

Peace: The Virtue of KINDNESS

by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD

Kindness encompasses a range of acts and habits that can be most easily described as thoughtful manners and heartfelt courtesy. Such etiquette not only applies to our relationships with other people but also to things, animals, plants and the Earth.

Kindness may be simple like saying “please,” “thank you,” “excuse me,” or “I’m sorry.” It may be offering a helping hand, patiently waiting your turn, returning a phone call or favor, or even cheerfully responding with a smile. Kindness is also characterized by being generous with your time, money, resources and a willingness to help. “Kindness,” as the Greek philosopher Sophocles said, “gives birth to kindness.” It is, as American writer/philosopher Mark Twain notes, “The language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.”

The present condition of the world seems to contradict the notion that the virtue of kindness offers people a sanctuary for peace, safety, comfort and hope. Over two-dozen major armed conflicts consistently take place in the world; over 1.5 billion people live on less than one dollar a day; 2.5 billion people have no access to basic sanitation or clean water; 1 billion people (over half of them women) are illiterate; thousands of acres of forest are logged each day, and dozens of species become endangered or eliminated. Earth’s climate is changing: there are increased natural disasters, global warming and desertification.

In spite of our planet’s vulnerability, humans have long had an ethic of kindness. The 6th century B.C. Taoist, Lao Tzu considered it one of the three great treasures of human conduct. Confucius taught kindness to be the path of civic responsibility, familial obligations, and courtesy. Buddha taught that kindness/generosity is a primary quality of an awakened mind. Mohammed regarded kindness as an essential sign of faith. Jesus Christ preached the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Bible, Luke 6:31). Native Americans promote kindness as reverence for life.

“My religion,” says the Dalai Lama of Tibet, “is very simple. My religion is kindness.” If you have ever felt a deep sense of satisfaction in showing unconditional kindness to another, you know what he means. For, kindness is as much a gift of conscience as it is of one’s time or words. Eastern philosophy believes there are three kinds of gifts: 1) the gift of material resources, 2) the gift of helping people rely on themselves, and 3) the gift of non-fear. Perhaps the greatest gift in a troubled world is that of helping people not to be destroyed by fear caused by social injustice, oppression, exploitation, lack, violence, or loss of dignity. What is your unique gift of kindness to this world?

Expressing Kindness

The prophet Mohammed of the Islam faith said, “A person’s true wealth is the good he or she does in the world.” Similarly, the philosopher Goethe stated, “Kindness is the golden

chain by which society is bound together.” The following are 20 ways you can express kindness throughout your life, as gifts of goodness to this planet.

