
"Kindness is the only non-delusional response to everything." George Sanders



Kindness is defined as extending genuine care and compassion in helpful action without expecting anything in return. Etymologically, the word "kindness" is born out of the Old English derivation of the word "kind", indicating one's kind or family members. Kindness, from the mid-5th century to the 12th century, meant treating one's family with compassion. Society has evolved since then, and the meaning of kindness has broadened to include not only family members but the development of the virtue of treating all people, universally, with kind-heartedness. The German word for child, *kind* has a similar root. The little child is full of innocent goodness, fresh out of the spiritual world, but is longing to know "how to do" kindness from those who care for them.

Learning Through Imitation

Our task as pedagogues is to create worthy patterns that generate a path for the child to follow. The young child has abundant enthusiasm and wants to learn how to "do life" from the teacher. To be an example of how to "do life" is a big responsibility and takes commitment and intense generosity from the teacher. We can ask ourselves, "How are my relationships with my colleagues, my friends, and family? Am I creating worthy patterns for the child to follow?" Our work with Waldorf pedagogy centres around the young child's natural ability to emulate what the teacher brings to the classroom. The young child imitates by first paying full attention to something, inwardly replicating it, and then following the pattern and modelling it. It is the teacher's privilege to show the child what it truly means to be a human being. What we think, feel, and do is transparent to the little child. They unconsciously imitate all the impressions they experience with their caretakers with uninhibited faith and unconditional trust. They have no filters— everything the adults around them do and say goes directly into their experience of the world. When an adult models genuine loving kindness that emanates from the heart towards other human beings, this represents what the angels do for us. When we become active on another's behalf and reach out with selfless kind-heartedness, we are imitating how our guardian angel works within us. The little child recognizes this gesture and begins to sense and mirror how kindness is "done."

We are not perfect, and sometimes situations don't go as well as we hope. Self-kindness and self-care are also important so that we nurture a forgiving, compassionate relationship with ourselves. Our wellspring of strength is inexhaustible when we are spiritually striving. It is a virtue to get up again after falling in the midst of difficulties and challenges and begin anew. The children sense this in their teacher and inwardly imitate it; this gives them courage with their own struggles.

Children Who Challenge Us

Many children come to us today with struggles that we try to understand. Every child carries a mystery that they have brought with them into this world, and it is our privilege as early childhood teachers to accompany them and remain steadfast by their side. When we have this attitude, Henning Kohler ¹ tells us, "The angel of the child puts the right question into my mouth, and the essential one that needs no uttering, the angel puts into my gaze, my fingertips, my body language, the sound of my voice." With these children, it is essential that the teacher makes an extra effort to become ever more sensitive, with empathy and active understanding for the child's situation. A child will resist a teacher who is not sensitive to them. Warmth of heart is important so that the child feels safe and cared for. The very children who demand the most from us build new potentials in ourselves. Building tolerance, acceptance, and patience has a healing effect. Extravagant kindness is a worthy offering to these children.

The Role of Compassion

In the lecture "The Destiny of Individuals and Nations" ² Rudolf Steiner describes the importance of our own heart deeply sensing into the hearts of others, especially those who are suffering: "How often has it been said that as human souls advance into spiritual worlds, they also grow able to join their own feelings to the pain that lives in another. And indeed, the one or the other of us will often be put in a position where the events of our time are causing pain. We shall then be able to see if we are strong enough to unite in the right kind of feeling with the pain of the other, if the pain living in the soul of the other can become pain felt in ourselves. The potential is there for mankind to gradually reach a point where the pain living in another does not spare us but lives on in us." Can our hearts hold a sacred tenderness and develop the virtue of selfless kindness for our brothers and sisters? Spiritual kindness focuses on the sake of the deed that is done and not for one's value in it. When we put ourselves aside and are fully present for another person, we enter into a deed of kindness that frees us up for grace to be part of what we do.



