2000 Years of Kindness
by Maria Popova

“Practice kindness all day to everybody and you will realize you’re already in heaven now,” Jack Kerouac wrote in a beautiful 1957 letter to his first wife turned lifelong friend. “Kindness, kindness, kindness,” Susan Sontag resolved in her diary on New Year’s Day in 1972. Half a century later, the Dalai Lama placed a single exhortation at the center of his ethical and ecological philosophy: “Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible.”

Nothing broadens the soul more than the touch of kindness, given or received, and nothing shrivels it more than a flinch of unkindness, given or received — something we have all been occasionally lashed with, and something of which we are all occasionally culpable, no matter how ethical our lives and how well-intentioned our conduct. Everyone loves the idea of kindness — loves thinking of themselves as a kind person — but somehow, the practice of it, the dailiness of it, has receded into the background in a culture rife with selfing and cynicism, a culture in which we have come to mistake the emotional porousness of kindness for a puncture in the armor of our hard individualism. And yet kindness remains our best antidote to the fundamental loneliness of being human.

Gathered here are two millennia of meditations on kindness — its challenges, its nuances, and its rippling rewards — from a posy of vast minds and vast spirits who have risen above the common tide of their times to give us the embers of timelessness.

Century-old art by the adolescent Virginia Frances Sterrett. (Available as a print and stationery cards.)

MARCUS AURELIUS

Once a heartbroken queer teenager raised by a single mother, Marcus Aurelius (April 26, 121–March 17, 180) was saved by Stoic philosophy, then tried to save a dying world with it when he came to rule Rome as the last of its Five Good Emperors. Across the epochs, he goes on saving us with the sonorous undertone of his entire philosophy — his humming insistence on kindness as the only effective antidote to all of life’s assaults. In his timeless Meditations (public library) — notes on life he had written largely to himself while learning how to live more nobly in an uncertain world that blindsides us as much with its beauty as with its brutality — he returns again and again to kindness and the importance of extending it to everyone equally at all times, because even at their cruelest, which is their most irrational, human beings are endowed with reason and dignity they can live up to.

Drawing on the other great refrain that carries his philosophy — the insistence that embracing our mortality is the key to living fully — he writes:

You should bear in mind constantly that death has come to men* of all kinds, men with varied occupations and various ethnicities… We too will inevitably end up where so many [of our heroes] have gone… Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Socrates… brilliant intellectuals, high-minded men, hard workers, men of ingenuity, self-confident men, men… who mocked the very transience and impermanence of human life…. men… long dead and buried… Only one thing is important: to behave throughout your life toward the liars and crooks around you with kindness, honesty, and justice.

The key to kindness, he observes, is keeping "the purity, lucidity, moderation, and justice of your mind" from being sullied by the actions of those you encounter, no matter how disagreeable and discomposed by unreason they may be. In a passage itself defying the laziness of labels, rooted in a metaphor more evocative of a Buddhist parable or a Transcendentalist diary entry or a Patti Smith Instagram poem than of a Stoic dictum, he writes:

Suppose someone standing by a clear, sweet spring were to curse it: it just keeps right on bringing drinkable water bubbling up to the surface. Even if he throws mud or dung in it, before long the spring disperses the dirt and washes it out, leaving no stain. So how are you to have the equivalent of an ever-flowing spring? If you preserve your self-reliance at every hour, and your kindness, simplicity, and morality.

LEO TOLSTOY

In the middle of his fifty-fifth year, reflecting on his imperfect life and his own moral failings, Leo Tolstoy (September 9, 1828–November 20, 1910) set out to construct a manual for morality by compiling "a wise thought for every day of the year, from the greatest philosophers of all times and all people," whose wisdom "gives one great inner force, calmness, and happiness" — thinkers and spiritual leaders who have shed light on what is most important in living a rewarding and meaningful life. Such a book, Tolstoy envisioned, would tell a person "about the Good Way of Life." He spent the next seventeen years on the project. In 1902, by then seriously ill and facing his own mortality, Tolstoy finally completed the manuscript under the working title A Wise Thought for Every Day. It was published two years later, in Russian, but it took nearly a century for the first English translation to appear: A Calendar of Wisdom: Daily Thoughts to Nourish the Soul, Written and Selected from the World's Sacred Texts (public library). For each day of the year, Tolstoy had selected several quotes by great thinkers around a particular theme, then contributed his own thoughts on the subject, with kindness as the pillar of the book's moral sensibility.

