

Kindness. Man that's a tepid topic. I could stand up here and say that we all need to be kind and that we need more kindness in the world and it won't cause any controversy. No one is going to leave angry or stop me after the service to argue a point. I'm pretty sure that all of us agree that we should be kind to one another. But if that's the case, how come we aren't? What exactly is keeping us from being our best selves?

This month is Random Acts of Kindness Month – a holiday invented to encourage and promote kindness, forgiveness and civility in hopes that people will practice being warmhearted, considerate, humane and sympathetic.

I think its great idea to remind us of the importance of kindness because I believe kindness and civility are critical. I think that we influence every person we come into contact with and that it is up to us whether we are a good influence or a bad influence. I also think kindness is like planting a flower. It doesn't necessarily make the whole city more beautiful, but it makes your little corner of the world more beautiful. And sometimes the idea, once planted, spreads. So, in other words, I WANT to approach other people in my life with kindness. But I get off track.

In a way it's kind of like meditation. You know how, when you meditate you're supposed to clear your mind, and if you find your mind wandering, you're supposed to GENTLY bring it back? That's what Random Act of Kindness month is doing – it is gently reminding us that we have wandered from our purpose and helping us get back on track.

I've spent some time thinking about my own lost opportunities to react with kindness and I've identified a number of things that have hindered me -- and I thought I'd talk about those today just in case you too have found yourself not living up to your kindness ideals.

It seems to me that the ability to act with kindness is dependent on our ability to feel empathy for others. Plato said "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." He meant that we need to put ourselves in the other person's place and understand how they might feel. To see our own problems in theirs.

Maybe that's what kindness really means. It's when we see other people and think "we are of the same kind" or "we have things in kind" ... that somehow we are "kin". So one of the things that stands in the way of acting with kindness is the inability to feel that connection with someone or something else. I know that I don't always feel compassion towards people who I don't understand. Instead of seeing all of us as part of that interconnected web with the same sorts of dreams or problems, I feel like some people are SO different from me. I can't even think of how to be kind to them. Of course the truth is that I should just see them as human beings and treat them with the same warmth I would anyone else. Maybe this month we can remember to see ourselves in other people and treat them the way we would like to be treated.

Sometimes I think I am just too busy to act with kindness and concern. I'm in a hurry and I can't bother to take the time to help someone else. I would like to say that every time I've been in the grocery store, for example, and I've seen someone struggling to reach something on a shelf or in the cold case, that I've stopped to help them reach the item they need. But in honesty, it depends, in part, on whether I'm rushing around that day. But if I am honest with myself, here is what I really know. I am never that busy. There is always time for kindness and connecting to another human being. Remember what William Penn said. "I expect to pass through life but once. If therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again." Just for this month, let's not be too busy. Let's do the kind thing, right then.

Along this same vein, is the feeling that I am just too tired to bother being kind. This seemed especially true when I went to the Random Acts of Kindness website where they suggest acts of kindness for the month. It made me tired just to read all of them! I thought "these people have way more energy than I have!" But to be honest, being kind doesn't always require a big production of kindness. Merely smiling, nodding and greeting a stranger on the sidewalk is an act of kindness. Saying "good morning" to someone in the elevator is an act of

kindness. Think about how it makes you feel when a stranger smiles, holds the door for you, says hello as they walk past – it always brightens my day a little. H. Jackson Brown said “Today, give a stranger one of your smiles. It might be the only sunshine he sees all day. “ It’s not going to exhaust me to smile for goodness sakes!

There are even things we can NOT do, and their very omission is an act of kindness. Listening without talking or listening without giving unsolicited advice can be an act of kindness. Biting back a mean retort is an act of kindness. I love Robert Brault’s quote where he said “Today I bent the truth to be kind, and I have no regret, for I am far surer of what is kind than I am of what is true.”

Surely I am never too tired for these simple acts of kindness? So this month, let’s look for the lazy acts of kindness that we can spread, even when we think we are too tired for one more thing.

I hate to admit this in a public setting, but one of the main reasons I find myself holding back instead of reacting with kindness is because I’m angry or my feelings have been hurt. I can tell you that I WANT to be a person who always takes the high road. I tell myself to let things go, that I can afford to be magnanimous to people with whom I’ve had a disagreeable encounter. But it is so HARD. One of the reasons that this is such a hard roadblock to overcome may be that it only occurs with people I have a relationship with. I don’t get angry with complete strangers! It’s the people who are in your life who have the power to hurt you and make you angry. Yet I know I still need to be kind even when I am disappointed with another person’s actions. Samuel Johnson said “Kindness is in our power, even when fondness is not” and I think that is true. Not only does reacting with kindness put a damper on the other person’s meanness, but it also is better for our own peace of mind and wellbeing. Just for this month, I’m going to try extra hard to be kind to unkind people – because they need it the most.

