

## Rediscovering Gentleness by Durriya Kazi

At the end of Craig Foster's 2020 documentary film *My Octopus Teacher*, he shows his son the wonders of nature along the shore and in the sea. He says the most important thing to learn is a gentleness that thousands of hours in nature can teach a child.

The word 'gentleness' suddenly stood out and could well be the best description of the film. It is a word rarely used today. One is more likely to hear the words 'success', 'ambition' or 'being tough' in an ungiving world.

Today, the word gentleness is more likely to be used as a quality to sell face cream, pampers or bed sheets rather than as a spiritual value. Once a quality to be nurtured, gentleness gradually became associated with high birth, and soon lost its value as education and power spread across class. Today, we rarely hear people being described as gentlemen, and its extension, gentrification, has acquired a negative connotation of deliberate exclusivity.

Gentleness as a quality is seen as sentimental, mawkish or weak — people who can be easily pushed around, who live in a bubble and are not empowered to survive the challenges of life today. Often perceived as a feminine emotion, men in particular who are naturally gentle are encouraged to keep it hidden.

The only circumstances where gentleness has remained acceptable is in parenting, teaching or healing professions, in contrast to "tough love" parenting, strictness in the classroom or dispassionate professionalism. Popular culture is filled with innocuous gentle giant characters — characters that are large and strong but are not violent or aggressive, from King Kong to John Coffey in the film *The Green Mile*.

In a food chain-defined world of 'eat or be eaten', gentleness seems a recipe for failure. Yet gentleness is a much stronger quality than the reputation it has acquired. The philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle reminds us that key moments of our lives, especially at the beginning and end, are marked by gentleness. She suggests gentleness is an extraordinary force of resistance within ethics and politics. Gentleness is not just noble, but intelligent and powerful.

A gentle person remains calm, consistent, puts people at ease, is active not reactive, brings about change through persuasion rather than intimidation, and can wait patiently for opposition to breakdown over time.

Gentleness, as a choice, is an act of strength. John Locke believes, "Gentleness is far more successful in all its enterprises than violence; indeed, violence generally frustrates its own purpose, while gentleness scarcely ever fails."

Gentleness has a formidable list of proponents — Buddha, Lao Tzu, the Prophets Jesus and Muhammad (PBUH), and the Sufi masters. Art, along with poetry and music, employs gentleness in a more pragmatic fashion — by observing subtle emotions, nuances of colours and form.

Gentleness made a comeback through moving images on television sets across the world, of health workers comforting Covid patients, especially those dying without their families around.

The world has clearly moved away from business as usual. Aggressive wars, global corporate speculation, damage to the climate and inequality, have left people anxious and hurt. Corporate Social Responsibility, microfinancing and formulating Millennium Development Goals are token acknowledgements of the realisation that we need an axial change.

Perhaps the new style of leadership is symbolised by New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who has impressed the world with her ability for strength, decisiveness and determination with empathy, gentleness and compassion. Gentleness is seen as the new act of rebellion.

The 13th century Sheikh Edebali, in his famous verses for King Osman, Now you are king!, advises qualities of calmness, tolerance, encouragement, forgiveness, unifying people in the face of wrath, disunity and indolence.

His contemporary, Jalauddin Rumi, wrote, "Raise your words, not your voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder."