

You Are What You See: Inspiring Kindness Through Images by Awakin Call Editors

We live in a world where news stories are riddled with negativity; wars, crashes, political and social strife fill our living rooms and enter our most personal of space, our homes. What are the implications for our neurological and physical health to be exposed to such negative news, and what are the effects when this is turned around and people are exposed to positive news, see acts of kindness and learn of human goodness? This was the question that Dr. David Fryburg asked himself after experiencing what he calls a “sort of news-induced depression”. He learned of studies suggesting the negative physiological effects that negative news could cause, and he began wondering about the importance of balance.

So David, a physician and research scientist, as well as a keen photographer with published works and solo exhibits – together with his oldest son Jesse in 2014 – started a non-profit to promote kindness, compassion, and empathy. The organization, Envision Kindness, brings together David’s foundations as an accomplished scientist with his creative energy and belief in the power of the visual.

Envision Kindness has the mission to promote kindness, compassion and empathy through the sharing of photographs and videos. What follows is the edited transcript of an Awakin Calls interview with David. You can listen to the recording of the call [here](#).

Preeta Bansal: Today we have a remarkable guest speaker, David Fryburg, whose personal journey is not only inspiring but also is having a tremendous impact on many people. Dr. David Fryburg is a physician who is involved in the global movement to spread kindness, as is our moderator, Dr. Ameeta Martin, who is the editor of Service Space’s KindSpring Newsletter.

Ameeta Martin: Dr. Fryburg, how did your journey begin and lead you to this point to create Envision Kindness?

David Fryburg: In many ways, I’ve been an academic vagabond going from one university to another, and I always thought I’d grow old and die as a professor. But I decided to move to the pharmaceutical industry from academia because the opportunity to do things for people on a widespread or population basis was more appealing than what I could do alone in my own clinic or lab. After 13 years, I left the pharmaceutical industry and now, as a consultant, I lead teams of scientists to solve common problems in my areas of expertise. These are government, academic, and industry scientists who work together to put important information in the public domain and advance science for the purpose of improving society. While a consultant, I observed that I was getting depressed from seeing all the negative news stories, the research scientist in me said, “Let’s go read the literature.”

I learned that looking at negative news could rapidly induce anxiety, stress, and fear. I worried about the full effects that it had on people and wondered how we could rebalance what people see and do it in an unbiased way that brings people together. We also needed to accomplish our goals in today's environment in which people don't want to read much or be told what to do.

How do we do it quickly and easily while transcending the limits of language? It was important that a person in the US could get a similar meaning to someone in Morocco, Russia, Estonia, or South America. In other words, how do we make this more of a universal human dynamic and not something constrained by language? I looked at a lot of wonderful organizations that promote kindness to figure out how we could add to or compliment their work.

We decided that our focus was going to be images. We would gather and disseminate diverse images of acts of kindness and let people interpret them, assimilate them, and go on their way for the day. The "dosing" had to be regular to compete with the other inputs people are exposed to each day. You get up in the morning and you look in the newspaper or at the television or some other source, and then there are personal inputs, and when all integrated together, these create our state of being.

I had been an avid amateur photographer for a long time. What I love about photography is that it causes me look more at the world than I otherwise would. It makes me think about relationships to the elements and about that moment in which that photograph was taken. So the original idea is about using the power of the visual to get people to look more. There are lots of acts of kindness that we see everyday, but we don't necessarily truly see them. We don't stop and admire them because they're usually fleeting, perhaps taken for granted, or because we are distracted by other things. When we looked at what images like this (of kindness) were available on the web, we discovered they were sparse and, although they were really nice, they were only about big or heroic things like a waitress who was given a tip of a thousand dollars, or someone who donated a kidney, or a person who ran into a burning building to save someone else. While they are great and wonderful acts, what we really thought about was our prototypical average "Joe" who may not be able to relate to that.

My son and I were struggling at first because it was very difficult to get material, and I didn't want it to be just my own images. Even if it was, I would never be able to provide enough to make this work. So we thought, "What if we have a contest for youth?"

We asked local students in high school and college to make humorous or lighthearted videos about kindness. We also incorporated public voting for selecting finalists so that the students would go out and campaign for their films. And by campaigning for their films with their friends and relatives and neighbors, they themselves would be championing kindness and getting these folks to look at images or stories about kindness. This contest was a pilot to see what it would be like, and it was really quite amazing. Several thousand people voted on the 19 films that were submitted. And we got some amazing pieces. There was one film in which they had the entire school body go out onto the football field and spell the words "Be Kind" like a marching band. And though I was feeling good about the whole thing, I thought, "Okay, well, what happened when they went back to school?" And that's where things really got transformational.

