Three Lessons From My Kindness Challenge
by Thao Phi

Last summer I interned with ServiceSpace. Our first task as interns was to complete a 30-day kindness challenge - so for a whole month, we did different acts of kindness every day. And it made me realize that kindness can be found in every part of life. Kindness isn’t a single, isolated event - it’s a ripple. It is a noun, an adjective, and a verb all in one -- kindness can be a way of life.

I am extremely grateful because people have shown me kindness throughout my entire life. Even strangers. While this is not the first nor last act of kindness I’ve experienced, there is one particular story that always stands out in my mind. Back in high school, I was studying at Barnes & Noble on a Sunday afternoon. I was standing in line to pay for my lunch when I noticed the stranger ahead of me curiously looking at me. I wasn’t sure what his intentions were, and it made me a little uneasy. When it came to his turn to pay, he told the cashier he also wanted to pay for my meal and I was confused by the gesture. What confused me even more was after he paid for my food, he left me alone. He didn’t try to talk to me or try to explain why he paid for me. He had no hidden agenda and he didn’t expect anything back from me. Society teaches us to keep our guard up and to be cautious about what we don’t know, especially people. We must learn not to let the unknown close our hearts off or we may miss the greater gifts that are rooted in kindness.

I’ve found that there are three different yet vital components of kindness I’d like to share.

The first is to be kind to strangers. About a month ago, I found myself people watching at Barnes and Noble on a Friday morning. I saw a group of special needs people with their caregivers and for some reason, it really tugged at my heartstrings. I wanted to do something but was hesitant because I didn’t know how they’d react. I walked around the whole store before coming back to them, still contemplating if I should do anything. I decided to approach one of the caregivers and asked her if I could buy each individual a cookie. I was so nervous that I could feel tears forming as I asked. The caregiver was surprised and touched by my suggestion, telling me that most people either stare or walk away. I bought them cookies and went on my way. I thought of how funny it was that I was worried about people taking my act of kindness as weird or wouldn’t welcome it. This group of people taught me that if I am open to kindness, others will be open to receiving it. Be courageous in your acts of kindness, and take that leap of faith in others.

The second is to be kind to the people you know. It’s almost easier to be kind to strangers because we don’t have as deep of a relation to them, but we can’t forget about showing kindness to those we know either. Last summer, one day I sat down with my dad after lunch and really got to know him. I wondered why after twenty-two
years I hadn’t done this sooner. I asked him about his younger years and listened to his humbling and inspiring stories. It’s so easy to take for granted the time we have with people we know because we assume they’ll always be around or that we know enough about them already. Kindness doesn’t always have to be big and elaborate. Sometimes it’s the smaller and simple acts that show what a long ways kindness can really go. Kindness helps build relationships with people we don’t know, but it also maintains, and even mends, the ones we already have.

The third is to be kind to the person who knows you best - be kind to yourself. One of the pearls of wisdom my mom told me shortly before she passed away was, “You have to love yourself before you can love others.” I didn’t understand what she meant at the time, but as I’ve gotten older it made more sense. How was I going to be kind to others if I couldn’t be kind to myself? We are our harshest critic and may feel that we are undeserving of that kindness. By the end of my kindness challenge last summer -- after thirty days of being kind to others -- I learned that it’s okay to be kind to yourself, even necessary at times.

At the heart of kindness is giving. It’s not just giving in a material sense but the intangibles, too -- whether it be a shared memory, forgiveness, your time, anything. There are countless forms that kindness can take. I believe that finding what really touches your heart is the doorway to being kind. Pretty soon you’ll see that we are all interconnected through an endless chain of giving various acts of kindness, whether it’s the earth giving its resources, the relationship between parent and child, between teacher and student, giving to animals, the environment, through charities, or simply being kind to yourself. The last bit I’d like to share and leave with you is a quote from Aesop; "No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."