

Kindness In An Age of Connected Disconnection by Rahul Brown

Quietly, I scan the room looking for my targets. Two sets of couples jump out: one that very much seem to be enjoying each others company in sweetly engaged conversation, and another set sitting in front of each other but both silently and totally absorbed by their mobile phones. Which couple's lunch should I anonymously pay for, and more deeply, does anyone really need to go to such extra effort to practice kindness in the world?

In our modern world, making a concerted effort to be kind is as vital as making a concerted effort to get some exercise. The parallels between a workout for your body and your spirit are uncanny, with analogous outcomes as material and mental consequences.

One hundred years ago, very few people had to make much extra effort to seek out exercise. For those that lived in cities, there was considerably more activity built into daily life because of the lack of cars, elevators, and other conveniences. This was even more true for the vast majority who lived in rural areas. There was high probability that food was seasonal, organic, pesticide-free, local, non-GMO, unprocessed, natural, and fresh, thus also mitigating the way diet contributed to the need for additional exercise.

Today, chances are that if you are reading this, you're relatively sedentary and have a few extra pounds on you. There is high probability that your last meal contained out-of-season items from thousands of miles away, had traces of pesticide, was processed to add extra fat, sugar, or both, contained preservatives to maintain freshness, or was genetically modified to include some subset of the previous traits.

The range of health conditions that can be avoided or cured by diet and exercise is simply staggering. Conversely, the number of conditions which can be triggered by improper diet and lack of exercise is similarly huge.

One hundred years ago, very few people had to make much extra effort to seek out opportunities for kindness. Those who lived in cities knew their neighbors, shopkeepers, and skilled tradespeople and this was even more true for the vast majority of people who lived in rural areas. Much less of life was monetized, as there was high probability that a rich network of deep ties built on mutual interdependence and an understanding of shared destiny produced a steady trickle of kindness that one exuded, even if only with an implicit faith that kindness would be returned in one's own moment of need.

Today, chances are that if you are reading this, you're relatively isolated and know two or fewer of your neighbors. There is a high probability that our highly monetized society has immersed you in the illusion that you do not need your neighbors. It doesn't end there:

you're enmeshed in a network of transactional relationships that fall beneath the threshold of even loose ties. All of the essentials you need for your survival, from your food, water, electricity, gasoline, transit, and waste disposal are delivered by nameless and often faceless people who live far from you, and probably paid for by an electronic payment you make to other people who live even further away behind more firewalls. Your whole apparent means of survival has been reduced to your day job, yet even there, chances that you have a deep relationship with even three of your co-workers is very low. What's worse is that the pace and structure of your life is such that if anyone around you needs something (hint: they do), you are scarcely aware or even available to serve their needs. And chances are that when you encounter someone truly in need, you struggle to trust that their stated needs are genuine and simply do not have time or patience to discover and serve their true needs.

The range of mental health and social conditions caused by this sense of isolation, lack of trust, and apparent disconnection is staggering. Conversely, the magnitude of mental suffering that can be avoided or reversed by an attitude of gratitude, kindness, and compassion born of interconnection is similarly huge.

We're in the paradoxical age of connected disconnection. The dark side of our scientific progress has been a relentless pressure to disaggregate, decouple, dissect, and quantify everything. Yet in breaking the wholeness of life, we discard everything we can't measure and often kill whatever we try to disconnect in the attempt to understand its constituent parts. Like that poor frog in 8th grade biology that had to die so we could see how its liver connected to its spleen, we're the ones slowly making our way to the proverbial chopping table at the behest of our reductionist view of progress. Wouldn't it have been better to study the frog while it was alive, perhaps in its native environment, doing what nature intended it to do, so we could understand its place in the world and connection to life's wholeness?

The stakes couldn't be higher. This is bigger than changing the world. Its about changing this moment, bringing a sense of aliveness to it, affirming our interconnection and interdependence, and cultivating a quality of heart and mind that bring joy to ourselves and others. Its really about changing yourself. And if you can do that, the world might just be changed in the process.

May we all exercise our bodies and our spirits every single day!