1. ***Be kind to the soil.*** Grow food crops organically, without using synthetic fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides. Nutrient-rich soil creates optimally nutritious fruits and vegetables. Therefore, compost and recycle organic materials back into the soil.
2. ***Be kind to the water.*** Do not dump personal or industrial waste into freshwater sources or the ocean. About one-half of the world’s population is unable to use clean water for drinking or sanitation. Protect valuable watersheds.
3. ***Be kind to the forests.*** Trees are critical to regulating Earth’s temperature and climatic patterns. Protect trees and regularly plant new ones.
4. ***Be kind to the air.*** Do not pollute the air you breathe. Help ensure that industries do not discharge toxic materials into the air. Similarly, work to reduce automobile emissions by driving less, walking, bicycling and supporting alternative technology.
5. ***Be kind to nature.*** Appreciate and value nature’s vast diversity of resources and inherent beauty. Serve to enhance and sustain forests, oceans, waterways, parks, shorelines and fragile ecosystems for future generations. Be a good steward by borrowing only that which you need, and giving back more than you take.
6. ***Be kind to animals.*** Honor both wild and domesticated animals by protecting and ensuring their safety. Work to prevent their abuse and exploitation.
7. ***Be kind to children.*** Ensure that they have safe places to play and grow up in. Help them to eat nutritionally well, be vaccinated against disease, have clean water and sanitation, and be guaranteed an education. Prevent their abuse and exploitation.
8. ***Be kind to women.*** They have the right to education, fair employment, trouble-free childbirth, healthcare, and safe places to live. Women, like children, also have the right not to be abused or exploited.
9. ***Be kind to the elderly.*** They have earned the right to receive healthcare, shelter and the assurance of money to meet their everyday needs. Honor their wisdom and skills.
10. ***Be kind to the disabled.*** Help to create a society that is barrier-free and compassionate so that the disabled have all the rights and privileges of anyone else.
11. ***Be kind to your family.*** Ensure your family’s safety and security. Play together and worship together. Do not tolerate physical, mental or emotional abuse. Honor your partner and support him/her in ways that improve their wellbeing and self-esteem.
12. ***Be kind to friends and strangers.*** Do not speak harshly, ignore their needs, lie, or selfishly exploit them. Lend your help, say a kind word, respect them in the same way you would want them to respect you.
13. ***Be kind to your teachers.*** Honor their efforts to enhance your life with knowledge, skills, and creativity. Be a good student.
14. ***Be kind to your leaders.*** Honor their efforts to guide your community, state or country. Ensure that their efforts are fair, compassionate and are driven by equality for all. Work for civility, not autocratic rule.
15. ***Be kind to other cultures.*** Honor the diversity of humans on this planet. Respect their history, religion and ways of living. Be appreciative of their art, music, dance, crafts, stories, architecture, and ways of celebration. Serve to protect their way of life.

16. ***Be kind to other religions.*** Accept that there are many ways to truth and God. Never persecute others because of their religious beliefs or rituals. Honor their places of worship, spiritual leaders and doctrines.
17. ***Be kind to Earth.*** See this planet as a sacred sanctuary afloat in the universe, ripe with diversity and abundance for all life upon it. Honor the idea of a global community — that we are each other’s keeper. Everybody and everything on Earth is interconnected, therefore accept your role as a planetary steward ensuring Earth’s safety, security, comfort, wellness, beauty and peace.
18. ***Be kind to yourself.*** Take care of your body by eating well, exercising and engaging in good hygiene. Abstain or be temperate in alcohol or drug use. Strive for an education or a good trade skill. Create a support system of friends and family. Get good rest. Stimulate your mind through creative activities. Do not engage in thoughts, or associate with others, that diminish your self-worth and confidence. Find ways to honor your soul’s need for meaning about life, especially through spiritual practice, faith, occasional solitude, or surrender to God.
19. ***Be kind with your words.*** Learn how to control your anger, the use of vulgarity, and the making of threats. Verbal abuse is unkind and may harm others’ feelings.
20. ***Be kind in your prayers.*** Your prayers should be positive and sensitive, not used against an enemy or foe. Pray not for God to be on your side but for you to be on God’s side.

Feelings of Gratitude

When you engage in the many forms of kindness listed above, you are bound to feel gratitude for life. Your gratitude will mirror a courteous and reverent approach to make life better: for yourself, others, and Earth. Your gratitude may also reflect your attempts at living modestly and with humility: causing no unnecessary harm, and living simply so that others may simply live.

One of the easiest ways to be kind is to consider the qualities of character that make you a Friend to others, a Guest wherever you may be or travel, and a Host to those who meet your acquaintance and come to your home. By showing courtesy as a Friend, Guest and Host to both humans and nature, you are also extending your gratitude for their existence. Such gratitude is like a hummingbird enjoying the nectar without bruising the flower.

Remember:

Kindness and gratitude is a well of sustenance worth visiting each day. The nectar of kindness is a sanctuary for the heart, a refuge for peace of mind and peace given to others, no matter how large or small the gift. Contemplate these words of Mother Teresa: “We cannot do great things; we can only do small things with a great amount of love.”

Copyright 2007, C. Forrest McDowell, PhD

Excerpted from forthcoming book, *Peace of Heart, Peace of Mind*