

2022 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – Honorable Mention]

THE VALUE OF KINDNESS

(Original)

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Of all the fond memories I have had before language, the greatest is the night sky and my blind grandmother's face merged into each other and this has stayed in my head like an old photograph. As I grew older, this memory soon found words. At six, I remember my grandmother, amidst the night sky and the crickets, telling me stories of the rise and fall of civilisations, epics of great men and sometimes, simple stories of rural communities, of fishing villages where men looked at their fellow men as if they were an inextricable part of one another. I come from a small village in West Africa where individuals are named by the values that best define them. I vividly remember a story of my grandmother's — perhaps the simplest of them — about a man who lent some of his money to a stranger who needed money to save his dying mother. The creditor had lent him the money and on being asked by the stranger why he had given money to someone he did not know, the creditor had said: where I come from, a man is named after the quality of his actions and known by how many lives he has treated as his own.

Stories live in our blood streams. They are fluid forms of a future we can draw from. These stories told by grandmother are a form of kindness. It is great generosity that such valuable tales have been passed from generation to generation and often times, we draw from them a wealth of lessons to create who we want to be. For many years, simple as the story had been, I have lived by the value of kindness — knowing nothing else. Beyond every other great civilisation or empire, the greatest show of our individual and collective civilisation, I believe, is that we show kindness to one another. To be kind, I have learnt, is to be humane and to recognise also our humanity. It is to understand that above the noise of life is the tenacity of showing generosity and that if we show kindness, we have succeeded in showing discipline, honesty, love and selflessness. A simple act of kindness is a great act of heroism because kindness saves people, saves lives and saves the world. The end of our lives is that we die but the beginning of our lives is that we live through others, seeing them not just as

appendages but as elemental compositions of ourselves.

I teach Literature to high school students and to teach stories is to teach empathy and kindness. Once, I had a thirteen year old student with cancer. In the last two months before we lost him, I researched on his disease because I had promised to love him and to understand him. Upon his death, I realised that I was most alive in the times that I had cared for him. So, each time I teach, I teach the kind of kindness that Mark Twain says is the language which the deaf can hear and blind can see. I teach the mechanics of generosity and the aesthetics of helping one another in dark times. Everytime I pick a stray litter, everytime I volunteer for a social outreach to street children, everytime I start a discourse on what it means to truly live, I teach my heart and the elements around me to be benevolent and kind. Kindness, I have learnt, doesn't only empower the receiver but also the actor.