

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Trust”
Sunday, February 17, 2019 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “You may be deceived if you trust too much, but you will live in torment if you don’t trust enough. ~Frank Crane

Sermon “Random Acts of Kindness” Rev. Paul Sprecher

Stacy Lee, a grandmother in Columbia, Maryland, tells this story about a random act of kindness that enabled her to be kind to her granddaughter:

I saw a dress in a consignment shop that I knew my granddaughter would love. But money was tight, so I asked the store owner if she could hold it for me. “May I buy the dress for you?” asked another customer. “Thank you, but I can’t accept such a gracious gift,” I said. Then she told me why it was so important for her to help me. She’d been homeless for three years, she said, and had it not been for the kindness of strangers, she would not have been able to survive. “I’m no longer homeless, and my situation has improved,” she said. “I promised myself that I would repay the kindness so many had shown me.” She paid for the dress, and the only payment she would accept in return was a heartfelt hug.¹

Yes, it’s Random Acts of Kindness day today, February 17th. Actually, it seems it’s also the last day of Random Acts of Kindness week, which always starts on February 11th. Others have it that the week starts today and extends through next Friday. So we have almost two weeks to intentionally practice random acts of kindness.

The term and the practice are said to have originated

...in a Sausalito, California, restaurant in 1982 when Anne Herbert scrawled the words "practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty" on a place mat. From there it spread to bumper stickers, quietly at first, but with all the powerful momentum of something important—calling us to lives of caring and compassion. *Random Acts of Kindness*, a book telling true stories of acts of kindness, was published in February 1993 and set off a chain reaction.²

Of course, the idea is that by setting aside a day or a week or more to *practice* random acts of kindness, we develop a capacity for kindness every day of the year. The Dalai Lama says to “Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible.”

There’s an app for that, the Kindness app. [pull out phone] It offers specific suggestions for performing a random act of kindness each day and then writing it down so you remember and can keep doing it day after day. Today, for example, it suggests, “Catch up with an old friend who you have not heard from in a while.” You could try that one out today. There’s also a hashtag for that that, #RAKtivist. There’s a foundation for that, the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation. There are ideas to try out, 51 in one of the lists I saw; here are a few:

- Send someone a handwritten letter or postcard.
- Bring someone a souvenir.
- Cook someone a meal.

- Bake someone treats.
- Give someone a book you think they'd like
- Give someone a hug

Especially for a stranger, you could

- Leave quarters at the laundromat.
- Pay the toll for the person behind you.
- Leave a larger than normal tip.
- Buy someone behind you in line their morning coffee.
- Give up a good parking spot.
- Let someone behind you at the supermarket check out first.

Practicing random acts of kindness is a way to build up social trust, a way of demonstrating that the world is not actually a hostile and threatening place. If we are fortunate, we learn basic trust from our parents, the sense that we are safe in this world. Not everyone is so fortunate, and we learn to be less trusting in some situations as we grow up and can sustain more risks. Random acts of kindness both given and received can disrupt the patterns of doubt and mistrust that too often cloud our days.

So what's in it for me? So asks the skeptic. What's in it is the possibility of a world that has more trust kindness in it because I'm doing my part to make it so and others are learning to reciprocate.

Here at First Parish we learn to practice kindness as a way of life. We gather in covenant with one another and remind ourselves each week that "Love is the

spirit of this church, and service is its gift.” When we speak of “service,” we are talking her about specific acts of kindness we do here at First Parish:

- Preparing lunches to feed homeless people at Mainspring each month;
- Providing clothing for families and especially children in need – this year especially collecting diapers as well as other clothes;
- Sharing our plate each month with local charities, this month with Health Imperatives, which promotes healthy, safe, and vibrant families and communities; and
- This winter we are privileged to be able to give shelter to someone who would otherwise have to sleep in his car.

It’s not always easy to carry our covenant out in practice and sometimes the affirmation can come to seem rote. Sometimes in the work of the congregation we forget that we are all committed by our covenant to being kind to one another. Have any of you ever been frustrated in a committee meeting or at an event that wasn’t going just right? Have any of you ever gotten short with another member or even lost your temper (besides me)?

