

The Roots of Kindness in World Religions
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I can't think of any other period in my lifetime when Americans were behaving as rudely towards one another as now. We are not taking our turn at 4-way stop signs here in Sheridan, some are disrupting school board meetings in aggressive and discourteous ways. Some are displaying extremely offensive political banners and stickers. On national TV and radio people are feeling freer to use 4-letter words, many are referring to people we disagree with in very derogatory terms, and many are yelling at one another. Airline staff are being verbally and physically assaulted. The riot at the Capitol on January 6th is but an extreme case of what has been building for many years in our country. It is especially disturbing that some who behave these ways also claim to be faithful Christians. As blogger and UU minister John Palovitz has pointed out, many of these same people do not seem to realize what a departure their behavior is from the teachings of Jesus. Palovitz wrote a piece recently entitled; "I'm Not Saying Conservative Christianity is Anti-Jesus. Jesus is." Here is a quote:

The poor, the outcast, the hurting, the hungry, the homeless, the lonely. Jesus said he literally inhabits the most vulnerable among us, and that the way we treat them is the way we treat Jesus himself. That's a really disturbing reality, when you spend so much of your time denying people healthcare and cutting social programs and assault voting rights and legislatively attacking people for their sexuality or their nation of origin or their [skin] pigmentation.

I don't claim to know how we have come so far off the track of kindness, which is the theme for this month, but I thought it would be useful to explore the roots of kindness in the teachings of some of the major world religions. Perhaps strengthened with this knowledge we might be better prepared to deal with the decline in courtesy and kindness that we have been witness to.

Ian spoke a couple of weeks ago about the spirituality of working for justice. He defined spirituality as the search for meaning and purpose. And Shannon spoke last week about kindness and gratitude from a Native American perspective. Kindness seems related to justice seeking as seen in the words of the prophet Micah (8-6) from the Hebrew Bible: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requests of you; but to do justice, to love loving-kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. At least from a biblical view, justice work, lovingkindness, and humility are brought together as a unified guide for living.

We know that kindness is inherent in many animal species. I am thinking of the benevolent bonobos, elephants, dolphins, dogs, and other creatures who all display kindness and sensitivity towards each other and across species. It seems that kindness is rooted in our biology. I believe one of our life tasks and purposes is to work towards greater kindness and reduced aggression. Psychoanalyst Alfred Adler pointed out over a century ago that sensitivity and kindness towards others are part of the foundation of mental health.

What is kindness? According to Wikipedia:

Kindness is a behavior characterized by benevolent goodness. When a person acts compassionately or generously towards another person or animal, he or she is said to be kind. Kindness to people who are needy or ill is sometimes characterized as being charitable.

Relatedly, I believe love is an emotion and an intension to treat others well. Love and kindness are both based in compassion and empathy. To my thinking kindness is an expression and extension of platonic love. I believe kindness is on the continuum of love.

How does kind behavior towards others affect people? Many empirical studies confirm that positive social connections at work produce desirable results. For example, people get sick less often, recover twice as fast from surgery, experience less depression, learn faster, and remember longer, tolerate pain and discomfort better, display more mental acuity, and perform better on the job. Research also finds that a positive workplace increases positive emotions and well-being. This, in turn, improves people's relationships with each other and improves their abilities and their creativity. It buffers against negative experiences such as stress, thus improving employees' ability to bounce back from challenges and difficulties while bolstering their health. As an example of this type of research, a 2018 study focused on employees at a Spanish company. Workers were asked to either a) perform acts of kindness for colleagues, or b) count the number of kindly acts they received from coworkers. The results showed that those who received acts of kindness became happier, demonstrating the value of benevolence for the receiver. More importantly, those who performed the acts of kindness benefited even more than the receivers. Not only did they show a similar trend towards increased happiness, but they also had a boost in life and job satisfaction, as well as improvement in mood. Furthermore, the effects of altruism were contagious. Coworkers on the receiving end of the acts of kindness ended up spontaneously paying it forward, themselves doing nice things for others.

When you are kind to others how do you feel? As I mentioned, research studies have shown repeatedly that when we give to others we are more likely to feel joy than when things are given to us. Psychoanalyst Alfred Adler encouraged his depressed patients to do something kind or helpful for another person every day to improve mood. Recent studies have shown that kindness does elevate the mood of the giver as Adler intended for his patients. Kindness can positively change brain chemistry. Being kind boosts serotonin and dopamine, which are neurotransmitters in the brain associated with feelings of satisfaction and well-being. Acts of kindness have also been found to reduce social anxiety. My own experience has been consistent with this research.

