

2019 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Children's Category – Honorable Mention]

My Journey Through Kindness

(Original)

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“Help...my baby...” the woman’s moan sounded like a chant on the busy road where I waited for my parents to pick me up from tuition.

The child was sick. I was no doctor, not even an adult, but I had experienced enough fevers to recognize that something wasn’t right.

My hand fished around in my pocket to find two crumpled Dollar bills; the last of my birthday money. I took the few steps to the pharmacy, bought a cooling patch, then I retraced my steps, and gave it to the woman tending the child.

She took the box as gingerly as if I were offering her diamonds.

I looked down at my clammy hand; palm now empty, sweat forming where minutes earlier money had been. I was just eight years old, and unable to name the emotions that coursed through my tiny body. I guessed the warmth I felt was connected to the gratitude in the woman’s eyes; I knew that close behind it lurked an emptiness knowing the last of my birthday money had gone to someone else. But there was another sensation, some hitherto unknown emotion that pulsed within me. It would take me five years before I could put a name to what I felt on that scorching day: compassion.

Years pass. I grow. My parents congratulate me, and themselves, on my good manners. Relatives comment on my thoughtfulness. I am told I am a generous child. Nature or nurture, something has been done well.

My English teacher likes competitions almost as much as she likes kindness. I am encouraged to join; to write an essay on something I’m still not sure I understand. Confusion begins.

When does giving up your seat evolve from manners to thoughtfulness...? At what point does giving ten thousand Riel to a friend, change from generosity to kindness...?

Dictionaries offer definitions and synonyms, but the semi colons and italics dance like Khmer Apsara dancer in my mind, blurring the borders that take one act to another,

confusing nuances and delicate hues of interpretation that should lead me to a clear division.

“Look at your fingerprint!” my teacher instructs. “Kindness is just as unique.”

I speak to my subconscious for clarification. The answer is simple to hear, yet as complex as a koan to explain. I teach myself a new form of meditation: kindness mindfulness, and now that my eyes are truly watching, I see acts of kindness sprinkled like specks of spice an otherwise bland and tasteless waste ground.

Kindness makes me hungry to receive, and starving to give. Every day there are chances wasted, opportunities squandered, where someone’s burden could be alleviated by a chance encounter. I want to see kindness everywhere.

Where once, truth was beauty, kindness supplanted it.

I completed four random acts in three days.

But something has change.

Somewhere on this journey, kindness has metamorphosed. My acts, once incidental, became more structured; a ritual of give and accept. I question their responses, (can they truly benefit?) and doubt my own authenticity (could I have given more freely?)

Nothing, it seems, kills kindness like expectations.

I continue my acts, poring over every one like an anxious lover. Then I understand. Not in a vapour of interpretation, but commonsense and logic.

Manners are the “please” and “thank you-s” we learn early on that pacify our elders, and acknowledge our appreciation.

Generosity is giving what we have, to people we know who need it. For those looking for something in return, good karma is promised. It’s spiritual economics at its most basic.

But it’s the unexpected give-and-get-no-return policy of kindness, that leaves me breathless.

I knew I wanted a kinder world before I join this competition. Now I understand it can’t enforce, but develop organically. It’s witness with our hearts, not our eyes.

Every day, we are offered an encounter with kindness. We may call it love, or spirituality; credit it to ourselves or a divine Creator. But that essence, that celestial light passing from person to person without fruitful expectation or nicely calculated less or more, is what we gives this world its heartbeat.

And we, its temporary inhabitants, our beauty.