

The Antidote to Meanness

In *The Atlantic* this month, David Brooks poses the question, “Why have Americans become so mean?”

He writes, “I was recently talking with a restaurant owner who said that he has to eject a customer from his restaurant for rude or cruel behavior once a week—something that never used to happen. A head nurse at a hospital told me that many on her staff are leaving the profession because patients have become so abusive. At the far extreme of meanness, hate crimes rose in 2020 to their highest level in 12 years. Murder rates have been surging, at least until recently. Same with gun sales. Social trust is plummeting. In 2000, two-thirds of American households gave to charity; in 2018, fewer than half did.”¹

Brooks analyzes why he thinks this is, and what to do about it. The solution, he concludes, lies in the realm of *moral formation*.

In a healthy moral ecosystem, a web of interconnected responsibility causes us to live with kindness, empathy, and a fair degree of humility.

And we might even be *nice* about it.

Niceness may be the moral equivalent of a Kleenex – easily used and imminently disposable, but that doesn’t mean that it is not useful. Indeed, being nice to people costs nothing and certainly greases the wheels of human interaction in ways that reduce friction between us.

Being nice to people is not something to spurn; life could be greatly improved for a great many people by simply exerting the basic social graces that niceness expounds: Saying *please* and *thank you*, particularly to those serving us, holding doors for those who are behind us, waiting our turn in line with good humor. All of these things make life easier on everyone.

Kindness, however, has been top of my mind lately. There is something that feels very wrong about the sort of insult-comedy that seems to dominate the ways in which common discourse proceeds. The reduction of complex issues to zingers, the replacement of true satire with memes that punch down rather than up; we notice the absence of civility at times more than its presence. Much of what troubles us culturally stems from a deficit of kindness.

To orient one’s life to function in a way that exhibits kindness – that enriches our common life. That recognizes the shared humanity between us. That gets at the heart of the old

¹ *HOW AMERICA GOT MEAN*, David Brooks, *The Atlantic*, AUGUST 14, 2023

admonition attributed to Philo of Alexandria: Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.

Perhaps that great battle – for each of us – is to maintain basic humanity in the face of cheaply manufactured outrage and insult.

Kindness also prepares us to offer *forgiveness*.

I'll hazard a guess that as we listen to our lives, two things stand out: When someone *wasn't* very nice, and when someone *was* very kind.

I don't believe that the world is falling apart any more today than it ever has been. In every age there have been persons of character and kindness, as well as persons of coarseness and brutality.

The story of Joseph is a story marked with coarseness, brutality, and jealousy.

Jacob, Joseph's father, a man of pettiness stitched together with flaws, married two sisters: Rachel and Leah. He loved the one and not the other.

It is a story of sibling rivalry - and *then* they have children.

Rachel gives birth to two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, and the name of the second, *Benjamin*, is a distortion of a Hebrew name – and the distortion gives the name meaning: *Son of my pain*. Rabbis believe that Rachel died when Benjamin was born.

And what good parent would do anything *other* than to lavish affection and love on a child who has lost his mother?

But Jacob's brothers resent Joseph's special treatment.

Finally, his brothers seize him and throw him into a deep pit, intent on murder. His brother Reuben wheedles the others, "What good is it for us to kill him?"

Instead, they sell him into slavery with passing traders. They cover his coat in blood and take it to their aging father and tell him that Joseph is dead.

It is a story that is bereft of human kindness.

Joseph's father dotes all the more on the remaining son of Rachel. Benjamin is all that is left to Jacob of a sweeping love story that brought out his best, and his worst.

Famine strikes the land, and the sons of Jacob and Leah journey to Egypt to find food.

In the sweeping soap-opera that is Genesis, it is easy to get caught in the stories of dysfunctional families and miss what God is doing... God never causes evil, but God is always working for good even – *especially* - in the midst of bad things. In the intervening years, Joseph has become a person of great wealth and influence, second only to Pharaoh.

From Joseph's enslavement, God brings the circumstances that will save his family, and preserve God's covenant people. While famine rages in Canaan, Joseph holds the power of life and death for those who caused him grievous harm.

There is a little about the story of Joseph that suggest to us that he is a person of innate niceness. Indeed, when his brothers come begging, he conceals his identity from them and toys with them. He makes them go home and bring back his brother Benjamin, to whom his father clings like a human security blanket. Joseph schemes to frame his brother Benjamin for theft, a crime that carried death. There is in the story a parallelism with the life-or-death debate that raged around Joseph when he was in the pit at his brothers' mercy.

No, it is not *nice*.