Committing acts of kindness also lowers blood pressure. According to Dr. David R. Hamilton, acts of kindness create emotional warmth, which releases the hormone oxytocin. Oxytocin causes the release of a chemical called nitric oxide, which dilates the blood vessels. This reduces

blood pressure and, therefore, oxytocin is known as a “cardioprotective” hormone. It protects the heart by lowering blood pressure.

Students of comparative religion have pointed to the fact that kindness is a key in nearly all traditions I will take a stab as to why this is so at the end of my talk. First, in keeping with our UU list of sources, I will share some of what Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism each has to say about kindness individually.

Judaism is the religion that I grew up with and that I still find has much to offer although I no longer believe in a personal God. The Hebrew Bible is filled with commandments that address kindness. The example that comes to my mind first is, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Other kindness laws mentioned in the Hebrew Bible include: when you employ dayworkers, you must pay them before the next morning. If you make promise to another you must fulfil it. If you are a farmer or orchard grower you are required to leave a portion of your crop for those in need, to gather for themselves. You are forbidden to lie or “bear false witness.” You must refrain from speaking ill of others. And there are many other rules of social conduct that address kindness in the Hebrew Bible. From the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible 15:11: "Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That's why I'm giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land." Also in Deuteronomy 22:4 "Don't just watch your fellow Israelite's donkey or ox fall down in the road and do nothing about it. You must help your fellow Israelite get the animal up again."

The Hebrew Bible also provides role models of kindness for us to emulate. We read of Abraham who prays to God to spare the sinful citizens of Sodom and Gomora from annihilation because there might be a few worthy people within the cities that who don't deserve punishment. Also many of you know the story of the 3 angels disguised as traveling men who approach Abraham's camp. When Abraham sees them approaching, and without any knowledge of who they are, he prepares a meal for them, and he washes their feet. Moses is another example of kindness because he accepts the task of leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, although he has much doubt about his ability to perform this task, only because that is asked of him. King David shows kindness and forgiveness to his enemies repeatedly and is generous with almost all he encounters in the Biblical account.

The Talmud, a collection of interpretation of Jewish law by rabbis in the post Biblical era, refers to “*gemilut chasadim*,” meaning acts of kindness. One rabbi states that the world sustains itself on three things, the Torah (meaning the Bible and law), work, and *gemilut chasadim*. According to Jewish understanding, the world cannot survive without kindness. The Talmud further teaches that kindness is intended to be performed without any expectation of reward. Kindness should be done for its own sake. I think most of you know the story of the man who approached the famous Rabbi Hillel insisting the rabbi teach him all Jewish learning while standing on one foot. Rabbi Hillel took up the challenge by telling the man to stand on one foot and then recited, “love your neighbor as yourself.” The rabbi invited the man to put his foot back down and then said all the rest of Jewish learning was mere commentary.

In the Kabbala, the mystical teachings of Judaism, God's presence is manifest in the world in 10 aspects, referred to as "*sifrot*." One of these 10 is "*hesed*." As I mentioned *hesed* is the Hebrew word for kindness. The Kabbala teaches that God shows kindness to humanity by providing life and sustenance. In turn, and in fulfillment of the covenant between humans and God, Jews are to emulate God's kindness by showing it to others. The Kabbalistic concept of Tikkun Olam, meaning, the "repair of the world," comes from this teaching as well. By showing kindness to others we embody God's kindness, and this is expected to help bring about the messianic age, or if you will, the "Beloved Community."

I hope I have shown that kindness is deeply embedded in Judaism. Since we know that Jesus was born a Jew and led a Jewish life, we should not be surprised that much of what Jesus taught and modeled was also based in the tradition of kindness.

Christian author Frank Viola said this:

Kindness is a biblical way of living. It's a fruit of the Holy Spirit. On Paul's short list, in Galatians 5: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." It's not a duty or an act but instead the natural result of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. "We exhale kindness after we inhale what's been breathed into us by the [Holy] Spirit."

There are many verses in the Christian Bible that define and promote kindness. In the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he says: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32) In letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." (Colossians 3:12)

"Love your neighbor as yourself," is regarded by Christians as the second greatest commandment. The question is asked, "who is my neighbor?" The parable of the Good Samaritan answers the question. Here, a Jewish man was robbed and beaten, left to die in the street. A Jewish priest and Levite passed by without helping, but the Samaritan saved him. The point of Jesus' story was this: everyone is your neighbor – the foreigner, the widow, the orphan, and even your enemy. The Christian Bible teaches merciful kindness to everyone.

For a perfect model of Christian kindness, we need look no further than Jesus himself. Healing the sick, feeding the hungry, teaching the people, caring for the widow, and defending children, Jesus' life was devoted to kindness. Defending the weak, poor, and needy, Jesus is quoted, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

Pope Francis to me embodies charity and kindness as a standout among contemporary leaders of the Catholic faith: Francis said, "A Christian brings peace to others. Not only peace, but also love, kindness, faithfulness and joy."

