirts, then driving through on Main Street... Only this time, highly caffeinated, with a pile of the week's newspapers in my lap, I was devouring the news, of the wild fire spread of the pandemic and of the flagrant disregard of masking and the willful political movement against mandated masking, something about the constitutional right to spread a deadly virus...so my head was deep in the news while Gus was driving, and I looked up as we approached the town, and I piercingly, curiously observed every detail I could see... a few political signs not to my liking, and because it was Saturday, people were going into the stores, and I noticed how few were wearing masks... same town as before, but this time my eyes were sharp and so was my tongue with tribal vitriol and my heart hardened with judgement. We passed through the town back into the countryside and my head went back down into the newspaper.

And there I read about a human being, a political leader whose heart is grounded ever and always in lovingkindness. Ekrem Imamoglu was elected the mayor of Istanbul using a different playbook than the very totalitarianish President Erdogan of Turkey. Imamoglu is all about "radical love". He reached out to the more traditional, conservative supporters and listened, showing them respect, focusing on the bread and butter issues that could unite voters across opposing political camps and making it clear that *they* were not the enemy. Rather the enemy is the leader of the country with his divisive politics. I felt chastened in my harsh judgements by this wise and kind leader that day as we drove North through small towns. And I felt so grateful for people like Imamoglu in this world.

We're all doing a lot of reading, listening, pondering about leaders these days. What makes a good leader. Live long enough and every leader will disappoint you. Who has done well with climate change or mass incarceration? No one. Regardless of political party. And all leaders have to make impossible choices. Awful compromises. They have to get things done. There can be no purity in politics. Does kindness really matter in a leader? Does the soul of a leader matter? Or is the most important thing where they stand on the issues that matter most to you?

Kindness is at the heart of every great religion; at the headwaters of both of the two great rivers of religion--- the Abrahamic and Vedic. Therefore, unless you simply do away with or disregard the value of religion in human history, kindness must matter. The character of a leader's soul must matter. Who can know another's soul? No one. But you can listen for clues in their life story, in how they treat others, in how they deal with grief. Have their hearts been broken open? Or are they afraid of sorrow? Do they empathize with others? How were they raised? This "soul" information is important. For with all that power they are given, with a distorted or maimed soul, they can do immeasurable damage and harm; but with a wise and kind soul they can do generate a goodness that determines the shape of the future.

How is your soul? How are you doing with the religious teaching of kindness? How were you raised? What was the blessing, the departing words, you most remember your parents saying to you as you left for school each day? Other than, "don't forget your lunch!" or when they dropped you off at summer camp? Or said goodbye as they deposited you at college? (I know these are prepandemic experiences, but we trust that they will also be post pandemic experiences...) What were their last words, their blessing to you? What is your blessing to your children? What words do you most want to stick to them as you say goodbye.... "Be smart". Work hard. Be a winner. Get good grades. Look good. Be kind.

Of course there's so much else we hope we've imparted to our children before they go into the world without us. Yes we want them to have a heart of kindness, but we also want them to have that sixth sense that will keep *them* safe in this world as it currently is. We hear from parents of children with black or brown bodies, about how much life energy goes into that sixth sense when they leave home, about where to be and how to move your body in the world and how to respond in different situations, not only if you are addressed by the police, but in stores and in schools and in campgrounds up North and so many places where whiteness is considered the norm. Oh that sixth sense needs to be so strong in these little and growing brown and black bodies. How to be kind in and through all this careful living takes a strong religion. And girls and women, we have a sixth sense too. I don't know how I developed mine as a girl, but it kicks in automatically when I'm in certain situations and places, especially as night falls or in isolated settings, or in a room that is so heavy with patriarchy, I can smell it. My parents did well at creating in me, this sixth sense. And all of us now, we all have a bizarre, new sixth sense, or most of us do, that triggers the six feet distancing from another, or the hand reaching for the mask, or the deep resistance and wariness in going into any building other than home. Yes, we want our children to be kind *and* we want them to be safe.

Can you be too kind in this life? In this world? I don't know. But I do know that there is great wisdom in our religion that holds together, in creative tension, all three high values, kindness, justice humility. Yes, we are to be kind to the individual in our midst, like the police officer in riot gear standing right in front of us, to see their humanity, because when we stop seeing the person in front of us as a human being, then we ourselves begin to lose our humanity. But we are also required by God to commit our lives to the work of social justice, to dismantling oppression, in all its obvious *and* more cunning and hidden manifestations, and creating, with our collective prophetic imagination, God's dream of justice. And, at the same time, as we love kindness and do justice, we are to be humble... to take ourselves out of the center of our world somehow and to put the God of all creation at the center of our world... that is, do the ego work like we started in Lent before the pandemic overtook our lives.