We decided to survey the students and teachers who participated, and teachers wrote, "School spirit is soaring. Students are acting nicer to each other." The teachers were much happier. Students were complimenting one another. And then there were

references to independent volunteer efforts that the students were doing, and these independent volunteer efforts included one student collecting coloring books for people with cancer and another student starting a clean water project in a developing country. There was no content in the films that had anything to do with these ideas. The students did these things based on what was inside of them. It was organic. It was natural, and I loved it because each of us is going to be kind in our own ways.

Spurred on by the success of the first contest, we got some grant money and ran several others. We expanded it to a similar contest statewide in Connecticut because we were getting notes from teachers around the state, asking if they could participate in the county contest. We ran a college photography contest in which we surveyed the participants afterwards, asking them, "How did it make you feel to look at other people's images?" The one that stuck with me the most was a student photographer who wrote in response, "It let me look at society through a lens of compassion and grace." So we're continuing to do these programs framed as contests and looking at them in different formats because it's win/win across the board, including sharing it with the wider public. The kids liked it because they like competition. The prizes, by the way, went back to the schools for arts education. The schools benefit, the teachers benefit, and the students benefit.

We've also just completed what has turned into an international still-photography contest open to adults. There were over 1500 submissions from more than 630 photographers in 80 countries. We've gotten submissions from places like Azerbaijan, Iran, US, Russia, the Ukraine, countries in Latin America, and from the Philippines and India (which represented almost 30 percent of the submissions). Beautiful, wonderful images.

We did an internet-based study on how images affect people. We put together a scientific advisory board to help us because, while I'm an endocrinologist with experience in human-based research, I didn't know anything about psychology research. A friend of mine who's a professional statistician did the statistical analyses. Four hundred participants were divided into four groups. One group saw only negative images (destruction, death, violence). Another group saw neutral images (towels, door knobs, light switches). Another group saw positive image (puppies in a basket, bunnies with flowers, a child exhilarated while white-water rafting). And those three groups all came from a standard set that psychologists have used for years. The fourth group saw images depicting acts of kindness. These included a woman in distress on a darkened stairwell being comforted by a police officer, one where a chemotherapy patient's friends shaved their heads in support of him, and one with a young man escorting two elderly women to their car. There was a little bit of text that was associated with each of the images.

The participants filled out mood questionnaires before and after viewing the images. People who saw the negative images felt a worsening of sadness, anger, and fear and a decrease in joy, optimism, and gratitude. The people who saw the neutral images looked like a slight version of the negative group: they got a bit less joyful and a bit more sad. The people who saw positive images got more joyous, and the folks who saw the kindness images had double the response in joy, optimism, gratitude, and compassion than those who saw the positive images.

We found it remarkable that people are programmed to respond to images of kindness, even when the images show a struggle; people respond to the resolution or the attempted

resolution of the problems. They respond to the people connecting in the images. It was quite clear how much more impact the images of kindness had than even the typical go-to like kittens or puppies.

Ameeta : Let's expand a little bit more on the science of kindness. You know we are all hardwired for kindness, yet we're also hardwired so that negative things affect us much more for self-preservation than positive things. So don't we need an incredible overload of positive images to counteract our innate preference to focus on the negativity?

David: I don't fully know the answer because we're doing that work now, trying to understand what it takes. It has been said that something negative has 5 or 10 fold the impact of something positive. People can relate to this themselves; on Trip Advisor, for example, a negative review of, let's say, a hotel, requires at least five if not ten positive reviews to outweigh it.

But the encouraging thing is that we are naturally born kind. If you look at studies of toddlers where the investigator drops a pen, the toddler usually picks it up and hands it back to the investigator. That gives an edge to invigorate someone and inspire them to be kind. While we don't know what that balance is, we want to at least try to restore it to some degree and perhaps to achieve something even greater. There are other studies that show that when people start to see images of kindness, their willingness to volunteer and do other kind acts or to think positively increases. Hate and anger have their own ripple, but kindness does too. And so the more kindness that we can propagate, the more this becomes reinforced. So it's not just looking at images anymore—it's doing. And when doing something makes someone feel good, that reinforces the behavior. And what's really cool here is we can think about it like an epidemiological approach to providing and stimulating kindness, like how a virus might spread in a population. It is not necessarily the only approach, but it may be a nice trigger to get things started and to help maintain an even disposition.

Ameeta: So, basically, it's about trying to create a dopamine high by doing good things rather than bad things to create that same feeling?

David: Absolutely. We don't know the specifics of the response in full, but oxytocin has been implicated in some studies. There are a variety of internal events that occur in response to observing kindness and then doing it. The old aphorism "an act of kindness benefits the giver more than the receiver" really hit home.