Here are several quotations from the New Testament that promote and encourage kindness:

Carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2 This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you." (1 John 15:12) Give to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:42) Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home. (Romans 12:13) Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. (Philippians 2:4) My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!?" What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity. (James 2: 14-17)

For a Buddhist view of kindness I have relied on Sharon Salzberg's book, Lovingkindness. Salzberg refers to *metta* the ancient Pali language word for "love," "compassion" or "lovingkindness." The Dalai Lama who advocates *metta* often repeats either, "My religion is kindness," or, "My religion is compassion." *Metta* is not to be confused with romantic love, or love based on desire, rather what we in the west might call platonic love. This love asks nothing in return, and it is not exclusive to one or a few people. Salzberg says when we practice lovingkindness, we can overcome the fear of rejection and the "illusion of separateness, of not being part of the whole." *Metta* allows us to "embrace all parts of ourselves and all parts of the world." Perhaps this explains why kindness reduces depression and social isolation. Salzberg writes that through *metta* we become more able to accept both life's pleasures and its pains. It is through *metta* Buddhists believe we discover our true selves or what is referred to as "Buddha nature," and become more accepting: "The loving mind can observe joy and peace in one moment and then grief in the next moment and it will not be shattered by the change." Practicing *metta* also helps us to become more balanced and whole and to reach our purpose in life according to the Buddhist tradition.

The power to experience and practice lovingkindness is entirely ours; no one can take it from us. In the most powerful example of this I can think of Viktor Frankel proved that in his concentration camp experience. There he continually worked on helping others as his way to find meaning and connection, which enabled him to endure the cruelty he was subjected to.

When one practices meditation, it is *metta* that allows one to see that we are connected to all things. Buddhists believe that *metta* is the natural state humans are born with and can cultivate through meditation and acts of kindness. Salzberg points out, as have many others, that the practice of *metta* begins with oneself: "You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection." Love for others that does not include love of oneself can result in poor boundaries and dysfunctional relationships. Appreciating the "inherent worth and dignity" of others does not mean we must accept what Salzberg calls "difficult qualities and unskilled actions." She advises us to focus on the positive in others to encourage lovingkindness

towards them. A friend can help another deal with challenges through standing side by side. Treating others with lovingkindness facilitates self-love in the receiver. *Metta* is what binds people together in Buddhist understanding and is a central teaching.

Whether it is called *hesed*, *metta*, or lovingkindness all three religions give it a central focus. We also saw, kindness benefits us physically, socially, emotionally, and mentally. But does it also yield spiritual benefits? All the religions we looked at, offer strikingly similar teachings on kindness and love as a spiritual practice. Overcoming excessive self-focus is the path to achieving wholeness and connection with other people and all living things. All encourage empathy and compassion. Concern for others and acting for the benefit of others are essential means for attaining spiritual enlightenment. All the religions we looked at emphasize that orienting towards kindness will also make life more fulfilling and create the harmony that allows the world to function and to heal. Our country and our world need this now as much as ever. Kindness, much as justice work, gives our lives meaning and purpose. The Buddha, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus are role models in their practice of kindness, and their selfless devotion to others. Their examples show what a spiritual life can look like. The apostle Paul said that when we are kindly, we embody the Holy Spirit. The Kabbala teaches that kindness is one of the ways that God is manifest in the world and so we are cocreators when we act with kindness. The Buddha taught the *metta* was a pathway to oneness with all creation.

The fact that the principle of kindness is common and basic to all the major world religions suggests that it is part of our shared humanity. The Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore referred to love as the ultimate spiritual truth that lies at the heart of creation. It is through kindness and love that we UU's believe "salvation" occurs and it is in this life rather than beyond it. Salvation happens when we treat others kindly and work for the wellbeing of others. In doing so we take part in the love that created the universe.

A goal common to all the major religions is to make the world better because in the end all are part of the human family and of life on earth. I think most UU's would agree with this goal because if you look at our 7 UU principles, concern for others and our world is embedded. Kindness is a way to recognize and respond to the interconnected web of existence.

Unitarian Universalists are now discussing a proposed eighth principle, which in its current draft form is: "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions." Enacting this principle would help us move away from the divisiveness I spoke of at the beginning of my talk. The new principle extends the invitation to be kind to others regardless of how different they may be from you or me. The idea of Beloved Community, regardless of what it is called, seems to me to be a central goal to all the religions talked about today. Kindness is universally acknowledged as a path to happiness and harmony and to a spiritual life.