One of the ways we remind ourselves of how our covenant actually works out in practice is by reviewing the behavioral covenant that was adopted almost six years ago by the congregation. [Appears on the overhead] As I read it over, it seems to me to be a prescription for kindness as a way of life here at First Parish:

To bring the above statements [in our covenant] to fruition, we pledge to each other, our fellow Church Members, Church Leadership, Church Staff, Minister, and our Youth to:

§ Maintain personal integrity – here we respect every person’s right to follow his, her, or their conscience; no one should be asked to believe in or participate in anything the violates their own sense of what is right.

Let’s all affirm that.

§ Nurture each other’s spiritual growth – “Spiritual” can be a little highfalutin’ some of the time. Growing our spirits means expanding our empathy – partly by learning to practice kindness more extensively.

[Everyone:]

§ Communicate honestly and directly, maintaining confidentiality and avoiding gossip – and this is one where all of us can falter from time to time. Another way we say this is “No triangulation.” If you have conflict with someone or feel a criticism welling up, go to them directly rather than behind their backs to someone else. Our Shared Ministry Committee can help and support you in doing that. [Everyone]

§ Listen sensitively and patiently, without judgment – We practice this especially in our Connections group meeting once a month, but we are committed to practicing it in every part of our life together. [You say it]

§ Keep an open mind on all issues – even when it seems to you that the other person is being a complete idiot [You]

§ Tolerate differences of opinion – because we have a lot to learn from other people’s opinions, even when we make decisions that can’t incorporate them all. [All]

- § Support each other in joys and sorrows – something we practice in every service during our time of sharing [Everyone]
- § Serve as models of appropriate and respectful behavior – be kind, and learn from others who are kind.
- § Focus on the common goal of creating a vibrant religious community, remembering that such a community requires our time, talent, and financial support – because we all have a lot to share with one another, including money, as our Stewardship Committee is reminding us especially this month and next. [All]
- § Use this Covenant as a guidepost in making decisions – when in doubt, pull this out! [all]

And let's all affirm together how this makes us a kind congregation:

Honoring these pledges will enable us to have “an inclusive community of love, truth, justice, stewardship, and service within and beyond these walls.”

Our gratitude goes to Sam Baumgarten, Rev. Anita Farber-Robertson, Jack Hart, Mary Maruska, and Lisa Rue, who drafted these words in 2013.

My friend and colleague Ken Reed-Brown celebrated thirty years of service at Old Ship/First Parish in Hingham a few years ago. He was asked as a sort of summation of his career so far what he believed were the three most important things about our Unitarian Universalist Living Tradition. His reply was:

“Kindness, kindness, kindness.”

So practicing random acts of kindness, not only today or this week but throughout the year, is one of the ways we continue to grow and mature all of our lives.

One more story of a random act of kindness, this from Marilyn Kinsella, of Canmore, Canada:

I forgot about the rules on liquids in carry-on luggage, so when I hit security at the airport, I had to give up all my painting supplies. When I returned a week later, an attendant was at the baggage area with my paints. Not only had he kept them for me, but he'd looked up my return date and time in order to meet me.³

Highlighting this day and this week for particular focus is a way of reminding ourselves that we should, as the Dalai Lama says, "Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible." It is a way of reminding ourselves that every person has inherent worth and dignity, and that we should make that evident in the way we behave toward them, whether partner, or member of our family, or friend or neighbor or stranger.

For, as Walt Whitman reminds us in his words:

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are,
The endless pride and outstretching of people; unspeakable joys and sorrows;
The wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see, and the wonders that fill
each minute of time forever;

It is for you whoever you are--it is no farther from you than your hearing and sight are from you; it is hinted by nearest, commonest, readiest.

Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last, in things best known to you, finding the best, or as good as the best

Happiness, knowledge, not in another place but this place, not for another hour, but this hour.

And may there always be kindness here, and in our hearts, and everywhere – wherever we may go.

AMEN, and may it be so.

¹ <https://www.rd.com/true-stories/inspiring/kindness-strangers/>

² <https://makeadiff.wordpress.com/2006/06/02/the-history-of-random-acts-of-kindness/>

³ <https://www.rd.com/true-stories/inspiring/kindness-strangers/>