

Feeding the Good Wolf: A Gratitude Conversation with Ferial Pearson by Katie Steedly Curling

Ferial Pearson founded Secret Kindness Agents to create and encourage kindness and compassion in our world. Pearson shares the Navajo story of a grandfather who tells his grandson about the wolves that live within his soul. There is a good wolf that is loving, kind, and compassionate. There is a bad wolf that is angry, hateful, and mean. His grandson asks him which wolf wins the internal struggle. The grandfather replies that the wolf you feed wins. We all have a choice as to which wolf to feed. We can all feed the kind wolf. In feeding the kind wolf, we are building ourselves, the person to whom we are kind, our community, and our world. Kindness reverberates and expands. In connecting Secret Kindness Agents with radical gratitude, it can be understood that agents (whatever their economic or social circumstance) become more powerful and aware of, and grateful for, their capacity to positively change themselves and their world through acts of kindness. Gratitude becomes a revolutionary proposition through acts of kindness.

Here Katie Steedly Curling speaks to Ferial Pearson about gratitude.

KSC: What are you grateful for?

FP: I am grateful for my ancestors, for one. I know that I would not be here without them. Not just genetically and biologically, but they formed who I am and what I value and have given me a chance to be a parent to my children. I am so grateful to my ancestors for that. I know they worked hard. I know they overcame so much, and still remained also grateful for what they have, and remained positive, and wanted to give back, and pay forward what it was that they were given. I am definitely grateful for my ancestors.

I am also grateful for my children because they teach me so much every day. Whenever I need a new perspective, I look to them and I always get it. They are so creative and sweet and open. I am grateful for my children and for young people in general. They always give me back my faith in humanity. When I get down, I just look to what they are doing and they inspire me every day.

KSC: How often are you in a classroom environment with young people currently?

FP: Just for observation? Almost every day at this point, but not as a teacher. My [university] students are in the field right now, and I am coaching them for the next couple months. However, I run the transgender youth group once a month on Saturdays, so I am with youth for that. That feeds my souls as well. So, then I just have lots of young people in my life, particularly in the LGBT community, that I work with. I do a pride prom. Some friends and I started a pride prom about thirteen years ago. We just wanted kids to be able to go to a prom where they could dance with who they wanted to dance with and not have to worry about judgement or people wanting them to be separated or anything like that. We wanted them to have a prom that they could afford so you know it is only

five dollars to get in, and they don't have to dress up super fancy if they don't have the money for that. In organizing things like that, I get to be around youth and that makes me so happy, for the Secret Kindness Agents. For some reason, people are hearing about it and want to do it. They will invite me to speak with their students. Quite often I get to be in a classroom with little ones, first grade through university, even. I will go and talk with them and workshop with them. It is sporadic, but it is quite often.

KSC: Do you have a gratitude practice—a personal gratitude practice?

FP: Every evening in quiet meditation I think of things I am grateful for. Then with my children, almost every night, we do something called High Low Hero. It is not a traditional gratitude practice. High Low Hero means you think of your high for the day, your low for the day, and who was your hero for the day, and why. Then we try to tell our heroes that they were our heroes. Kind of teaching them that they should look out for and what they should be thankful for every day.

KSC: How old are your children?

FP: Ten and thirteen, but they would want me to tell you almost eleven and almost fourteen.

KSC: How did you start High Low Hero?

FP: I used to go to a camp and then co-directed a camp called IncluCity Camp. The campers taught me. The young people again. They would do that in their cabins—Hi Low Hero. I thought,

‘That is great. Why not use it at home?’

KSC: Can we teach people about gratitude?

FP: That is a great question. I am not sure how I learned about it. I think it happened when I was very, very young with my parents and my grandparents. It got ingrained. It comes as second nature to me now. I think kindness and gratitude can both be definitely taught. By taught, I don't mean you open up somebody's head and put in in there, and you close up their head and they are done. What I mean is that they already have it. We just need to bring it up to the surface and then it can become a habit. It just needs to be done consistently and routinely with young people. That is what I was trying to do with my kids.

One thing I learned with teaching and learning about the Secret Kindness Agents, and doing that with my students, is the story of the two wolves. Do you know that story? It is a Cherokee legend. I found it on the First Nations website. A grandfather is speaking with his grandson. He tells his grandson, “I have these two wolves always fighting within me. There is a good wolf, full of kindness, and generosity, and gratitude, and compassion, and then a bad wolf, full of anger, and jealousy, and resentment, and they are always fighting each other.” The grandson asks him, “Well grandfather, which wolf wins?” and the grandfather says, “It is the one that I feed.” When I found the story, and told that story to my juniors in high school, we were in the middle of our Secret Kindness Agents project, and they said, “You know the acts of kindness we are carrying out are feeding the good wolves in the school. Not just the good wolves of the people who are receiving the acts of kindness, but our good wolves, as well.” When you are kind to somebody, you are growing your own good wolf as well as their good wolf. One of my non-negotiables has been that they have to reflect often. So, with my students what we did was, we journaled once a