I also came across something I never learned in medical school. That was a series of observations that show that people who volunteer on a regular basis have death rates that are 20-40% lower than those who don't. And there are very few things that cause death rates to drop like that. What comes to mind for me is clean water, vaccinations, or antibiotics in certain circumstances.

Darwin actually wrote that while survival of the fittest for a single organism is important, altruism and self-sacrifice are necessary for a group to survive. And if people are wondering how kindness affects health, I think it comes down to stress reduction.

On the other side, these observations also explain why social isolation, including prison confinement and situations where elderly or disabled people can't get out of their homes, is so devastating to mental and physical health.

Ameeta: So has this work in kindness affected how you view traditional medicine, particularly as it is practiced in the West? Do you think physicians need to treat patients differently, based on this work?

David: I think it has huge implications, not just for everyday life but also for medicine. I had always thought from years ago, before I ever got into this, that the connection with the patient, talking to them, connecting, and doing a meaningful physical examination were critical. There was always something very special about it. I don't practice medicine anymore, but I have spoken to others who are under so much pressure to fill out forms in record time that they don't have time for quality interactions.

Ameeta: I feel the entire hands-on part of medicine has substantially decreased with time. Like you said, it is much more about paperwork, but it is also much more about testing.

David: Sure, and there are multiple reasons for that too, including justifying a diagnosis and keeping on time.

So, I think it has implications in a lot of different ways, and from our own small vantage point, we are interested in allowing people to see the images, to get inspired, and to respond in whatever pro-social, positive ways that are unique to them.

The relationship to connecting to others all bubbled up for me in a conversation I had with Lionel Ketchian, who founded the framework for people to form "Happiness Clubs" to help people to have happier lives. In one conversation we discussed what comes first: Is it kindness that drives happiness? Because people who are kinder tend to be more happy. Or is it happiness that allows people to be kind? It occurred to me that that there actually isn't a straight line here. Rather, it is a circle. And the idea that, at the centre of the circle, I realized that it was about connection. Connection was the essential element that results from kindness and happiness and also promulgated both of them. It was through connection that people achieve meaning. What I refer to is the sense that a person matters or has value.

A lot of the work on connection and meaning brought me back to the work of Abraham Maslow and Victor Frankl. Maslow had a pyramid of human necessity, where the achievement of meaning and self-actualisation is the peak. Victor Frankl, who was a survivor of Auschwitz, developed Logotherapy to fulfill humanity's quest for achievement of meaning. They reinforced for me that almost everyone wants to achieve meaning--that after the provision of basic necessities, connection to others was an inborn mechanism to achieve meaning. So kindness is so powerful probably because it fulfills the innate drive to achieve meaning.

To go back to kindness and happiness, i.e., to discern the differences: psychologists use the term "hedonistic happiness," where somebody is happy because they are satisfying themselves, in contrast to another quality called the "eudaimonic happiness," where someone is happy because they are giving to others. Eudaimonic happiness is about transcending the self as an individual. And the key part here was the derivation of meaning and value. When we do or think about doing something for another, we are connecting to that other living thing and creating a bridge. That connection creates value and addresses the incredible drive for achievement of meaning that most people seek.

So this whole thing fits together for me: kindness creates connections, from which people derive meaning. And if they can get this eudaimonic type of happiness, where they are doing for others, it allows for more kindness to be manifested.

Ameeta: How many people are you reaching through Envision Kindness? And what do you feel you can do to promote even more positive images in the mainstream media?

David: Our major mode is social media. We have a modest following right now on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. But we know by looking at our stats that our images have been viewed 1.2 million times over the course of the year. So, we are trying to expand and continue that. The problem with this method is that there is so much content out there. What we are trying to do is provide interesting, engaging material that inspires people, and to just keep working incrementally. We have some other programs that we are working on that will use different ways of reaching out. These will probably be out in the next few months.

Ameeta: I am curious how you work with schools? Do you work formally through the school system or with individual teachers? I ask that because Service Space has many people within its organization that do a lot of different types of work with schools, and it seems to be a little more ad hoc - working with schools informally based on connections with individual teachers. And I wonder how you did it in such a systematic way through the state of Connecticut?

David: That was actually a lot of legwork. We went from both directions to identify contacts to promote the activity: the first group was teachers and the second method was to approach people who could disseminate more broadly. We got a lot of help from organizations across the state. People were wonderful. There's, for example, an association of art teachers in Connecticut, of boards of education, and of supervisors, and we reached out to all of them. Many of them shared our announcement of the contest. Since our real interest is building bridges, we wanted to provide a service for them, where rather than they're doing Envision a favor, their efforts would benefit their school systems. So many people responded positively to it. We assembled a list of art teachers, principals, guidance counselors, etc., who were in the state. They served as champions to organize the kids. So many teachers have written to us asking when we are doing the next contest. Others have written, "We're not waiting for a contest anymore; we're just going to put this in our curriculum."