In her extraordinary memoir, "I Am a Girl from Africa", Elizabeth Nyamayaro³ eloquently describes persevering through inconceivable odds and eventually finding her way to her true mission. Later in her life, she became an advisor to the United Nations and a warrior for social justice. She dedicates her memoir with these words: "For my dearest Gogo, whose indomitable spirit, love, and wisdom formed the core of who I am." In one of her most cherished childhood memories, her grandmother, Gogo, taught her that if one person is not well, no one else can be truly well. The Ubuntu greeting in her community was: "Ndiripo kana waka diyiwu" which translates as "I am well as long as you are well." What a beautiful way to greet another human being, so much better than simply saying, "Hello."

Children Born with Kindness

There are children coming into the world now that bring with them a quality of "spiritual kindness." At an early childhood teachers' conference some years ago in New York, an anthroposophical doctor said, "It is the children who are bringing us the latest news from the spiritual world." I found this profound statement to be true over the last 50 years and have been so fortunate and blessed to spend my life with little children. Recently, a five-year-old child whom I know well had a traumatic experience. This child has an extremely sensitive soul and has been well protected by her parents. The family was visiting friends, and the child was exposed to a movie with some harrowing scenes. Afterwards, she had frightening dreams and said, "I am having bad thoughts." There was much crying and struggling as the child could not understand why she could not let go of the images that she had seen. With her parents, she created what she called her toolbox. It contained artistic materials so she could express her sadness and anxiety non-verbally through drawing pictures and making beeswax angels that would protect her. She asked God to help her. A few weeks later, this child said to her mama, "Now I know that I can help someone else who is feeling the same way I have felt because of what I have gone through. I am going to tell them my story and help them." This is an astounding statement from a young child, indicating a futuristic capacity of spiritual kindness: sensing another's pain as her own and offering to serve others with compassion and understanding, as Rudolf Steiner described.

Social Acts of Kindness

There are initiatives that promote kindness and social justice, such as the *Random Acts of Kindness Foundation*, which address the whole society to promote empathy and dedicate it in a worldwide way. There are other foundations and projects that aim to bring societal awareness and the importance of bringing compassionate goodness to others. As James M. Barrie said, "Always be a little kinder than necessary." Small ways of bringing good and compassionate kindness in our daily work to all those whom we encounter are healing gestures. A radical motivation to always continue cultivating and invigorating our inner life is essential. Asking our spiritual helpers to guide us brings inspiration. Waldorf early childhood teachers bless the children in their care, treat them with dignity, and recognize the miracle of the spiritual being within each child. The children in our care are depending on us to bring a match from spirit country and translate it into earthly language. How we treat one another in the social realm is extremely important. This work is challenging and calls for persistent determination, selfless kindness, and willingness to stretch and widen the heart. There is so much suffering in our world right now that it can feel overwhelming to try and find ways to alleviate what so many people are experiencing. How vital it is to not only to believe in kindness but to live it fully and fiercely, with a mutual understanding that every person deserves the same care and dignity, regardless of who they are. There is a prayer that the Dalai Lama recites daily, originating from the 8th-century Buddhist sage, Shantideva. There are several different translations. The words hold deep spiritual kindness and everlasting compassion for all of humanity:

May I be a guard for those who need protection.
A guide for those on the path

A boat, a raft, a bridge for those who wish to cross the flood
May I be a lamp in the darkness
A resting place for the weary
A healing medicine for all who are sick
A vase of plenty, a tree of miracles
And for the boundless multitudes of living beings
May I bring sustenance and awakening
Enduring like the earth and sky
Until all beings are freed from sorrow
And all are awakened
May we all be resilient keepers of love, strength, and kindness.

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Footnotes:

¹ Henning Koehler, Difficult Children: There is No Such Thing. AWSNA, 2003,

² Rudolf Steiner, The Destiny of Individuals and of Nations, GA 157, Lecture One.

³ Elizabeth Nyamayaro, I Am a Girl from Africa, 2021, Simon and Schuster, Inc.