Perhaps prompted by the creaturely severity and the clenching of heart induced by winter's coldest, darkest days, or perhaps by the renewed resolve for moral betterment with which we face each new year, he writes in the entry for January 7:

The kinder and the more thoughtful a person is, the more kindness he can find in other people.

Kindness enriches our life; with kindness mysterious things become clear, difficult things become easy, and dull things become cheerful.

At the end of the month, in a sentiment Carl Sagan would come to echo in his lovely invitation to meet ignorance with kindness, Tolstoy writes:

You should respond with kindness toward evil done to you, and you will destroy in an evil person that pleasure which he derives from evil.

In the entry for February 3, he revisits the subject:

Kindness is for your soul as health is for your body: you do not notice it when you have it.

After copying out two kindness-related quotations from Jeremy Bentham ("A person becomes happy to the same extent to which he or she gives happiness to other people.") and John Ruskin ("The will of God for us is to live in happiness and to take an interest in the lives of others."), Tolstoy adds:

Love is real only when a person can sacrifice himself for another person. Only when a person forgets himself for the sake of another, and lives for another creature, only this kind of love can be called true love, and only in this love do we see the blessing and reward of life. This is the foundation of the world.

Nothing can make our life, or the lives of other people, more beautiful than perpetual kindness.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

In a 1931 essay for the magazine Forum and Century, later included in his altogether indispensable book Ideas and Opinions (public library), Albert Einstein (March 14, 1879–April 18, 1955) writes:

How strange is the lot of us mortals! Each of us is here for a brief sojourn; for what purpose he knows not, though he sometimes thinks he senses it. But without deeper reflection one knows from daily life that one exists for other people — first of all for those upon whose smiles and well-being our own happiness is wholly dependent, and then for the many, unknown to us, to whose destinies we are bound by the ties of sympathy. A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life are based on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving.

ROSS GAY

In The Book of Delights (public library) — his soul-broadening yearlong experiment in willful gladness — the poet and gardener Ross Gay recounts harvesting carrots from the garden with his partner, and pirouettes in his signature way of long sunlit sentences into a meditation on the etymology of kindness:

Today we pulled the carrots from the garden that Stephanie sowed back in March. She planted two kinds: a red kind shaped like a standard kind, and a squat orange kind with a French name, a kind I recall the packet calling a "market variety," probably because, like the red kind, it's an eye-catcher. And sweet, which I learned nibbling a couple of both kinds like Bugs Bunny as I pulled them.

The word kind meaning type or variety, which you have noticed I have used with some flourish, is among the delights, for it puts the kindness of carrots front and center in this discussion (good for your eyes, yummy, etc.), in addition to reminding us that kindness and kin have the same mother. Maybe making those to whom we are kind our kin. To whom, even, those we might be. And that circle is big.

ADAM PHILLIPS & BARBARA TAYLOR

In the plainly titled, tiny, enormously rewarding book On Kindness (public library), psychoanalyst Adam Phillips and historian Barbara Taylor observe that although kindness is central to all of our major spiritual traditions, it has somehow become "our forbidden pleasure." They write:

We usually know what the kind thing to do is — and kindness when it is done to us, and register its absence when it is not… We are never as kind as we want to be, but nothing outrages us more than people being unkind to us. There is nothing we feel more consistently deprived of than kindness; the unkindness of others has become our contemporary complaint. Kindness consistently preoccupies us, and yet most of us are unable to live a life guided by it.

