



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Beyond Random Acts of Kindness”

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A sermon delivered on March 13, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.* Pablo Picasso.

*The spiritual is higher than the physical, but the physical needs  
of others are an obligation of my spiritual life.* Rabbi Israel Salanter

*God is in the helpers.* Anne Lamott

### Sermon

I don't know how I came across that Thai Life Insurance video we showed earlier. But every time I view it, it's message goes right to my heart. I well up with emotion when that little girl comes down the street in her school uniform, her life having filled with new possibilities.

Each act the young man performed for others was so simple, yet made such a difference in the lives of those he helped, including a plant's. The effects of his acts encourage me to perform my own random acts of kindness and senseless beauty.

Do you remember that slogan from many years ago? That phrase was coined by activist Anne Herbert in 1982. Herbert, a writer/editor for *CoEvolution Quarterly*, a companion magazine to the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, and her fellow activist friend, Margaret Paloma Pavel, were sitting in a California restaurant bemoaning the increased violence in our country, specifically the events around the Rodney King beating and the march to war in the Persian Gulf that dominated the news.

Pavel recalls that day. “We wanted to stop the wars... To create a spell that would shatter the trance. So we took the phrase ‘random violence and senseless acts of cruelty’ [from the headlines] and created a ‘reversal’. It was not too tough to [switch] ~~find~~ kindness for violence. Not wimpy kindness but tough Dalai Lama never give up kindness.”

[www.improvisedlife.com/2013/06/11/the-origins-of-random-kindness-and-senseless-acts-of-beauty/](http://www.improvisedlife.com/2013/06/11/the-origins-of-random-kindness-and-senseless-acts-of-beauty/)

Eleven years later Herbert wrote the book, *Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty* which reported true stories of unprompted, selfless acts. On the inside cover flap Desmond Tutu

wrote, “We can indeed transform the world, and we are each called to take part in this sacred work. *Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty* offers this simple and powerful message of wisdom and hope. Wherever you are, you can create beauty. Moment by moment, you can create joy. Instant by instant, you can offer kindness.”

The mission and vision of this Fellowship is to transform the world, to turn a violent, unhappy world into a peaceful, happy world. And doing that doesn't require only grand acts of justice. Many little acts of kindness, by their number and pervasiveness, can work that transformation, too.

But I'm guessing you know all this. You've heard it from me before, you've read it on bumper stickers for decades, perhaps you've read Herbert's book. Even so, it is worth reminding ourselves that those numerous acts of kindness which we reflexively perform do make a difference in people's lives. Something as small as a smile may save a life.

Being kind is an act of generosity. When we think about others and not just ourselves, we're being generous. We may call it common courtesy, but it's not always common. I'm sure you've seen someone be discourteous to a waitress, or been cut off by an aggressive driver, or had someone cut in front of you in a line because they think their time is more important than your time. Perhaps you've been that person. I know I have. We aren't perfect and life overwhelms us sometimes. And that's the very moment when we most need someone's generosity the most. Especially their forgiveness, another act of kindness that's not so random.

I titled this service “Beyond Random Acts of Kindness” because it seems to me that a *random* act isn't good enough. Synonyms for random include arbitrary, unplanned, and erratic. Would that our kindness be frequent, intentional, and not dependent on how we feel in the moment.

On the other hand, random also includes the synonym unexpected. An act of kindness from a stranger may be completely unexpected, and that alone makes it extra special. Those are the moments you're caught off guard and the little act takes on greater significance.

Imagine receiving those little unexpected acts regularly. Would they become routine and no longer feel special? Or would they just make us smile more often? I'd like to think the latter. And wouldn't it be wonderful to have more reasons to smile?

This past January, Harvard University's “Making Caring Common,” a project of its Graduate School of Education, released a study about teaching kindness, titled *Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions*. The report focused on how colleges could promote good citizenship and well-rounded character development by altering their student applications and what they look for in an applicant. Harvard, Yale and the University of Virginia have joined this effort to encourage kids to have meaningful, community experiences and not just a litany of personal achievements that privilege the wealthy and encourage stress and individualism. The report included tips for how parents can urge their teens to make caring common or, as we might say, make kindness less random, and how that can benefit their application success.

Additionally, Dr. Richard Weissbourd, the Harvard psychologist who directs the Making Caring Common project, suggests five tips for parents to help make their children think about others more. I've removed the child-specific references to make these universal:

1. Make caring for others a priority. Help balance one's own happiness and personal achievements with the needs of others, such as sharing or giving something away.
2. Provide opportunities to practice caring and gratitude. Those who contribute to the happiness of others tend to be happier, helpful and more forgiving of others.
3. Expand your circle of concern. One's immediate circle is family and friends, but we can enlarge that by being more considerate of others, such as helping a newcomer, a waitress, and volunteering.
4. Be a strong moral role model and mentor. Walk your talk because we learn from and follow those we care about.
5. Manage destructive feelings. Caring for others can be inhibited by anger, shame, jealousy, and other negative feelings. Adopt and teach ways to manage these feelings, like taking five deep breaths before saying something they might later regret.

Simple tips we would do well to follow for ourselves and the children in our lives.

We had a Forum this morning on the US Presidential campaigns. Somehow kindness seems scarce in the rhetoric and activities of the campaigns. Protesters show disrespect to some gatherings and some gatherings show disrespect against protesters. But just as we do here at UUFA, we can hold different ideas about what our nation's challenges are and how to best meet them while remaining respectful of one another. Neither side should encourage violence to make their views known. Presidential campaigns should be, well, presidential. Respectful, if not kind.

Prominent American inventor, botanist, and peanut expert George Washington Carver wrote, "How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these." Tender, compassionate, sympathetic, and tolerant. In a word: kind.

Let us go far in life by making caring more common and random acts more intentional in the world. And when we do, we will transform the world. We will realize the mission and vision of this Fellowship.

Let's sing about kindness once more time...

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. What do you find most difficult within yourself to give away or reveal? How might that change?
2. What is most scarce in your life? What will help you feel or believe it to be more abundant?
3. What is your experience with homelessness or people needing assistance? How do you feel about your circumstances or people who are in such circumstances? What does it move you to do?