Oh this being alive is such a wonderful and arduous and joyful adventure! How then shall we live? That is the question. Micah puts it out there!... walk humbly with your God, do justice, love kindness...

In the great poem, "Kindness" The poet Naomi Shihab Nye ties kindness to sorrow. They are connected like baby to mother by an umbilical cord... It is when your heart is broken open by grief, that life's true wisdom comes to you... "Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing."

Our heart, the heart of humanity was broken open on May 25, 2020..... Somehow in those eternal 9 plus minutes captured on video, made public like the agonizing public crucifixion of our Lord, the heart of the entire world was broken open, filled with sorrow. It wasn't God's plan at all that George Floyd should have to die... let's be careful with our theology, but God is using this sorrow, and the work of a life time of people like John Lewis for such powerful redemption that it is almost unbelievable. There is such a mystery to the zeitgeist, how it is shaped and how suddenly it can change.... Why is it that 100 years ago, the lynching of 3 young black men in Duluth drew crowds of sickly curious white people and their hearts were hard and made even more cruel, rather than broken open and softened with sorrow and then kindness? Why didn't the lynching 100 years ago cause deep reflection and repentance? ...and why now 100 years later is this crucifixion, captured on video, opening people eyes, minds, hearts, in a way never of such magnitude never experienced before? With people pouring into the streets in an uprising of full hearted sorrow and outrage at seeing a human being treating another human being with an utter void of kindness. And then comes the reflection, of white people especially, it's about time.... of how is this possible..... and then the justice questions arise.... ..

We are in a new chapter. Our heart has been broken open. We are finally ready to repair the damage we have done to God's world, to repair human behavior and institutions, to let sorrow work like leaven and raise up the bread of kindness and justice.... We are not going back.

And there is of course, even more death. So much more death that need not be. Tragic death. Death from a pandemic raging across the world, across our country. How, as a people, are we acknowledging and grieving all this death? How are our leaders sharing their own sorrow, revealing some of their own soul out of love for their people? Modeling how to be human in the midst of a pandemic?

If we publicly and collectively acknowledge our grief, more than 150,000 Americans have died, that is more than 850 a day, and express our sorrow, our heart as a nation will soften and a spirit of kindness will grow and it will lift us up and give us the power to move mountains, to create a caring economy and commonwealth, to imagine and implement a green new deal, to reimagine policing and incarceration, to create a society in which it is easier to be good and kind.

But if we hide our dead, bury our grief, avoid the sorrow, the heart of our nation will become hardened and distorted. We will operate out of our reptilian brains, our tribal instincts will take over and our hearts will constrict with judgement and selfishness. The makings of a civil war....

We pray that our leaders might lead us into the tender gravity of kindness in these harsh and exhausting times...

There is a kind woman in New York City named Tamisha Brunson-Malone. She refused to let her heart grow numb or hard when the dead bodies started piling up. No one knew what she was doing but she had to do this small act of kindness in order to stay human.

Ms. Brunson Malone is a forensic technician in a hospital morgue in New Jersey where there is a hidden parking lot, with heavily restricted access, with three long trailers with loud motors powering their refrigerators. Inside each trailer are bodies in white body bags, stacked on shelves three high, coronavirus victims awaiting pickup.

Ms. Brunson Malone oversees this hidden scene. In May, at its peak, she said, "Opening up a trailer every single day, not knowing if you're going to have a few bodies and it's always full, full, full. There were dying at alarming rate, alone by themselves without their families."

In March, she came up with an idea and her supervisor said "yes". She went to a large flower plant and said I want as many daffodils, bright yellow daffodils, as you can sell me. She bought every daffodil in stock and she's been doing it ever since. She puts the daffodils on top of every body. She spends about a 100 dollars a week of her own money. No one sees this except for an occasional funeral director. She simply bestows this quiet touch of grace on these beloved bodies.

Poetry is the true language of the soul. Listen to this poem by Naomi Shihab Nye. "Kindness". I end with this...

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness...

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing
inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

Sources

Friedman, Thomas, "Trump's Wag-the-Dog War", New York Times, July 22, 2020.

Wilson, Michael, "Amid the Body Bags, She Bestows a Quiet Touch of Grace, in Yellow", New York Times, May 7, 2020.

Each day, upon awakening your first thought: “may I be kind to everyone I meet this day and to myself.”