Walter Brueggemann raises the question that must surely have lingered in the brothers' minds when Jacob finally died: "Perhaps Joseph will *now* unleash his long-restrained resentment. The brothers face a new circumstance, requiring new assurances. The enduring power of guilt and its resultant fear is a matter about which every family knows. Like every family, these brothers know that the only one who can break the cycle and banish the guilt is the *wronged* party, the one they most fear."²

To ask forgiveness is to recognize the depth of how one has wronged another. To give forgiveness is to release the right to hold accountable those who have wronged you.

Is it any wonder that Brueggemann then says, "Forgiveness is as deep as human relations can go."³

There is no question that this is kindness that is *costly*.

Sometimes it takes very great discipline to exercise the kindness of forgiveness.

To reach the point of forgiveness is to reach into the depths of wrong and pull forth kindness that comes from a place of deep and abiding grace.

It would be facile, almost insulting even, to suggest that forgiveness is simply a matter of the will.

Yes, there is an element of choosing to forgive that is essential, but the ability to make that choice is generally the result of moral formation. It is the result of cultivating our ability to see grace in our own lives so that we are able to give grace to others.

Perhaps even the ability to *think* in this way is grace.

Would Joseph have had the moral formation to forgive his brothers decades sooner?

² Walter Brueggemann, Genesis in *Interpretation*, Mays, Miller and Achtemeier, eds. (Atlanta, JKP, 1982) p370.

³ *Ibid*, p372 *emphasis mine*.

We do not know; the Bible does not say.

We do know that Joseph received from God wisdom, and a generous life in the intervening years. We *do* know that, in the end, Joseph was able to say, "God meant this for good."

Moral formation, moral framework, the ability to see what God can do in broken circumstances: *These are gifts of grace.*

In Louise Penny's *Inspector Gamache* series, there is a subplot beneath the murder mysteries that is as important as the whodunit aspect. Armand Gamache sees young officers who have been neglected due to bad attitude, insolence, and the like, and he frequently pulls them on to his team. There is always a moment of reckoning when he says this,

"There are four things that lead to wisdom. They are four sentences we learn to say, and mean, "I don't know. I need help. I'm sorry. I was wrong.""

It is moral formation. Notably, it is moral formation *for adults.*

Most of us, if we think of moral formation at all, think of it as something for children and adolescents. And certainly, we are more malleable in those years, more open to the power of suggestion as we see goodness at work in others.

But we adults shortchange ourselves if we behave as though what we absorb in adulthood doesn't shape us. It *all* matters.

Empathy and kindness can be cultivated as much in adults as in toddlers. We cultivate these traits within ourselves by leaning in to our humanity.

We train ourselves to think of what others have experienced.

Before reacting in a knee-jerk fashion, we consider *why* the one who has offended us may have done so.

We remember that we ourselves stand in need of forgiveness some of the time, not only generally, but *particularly.*

Perhaps we absorb some lessons by observing that which makes us recoil and resolving that our community needs us to be better than what we observe.

Certainly, Jesus' parable today tells us what *not* to do.

Brooks concludes his article, "Look, I understand why people don't want to get all moralistic in public. Many of those who do are self-righteous prigs, or rank hypocrites. And all of this is only a start. But healthy moral ecologies don't just happen. They have to be seeded and tended by people who think and talk in moral terms, who try to model and inculcate moral behavior, who understand that we have to build moral communities because on our own, we are all selfish and flawed."

The kindness to forgive is born of our awareness of our place in the grace of God.

Perhaps that is the heart of what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote that if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, so then that whether we live or die, we belong to God. To abide in God is to abide in the reality of God's grace such that the exercise of forgiveness is a spiritual discipline born of God's goodness to us.

Forgiveness is a long and repetitive story. Over and over again, wrongdoers find that there is still enough love in the world, and in the community, not to pretend as though nothing has happened, but to move from the place of injury, even deep injury, to a place of forgiveness.

The discipline of forgiveness is a practice that occurs all the time, over and over.

I love the way that Archbishop Rowan Williams put it. He writes, "To live a 'forgiven' life is not simply to live in a happy consciousness of having been absolved. Forgiveness is precisely the deep and abiding sense of what relation – with God or with other human beings – can and should be and so it is itself a stimulus, an irritant, necessarily provoking protest at impoverished versions of social and personal relations."⁴

Forgiveness is an extraordinary expression of kindness to others, but also to ourselves.

Because forgiveness is a *transformative* behavior.

It takes the coarseness and brutality of what has *been* and looks forward to *what can yet be* in the grace of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁴ Rowan Williams, Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel (Morehouse Publishing Company, 1994) excerpted in *Forgiveness* by L. Gregory Jones