Ameeta: You spoke earlier about how we need to see positive images on a regular dosing schedule because every day we are exposed to and buffeted by so many different inputs. I wonder, as you've done some of these follow-up studies, do you get a sense that most images come from repeat players, who submit images multiple times? Do you have regular photographers who become part of your informal network of people who contribute images, or are these contests kind of a one-off thing, with people participating just one time?

David: We haven't done enough repeating to answer that fully, but we're getting there. When we went from our county to Connecticut, about half of the participants from the first came onto the second. That's about the best I can give you as an answer, but we have to continue to develop that.

Ameeta: So, is there an opportunity for these people, outside of these contests, to continue to contribute images/videos?

David: We welcome them! There's a submission portal on our website where people can spontaneously submit stills and video. When we publish them on social media, we always credit the photographers/authors. The whole model is to disseminate. If we held it

close, it wouldn't benefit anyone. So we disseminate as much as possible, and if a piece is particularly meaningful or impactful, we will spend money to promote it.

Preeta: Dr. Fryburg, so many times when people talk about acts of kindness and generosity, it comes across to people who are left-brain dominant, like scientists, as quaint, cute, or sweet. I wonder how receptive scientists, academics, and physicians are to how you're expending your energies and the kinds of research that you're starting to probe.

David: There's some bias for my experience because my friends and colleagues are like me, but generally there's a lot of interest in it. There's also a greater recognition lately for increasing empathy in the clinical circumstance. How will that get translated? I hope that we'll see that within the next year or two.

Preeta: How can we, as a broad, global ecosystem or the Service Space community best support or amplify your work?

David: I really appreciate that question. I think that it would help to follow us regularly on social media, get our newsletter, and encouraging others to do that. What people are doing in that process is beginning to participate. See kindness, show it to others. This will change people, and without a lecture, without anything more than "Isn't that wonderful?" That would be really gratifying because that's why I am doing this.

Comments and Questions from Listeners

Wendy: I was just at the movies, and there were three trailers, each one more horrendous than the next. And I was sick to my stomach: the violence, the killing, the horror, and yet people seek this out. Can you talk a little bit about some people's choices to actually invite that kind of negativity in?

David: One of our SAB members, Doug Gentile, our Scientific Advisory Board, is a professor of psychology at Iowa State, and he and others -- Craig Anderson -- have looked at how entertainment and video games can draw people in. They are repetitive and can increase violence or aggression. It feeds into a biology the same way we crave certain other things, but I'm probably not expert enough to talk about it more.

Kozo: I was on a healing journey, and I came across this quote that alters to the old adage of "you are what you eat" to "you are what you digest." And that really shifted things for me. So I'm wondering also in terms of images and content, if it's not so much "you are what you surround yourself with" but "you are what comes inside." Viktor Frankl said, "You have the power to discern, to see these things that are happening in front of you." And he talks about having a bowl of disgusting soup, and then he made it into something that was going to nourish him. So I'm wondering if you can be placed in an environment where you're being bombarded with negative images, but you can have some sort of internal control, some sort of equanimity, some sort of filter that stops that from being digested.

David: Thanks, Kozo. It's a very valid point, but the limitation is—and if we talk about it from food, right —what your intestines can break down and absorb. There was a film, I'm trying to remember the name, a fellow who just ate McDonald's for...

Kozo: Oh yes. "Supersize Me."

David: Yes, that's right. If you had only that diet, irrespective of what your intestines were going to be like, maybe you'd have some buffering to its full effects, but you'd still be significantly influenced by it. So, while I agree with you that there's an internal ability to modulate this, we're also working on a very basic level in how the brain responds to these things. Most people, I think, are running from one thing to another, and internalizing a lot of material because they don't have the time to digest.

Amit from Washington, DC: I really appreciate your taking the time to share your research with all of us today. There are, as you said, massive implications for the work that you're doing in so many areas, whether it be medicine, education, or even the prison system, but what I'm really curious about is what's been the impact on you as an individual.

David: For me it's been a labor of love. A tremendous amount of effort is required because we are in a territory where there isn't a model to follow. And so there have been lots of challenges. But we've learned. And it just inspires me to think about the beauty of being human. So in one sense, it has had a lot of challenges. And in another sense, it has brought me back to what I love about medicine, how we are human, how our spirits connect, and what life is about. And each of us has our own legacy to leave. And it isn't about an individual; it's about leaving it better than we found it. It's not about remembering a name. It's about those who come after us. So for me it's very satisfying in that way because my goals are to build this into its own self-sustaining entity where it becomes the usual, the rote, and to figure out how we can get people to treat each other better, to collaborate more and cooperate and raise the level of human existence.