week. I would just ask them to write down what happened, how did you feel before, how did you feel after you completed your assignment. Just so they would be forced to reflect upon what were their physical reactions to it, what were their emotional reactions to it. Then we went back at the end of the semester and we looked back at all of their journals and they noticed there was a pattern. It feels good. That it is something that lasts. I had one student who had been bullying people because it felt good. He was angry because of home circumstances, rightfully. He noticed it felt better to be kind than it did to be a bully. Not only that, but that feeling lasts longer. When I bully someone that good feeling only lasts a few seconds, and then I feel really terrible about myself, but the good stuff lasts, you know. It builds on itself. Of course, the opposite happens when you do something mean to someone. You are creating a bully when people hurt people. Our mission was to keep feeding our good wolves and starving the bad ones.

I told my own children this at the time. They were six and nine when I told them about it. My favorite story is when my daughter woke up one morning. She said, "Sometimes I wake up and both my wolves are sleeping." So, she learned about apathy. [I asked her] "What do you have to do?" [She replied], "I have to feed my good wolf right away and wake him up." I think of gratitude as feeding the good wolf, as well.

KSC: That is a simple decision. Just wake the good wolf up.

KSC: Why do you think your Secret Kindness Agents work has been so successful?

FP: I think the answer to that is simple. It is not difficult to do. Down to the basics. Once you are down to the basics. I think it is popular, and I am going to find this out for sure when I start my doctoral research, I think it is popular because teachers need some motivation and some validation. Teaching allows low morale in places. They [teachers] feel so helpless, like "Okay, I don't have control over budget. I don't have control over what my students are going through at home. I don't have control over all these different things." That was one goal I had for the Secret Kindness Agents with my own students when they did the project, students who were living in poverty and did not have the best things happening at home. All those types of things. They were not the most popular. They did not have high grades, but I wanted them to know they did have control over some things. It was: If you do an act of kindness today, and you are having a crappy day, even if your dad's in prison for drugs, you can still go out there and smile at someone and it will make you feel better as well as that person feel better. I think teachers have latched on to that feeling as well. "This doesn't take very long. It is an organic part of my classroom and I am contributing to the education of the whole child and also building myself." One of the stipulations of the project is the teachers have to be agents of kindness themselves. They have to be Secret Kindness Agents.

KSC: Do they have to take Secret Kindness Agent Names?

FP: Yes, they do.

KSC: That is one of my favorite parts. Some of the names the kids take on. I laughed out loud. It totally frames the project in personal humor. There is a lightness to kindness.

FP: The first thing that students want to tell me when I go to their classrooms is that they want to tell me what their agent name is. They are chosen names. Some of them are of things that they love. There is a pair of second grade twins, and their names are Agents Whip and Neigh Neigh. I was in a middle school classroom and this young lady comes up to me and she says, "I want to tell you my agent name is my auntie's name. She was the

kindest person I knew. She passed away. So that is my agent name." I was like bawling.

Their agent names are important. There is a teacher that I did not know was doing the project. We were taking a couple of classes together. She came up to me and said, "I have done your project with three kids at my school and I want to tell you about this one young lady. She is a third grader, and her mom was dying of cancer, and she was really angry all the time. She lashes out and was really mean. I taught her about the kindness agents. She has this agent name: G Baby Believe." She says, "When she is really bad, and being really super mean, I call her by her agent name and then her whole personality shifts because I am calling her by her kind name. I am appealing to the kindness in her." The agent names are definitely a huge part of the project. They are nonnegotiable. We have to have those. The agent names came about because my students decided that when we do our acts of kindness it is not true kindness if you expect a thank you or a reward. We decided we have to have agent names so when we are writing letters or notes or birthday cards we could sign it with an agent name, so people would not know who we are.

KSC: Why are the names so important?

FP: Part of it is because it makes it fun. Not a curricular dry thing. It is just fun. It makes you part of a secret club that you belong to, and human beings need a sense of belonging. I have watched throughout my career as a teacher for fifteen years now. I have walked kids through some pretty bad things because they wanted to stay in and belong. I thought, 'What if we could do the opposite? What if people could belong for a good reason?' I think that part of it is that only my agent team knows my name. This is something that makes me belong to that team of people. Then the third reason is like [my teacher friend] said about G Baby Believe. It is powerful that even in your worst moments, somebody will call you by this kind name. They recognize that you are not a bad person. You are just making a bad decision in this moment. There are so many kids. You have probably heard this, "What's the point? I am just a bad kid. What is the point of even trying to be good?" but when you call them by their agent name it is like, "No. There is still good in you. You just need to make that good wolf a little bit stronger right now. Feed the good wolf." You feed the good wolf. I think that is why the agent names are so important.

KSC: Have you seen a cultural component to your kindness work?

FP: Not that I can think, and it has been done as far as I know in over a hundred schools throughout the nation and in Canada, both rural areas and urban. There are rogue agents doing it by themselves. [One of my favorite rogue agents] Gemini. He loves the project.

