

Rethinking Kindness

(Original)

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(Age 24, Brazil)

Sarah is one of the kindest people I know. She will never hesitate to find time to help others, or to compliment them on their appearance and their daily victories. Sarah is always the first to defend those who society is quick to judge – behind an appearance of laziness, she knows there might be depression; behind acts of anger and violence, she knows there's pain to be found. Being well acquainted with Sarah's unrelenting kindness, it has never failed to deeply shock me in the occasions when I heard her use incredibly harsh words against a certain person. In these moments, gone are her understanding and patience, inexplicably giving way to judgement and contempt. The target of Sarah's atypical behavior, in all the time I've known her, has always been a single one: herself.

As much as it saddens me, it hardly surprises me: I, too, am guilty of measuring both my flaws and achievements very differently from how I measure those of others. We are taught to be tolerant and forgiving with the mistakes of our neighbors, but seldom with our own. We think it's ok to call ourselves names – stupid, fat, ugly – that would be completely unacceptable if we were referring to anyone else. In essence, we learn kindness as something that always flows outward – never as something to be cultivated within.

Even more alarming is the fact that being kind to yourself may sometimes come across as selfishness, but making yourself available and willing to assist will never be met with reproach. With that, before the insurmountable challenge of having to face our own struggles and accepting the responsibility of dealing with them, many of us choose to help others instead. Thus, with the blessing of society, we bury our problems and try to fill the resulting emotional holes with the short-term – albeit indisputably genuine – satisfaction of relieving the loads of others. That these actions have positive effects for those who get help is not to be questioned – the long-term consequences for the helper, however, might be dire indeed.

Kindness is not an accident, a gift, a genetic trait with which some lucky few are blessed – it is a natural consequence of feeling loved and respected. But how can we accept the love

and respect of others if we don't feel like we deserve them? And how else can we feel deserving but by learning to love ourselves in the first place?

I don't mean to say that loving yourself is easy; it might, in fact, be the greatest challenge of all. But what other beginning could there be? All we have to offer is that which we cultivate, which exists in abundance inside of us. Kindness, in its purest state, doesn't simply flow – it overflows. By learning to be accepting of our physical imperfections, to forgive our own mistakes and to be understanding with our limitations, we become so full of kindness that we can't help but let it seep into every one of our actions.

If we do not begin by taking care of ourselves, our potential for kindness withers – there's only so many times we can lend a hand to others when we're the ones who need to be lifted off the ground. So I tell Sarah, every time I hear her be unkind to herself, that she deserves as much love and understanding as everyone else; that her struggles are not less important than anyone else's; that her flaws are not greater, her mistakes are not graver, her weaknesses are not any less deserving of compassion than those of others.

If we are to create a society full of kindness, we must begin small. Not with the whole world, as unfathomable in dimension as it is in complexity; not with our country, riddled with political and economic challenges; not even with our city or neighborhood or family, but simply with ourselves. To spark a long-lasting revolution, the change must come from within. Then, when we have finally found our inner kindness, we irradiate: to our family, our neighborhood, our city, our country – and who knows, maybe one day, the entire world.