

## **Kindness: The Paradox of Kindness**

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### **Opening Ritual/Lighting Candle/Silence:**

### **Opening Words:**

When we feel love and kindness toward others, it not only makes others feel loved and cared for, but it helps us also to develop inner happiness and peace. *Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama*

In about the same degree that you have been helpful, you will be happy. Karl Reiland, American Episcopalian Clergyman.

Kindness is the cause of all anxiety. *David D. Burns*, psychiatrist, who wrote, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*.

**Check-in:** Where you are now? What are you feeling as you enter the group?

### **Topic:**

Being kind to others is an essential precept of most world religions. Yet, as the Opening Words suggest, *doing* kindnesses is a mysterious, even paradoxical, venture.

Are we astonished by news stories about the pleasures of kindness? In their 2009 book, *On Kindness*, Adam Phillips & Barbara Taylor take the question seriously. Their premise: "Kindness...not sexuality, not violence, not money—has become our forbidden pleasure" [p. 5]. In their discussion, they reveal **the paradoxical nature of kindness**: "The pleasure of kindness is that it connects us with others; but the terror of kindness is that it makes us too immediately aware of our own and other peoples' vulnerabilities [and] failures" [p. 12]. The authors maintain that kindness is the ability to bear the vulnerability of others and therefore of oneself, which is traumatic for some. "Real kindness is an exchange with essentially unpredictable consequences" [p. 13].

Phillips & Taylor also acknowledge that the competitive individualism required to get ahead in the contemporary world makes kindness appear **self-defeating**. Kindness is seen as a sign of weakness, as a virtue of losers, as a higher form of selfishness or self-protection. Considering these implications, people find it easy to rationalize avoiding kindnesses.

Novelist and children's writer, Paula Fox remembers a passage from Coleridge's *Notebooks*. "A little boy comes home and he says, mother, mother, I gave a penny to a beggar. And she says oh, that was so good of you, and so wonderful. And Coleridge says that's the worst thing you could do to a child. You shouldn't be praised for doing what's right. **You should just do it.**" Fox's adult novels (notably *Desperate Characters*) explore the theme of doing good, and how, in her words, "the minute you become conscious that you are doing good, that's the minute you have to stop because from then on **it's wrong.**"

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. Describe an experience in which you have been kind to others or an experience in which others have been kind to you. Does doing kindnesses expose the doer's weaknesses? vulnerabilities?
2. When offering a kindness to another person, do you think the consequences are unpredictable? Are you aware of risks? What are those risks? Have you attempted to be kind to another only to have that person rebuke you in some manner?
3. How can kindness be the "cause of all anxiety"? Is it because we feel *obligated* to be kind and then fall short? Have you found yourself rationalizing to avoid an opportunity to do a kindness? What are your "favorite" rationalizations? How can they be countered?
4. Is consciously, purposely doing a kindness self-serving or, in Fox's terms, morally wrong? Does doing a kindness benefit the giver or the receiver or both?

### **Check-out/Likes & Wishes:**

How did this session go for you? Is there anything you'd like to call attention to?

### **Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice:**

When kindness has left people, even for a few moments, we become afraid of them as if their reason had left them. When it has left a place where we have always found it, it is like shipwreck; we drop from security into something malevolent and bottomless.