You know, sometimes I think it is just too embarrassing to be kind. Sometimes it takes getting out of your comfort zone to actually do the kind thing. You know what I mean? You have to be willing to step outside yourself.

A few weeks ago I was traveling and I was going through airport security. There was a mother traveling with a baby and young boy who was about 3. She was carrying the baby and pulling a suitcase while the little boy was pulling his own little suitcase. As the child realized that his father wasn't traveling with them – he started to unravel. He wouldn't pull his suitcase and he clung to his mother's leg and cried for his dad, who he could see on the other side of the glass wall. While his mom was very efficient and immediately buckled his little suitcase to hers and continued to move through the security line pulling the two suitcases, holding the baby and trying to verbally comfort her clinging son – she was clearly struggling. I thought "I wish I could help her."

Well, the truth is, I could have.

It would have been kind of me to offer to take over the suitcases and she'd be able to hold the little boy's hand and comfort him. But I stopped myself. I thought people in the airport might be suspicious if I offered to hold on to her suitcases. She might think it was odd for a complete stranger to speak to her. I looked around and other people were looking at her with sympathy, but no one else was stepping forward – and that also discouraged me from getting involved. So I did nothing. I had the opportunity to be kind – but I couldn't step outside my comfort zone to do it. Mignon McLaughlin said "Don't be yourself - be someone a little nicer." This month I'm going to look for opportunities to be better than myself.

Maybe some of you had children like mine – they had the uncanny ability to overlook any kind of mess. Dirty clothes on the floor? Cat threw-up in their path? Dead bug on the carpet? They'd just step right over it. They always looked surprised and completely innocent if I called them on it. Somehow they were so unobservant that they just didn't even notice the mess around them. Sometimes I am like that when it comes to other people and their need for an injection of kindness. To be honest, I just don't notice that there is something I can do to help make someone else's life a little easier. I am wrapped up with my own life and I am not paying attention to other people's mess. I am always amazed when I suddenly notice that there is someone right behind me with their hands full and I

didn't even know they needed to have the door opened for them. And I can be terrible about noticing a friend's distress – HOW can I EVEN be oblivious to people I care about? How can I NOT notice their unhappiness and their need for a kind word?

Then there are also all the "invisible" people in your life – the people it's easy to ignore -- the lady who cleans your office, the kid running the cash register at the grocery store, the cafeteria worker. It is so easy to overlook people. But sometimes they need us to notice them! The kid checking out the groceries just got snapped at by a customer and she needs you to smile, say a friendly word and act relaxed and calm. It should be easy. We just have to notice that it's needed. Just for this month I'm going to be observant and find where I can intervene with kindness.

All these things lead up to the one big thing that I think hinders me the most in my quest to be kind. I'm just out of practice. As a matter of fact, that's my main problem with the whole idea of Random Acts of Kindness. I don't think that kindness should be random at all. Spontaneous maybe, purposeful certainly But not haphazard or random. I think kindness should be one of our most purposeful spiritual practices. It is part of what makes us worthwhile human beings. Being kind makes us better people, it makes the world a better place and studies have shown that it is good for our health. So there are lots of reasons to embrace the practice and make it part of who we are. We need to purposefully practice kindness until it becomes part of our DNA. We need to practice until kindness becomes second nature.

Then I won't have to worry about being too busy, too lazy, too embarrassed or too angry to be kind. If I practice, practice, practice I could be kind without thinking. William Wordsworth said "The best portion of a good man's life are his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love."

I want to be THAT person. This month I am going to practice to become the person I want to be. I'm going to remember that life is short and there isn't a second chance to get it right.

Readings:

Just for today, I will let go of anger. Just for today, I will let go of worry. Today, I will count my many blessings. Today, I will do my work honestly. Today, I will be kind to every living creature.

Mikao Usui

When you are uncertain if you can combat the pervasive misery in the world, when you are unsure of what to do next, when you don't know who is on your side -- stand up and do the unthinkable! Contribute a random act of kindness, and in the doing, stake out a small part of the planet that looks forward to your presence.

These Random Acts of Kindness may not end racial hatred, droughts, or murders. But they do throw a counter weight onto the scales where we measure our worth each day. At the end of the day, you'll know one thing for sure: you chose not to live in the world as it is, but rather as you would like it to be.

Martin Kimeldorf