KSC: Well, we need to have more rogue kindness.

FP: He just reports it, and says, "This is Gemini reporting for duty." This is what I did today. There are things being done everywhere by people of all backgrounds. Teachers of all races are doing it. I think mostly though it is women who are interested in it. If there is any cultural component that would be it, but I do have few men who are doing it. I just traveled to Skylar, Nebraska a couple of weeks. There is a man there who is a school counselor. He had me come out and talk to his high school and middle school students out in Skylar, Nebraska. It is a rural area. There is a meat packing plant. I was looking for students of high poverty and who had a 2.5 GPA or below, and it was a mostly white school, but my students were mostly students of color in the school. I did have some white students as well, but all of them were living in poverty and all of them had some difficult circumstances that they were trying to pull through. So that was my

demographic, but everybody else who is doing it has very different circumstances, as well.

KSC: You see similar acts of kindness if they engage with the project, regardless of where they are? The teachers, in whatever context, report the same kind of positive impact?

FP: Yes. So far it is anecdotally, and I am going to be starting my research, so hopefully this summer I get to ask them intentionally what the impact was.

KSC: How do we teach gratitude? What is the hook?

FP: I think the hook has been when they have instant gratification. One of my non-negotiables has been that they have to reflect often. So, with my students what we did was, we journaled once a week. I would just ask them to write down what happened, how did you feel before, how did you feel after you completed your assignment. Just so they would be forced to reflect upon what were their physical reactions to it, what were their emotional reactions to it. Then we went back at the end of the semester and we looked back at all of their journals and they noticed there was a pattern. It feels good. That it is something that lasts. I had one student who had been bullying people because it felt good. He was angry because of home circumstances, rightfully. He noticed it felt better to be kind than it did to be a bully. Not only that, but that feeling lasts longer. When I bully someone that good feeling only lasts a few seconds, and then I feel really terrible about myself, but the good stuff lasts, you know. It builds on itself. When I talk to people about the Secret Kindness Agents, at the end I give them an assignment. It is to turn to the person next to them and then give them an authentic compliment. It can't have anything to do with their physicality. It has to do with what you enjoy about that person. Two things always happen. Always the first thing that happens, and this is regardless of age, whether its kindergartners or octogenarians, the first thing that happens is everyone starts giggling. It is hilarious. Then I give them two minutes to do their authentic compliment. When they come back, I just notice a second thing: [They] are all smiling. [I tell them] "I want you all to think about and notice how your body feels right now." You can kind of see this realization go over their faces. "Oh yeah. I need to notice how good I feel. I am kinda warm and fuzzy and buzzy this feels good." I tell them, "That is how you hook your students. You really get them to understand how good it makes them feel."

I think the best way to teach gratitude and kindness is through modeling. You know, we know that as teachers kids care more about what you do than what you say. You can preach all day long, but if you are not practicing what you are teaching them, they are not going to take it seriously. That is why one of the requirements is that we do the acts of kindness along with our students. I did it with my students so they knew that because I was doing it too that it was important to me, and because they were the ones who came up with the acts of kindness, they had buy in as well. Almost all of the [students] developed 'signature moves', they called them, acts of kindness outside of what we were assigning, because they wanted to do more, so it did get kind of addictive.

KSC: How often are acts of kindness implemented?

FP: Once a week. The act of kindness might last all week long. One assignment a week. The assignment might be that you are picking up trash after school every day for a week, or it might be that you have to smile at everybody you see all day for a week. You got your assignment and you had to do that. Some of them were just a onetime thing. One of them was, you have to find someone who may not get a birthday card this month and you

have to write them a birthday card, or write a letter to the custodial staff, or things like. It just depended on what the assignment was, but you drew an envelope once a week.

KSC: How often would kids get on fire with it and do more?

FP: All the time. I was not even sure how often it was happening. I had one student who saved up and bought a mower and was mowing people's lawns. He would go out at night and mow people's lawns without their permission. I had to counsel him out of that because it was dangerous. He would do it in a feather boa. For multiple reasons. You are going to get hurt.

KSC: He did it at night so it would be secret?

FP: That is exactly what it was. Let's talk about consent. Just random stuff like that. It was extending an arm into the community. It was like going to a bowling alley and helping kids tie their shoes. Simple little things like that that cost no money. That was one of our rules. It could not cost any money because none of us had any anyway. It changed the way I think about kindness. When I ask adults about kindness, the first thing they think of is money or donating things. What if you have nothing to give monetarily? That does not mean you cannot be kind. When I asked students to come up with acts of kindness, the two rules were: one, it could not cost any money, and two, it was going to be done within school grounds, because that was the culture we wanted to change, our school culture. They started doing stuff outside of school culture. Some of them had been doing things the whole time, even before our project, they were just kind people, and it was just second nature to them. It probably was what their parents modeled at home. Maybe at least some of them learned from their friends. What kindness was, and what it felt like when you were talking about something to belong to.