Defining kindness as "the ability to bear the vulnerability of others, and therefore of oneself," they chronicle its decline in the values of our culture:

The kind life — the life lived in instinctive sympathetic identification with the vulnerabilities and attractions of others — is the life we are more inclined to live, and

indeed is the one we are often living without letting ourselves know that this is what we are doing. People are leading secretly kind lives all the time but without a language in which to express this, or cultural support for it. Living according to our sympathies, we imagine, will weaken or overwhelm us; kindness is the saboteur of the successful life. We need to know how we have come to believe that the best lives we can lead seem to involve sacrificing the best things about ourselves; and how we have come to believe that there are pleasures greater than kindness…

In one sense kindness is always hazardous because it is based on a susceptibility to others, a capacity to identify with their pleasures and sufferings. Putting oneself in someone else's shoes, as the saying goes, can be very uncomfortable. But if the pleasures of kindness — like all the greatest human pleasures — are inherently perilous, they are nonetheless some of the most satisfying we possess.

[…]

In giving up on kindness — and especially our own acts of kindness — we deprive ourselves of a pleasure that is fundamental to our sense of well-being.

Returning to their foundational definition of kindness, they add:

Everybody is vulnerable at every stage of their lives; everybody is subject to illness, accident, personal tragedy, political and economic reality. This doesn't mean that people aren't also resilient and resourceful. Bearing other people's vulnerability — which means sharing in it imaginatively and practically without needing to get rid of it, to yank people out of it — entails being able to bear one's own. Indeed it would be realistic to say that what we have in common is our vulnerability; it is the medium of contact between us, what we most fundamentally recognize in each other.

GEORGE SAUNDERS

In his wonderful commencement address turned book, the lyrical and largehearted George Saunders addresses those just embarking on the adventure of life with hard-won wisdom wrested from his own experience of being human among humans:

I'd say, as a goal in life, you could do worse than: Try to be kinder.

In seventh grade, this new kid joined our class. In the interest of confidentiality, her name will be "ELLEN." ELLEN was small, shy. She wore these blue cat's-eye glasses that, at the time, only old ladies wore. When nervous, which was pretty much always, she had a habit of taking a strand of hair into her mouth and chewing on it.

So she came to our school and our neighborhood, and was mostly ignored, occasionally teased ("Your hair taste good?" — that sort of thing). I could see this hurt her. I still remember the way she'd look after such an insult: eyes cast down, a little gut-kicked, as

if, having just been reminded of her place in things, she was trying, as much as possible, to disappear. After awhile she'd drift away, hair-strand still in her mouth. At home, I imagined, after school, her mother would say, you know: "How was your day, sweetie?" and she'd say, "Oh, fine." And her mother would say, "Making any friends?" and she'd go, "Sure, lots."

Sometimes I'd see her hanging around alone in her front yard, as if afraid to leave it.

And then — they moved. That was it. No tragedy, no big final hazing.

One day she was there, next day she wasn't.

End of story.

Now, why do I regret that? Why, forty-two years later, am I still thinking about it? Relative to most of the other kids, I was actually pretty nice to her. I never said an unkind word to her. In fact, I sometimes even (mildly) defended her.

But still. It bothers me.

So here's something I know to be true, although it's a little corny, and I don't quite know what to do with it:

What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness.

Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded … sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly.

Or, to look at it from the other end of the telescope: Who, in your life, do you remember most fondly, with the most undeniable feelings of warmth?

Those who were kindest to you, I bet.

But kindness, it turns out, is hard — it starts out all rainbows and puppy dogs, and expands to include… well, everything.

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

Most failures of kindness, most triumphs of cruelty, are flinches of fear, unreconciled in the soul. In 1978, drawing on a jarring real-life experience, the poet Naomi Shihab Nye captured the difficult, beautiful, redemptive transmutation of fear into kindness in a poem of uncommon soulfulness and empathic wingspan that has since become a classic, turned into an animated short film and included in countless anthologies, among them the wondrous 100 Poems to Break Your Heart (public library).

KINDNESS
by Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.