

# IN DEFENSE OF KINDNESS

Why It Matters,  
How It Changes Our Lives, and  
How It Can Save the World

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*There are three ways to ultimate success:*

*The first way is to be kind.*

*The second way is to be kind.*

*The third way is to be kind.*

—Rev. Fred Rogers

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# CONTENTS

Preface . . . . .	.xvii
An Introduction . . . . .	.xxi
Kindness Defined . . . . .	. 1
Kindness Debunked . . . . .	.9
Kindness as Commodity. . . . .	. 17
Kindness as Competition . . . . .	. 23
Kindness and Privilege . . . . .	. 27
Kindness and Conflict. . . . .	. 31
Kindness and Those Closest to Us . . . . .	. 39
Kindness and the Public Square . . . . .	. 45
Kindness and the Everyday . . . . .	. 55
Kindness and Institutional Change. . . . .	. 61
Kindness and Resistance . . . . .	. 69
Kindness and Walking Away . . . . .	. 77
Kindness and Forgiveness. . . . .	. 85
Kindness and Saviorism . . . . .	. 91
Kindness and the Internet . . . . .	. 95
Kindness and the Impossible . . . . .	. 103
Won't You Choose Kindness?. . . . .	. 109
Acknowledgments . . . . .	. 113
Keep in Touch . . . . .	. 115



## PREFACE

### Ugh, That Mr. Rogers!

*I hope you're proud of yourself for the times you've said "yes,"  
when all it meant was extra work for you and was seemingly  
helpful only to somebody else.*

—Rev. Dr. Mr. Fred Rogers

SITTING IN THE movie theater one summer night in 2018, I realized that Mr. Rogers was not only a good storyteller, a carer of children's spirits, and a bringer of joy. Mr. Rogers was also a prophetic pain.

My family and I were watching the documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, which told the story of this Presbyterian pastor and person of faith as he struggled to convince the world and communicate to children that love, compassion, and kindness are powerful tools for healing, peace, and justice. In 2018, politicians, professional commentators, and armchair pundits seemed to be doing anything but extending kindness toward one another and anyone who disagreed with them. As I sat in the theater that night, I became acutely aware of two things about myself. First, in becoming increasingly subsumed by the constant barrage of hate, I was losing my ability and desire to

regard my deepest political, theological, and ideological “enemies” as divinely created, complex, and beloved human beings. Second, my long-held belief that treating human beings as human beings is a transformative, healing, and needed witness in the world was fading fast.

About a year prior to this cinematic reintroduction to the message of Mr. Rogers, I had walked away from this kindness book project. Affected by the dumpster fire of our political climate, I was becoming cynical and was no longer claiming—let alone practicing—kindness as my way of being in the world. I found myself increasingly unable to extend kindness to some people. Frankly, I had become caught up in my own warped understanding of what it means to be kind rather than to be nice. I had become lazy in my calling to be in the world differently, especially in times of great human conflict. I was still talking a big game, but practically speaking, I had in many ways given up.

Like so many other people, I stress eat like a beast and pack on the poundage, and I could feel my accustomed empathy fading and my hopeful spirit calcifying.

And then along came Mr. Rogers and his kindness nonsense.

That night in the theater, as Mr. Rogers’s story unfolded, I was jarred into the realization that a lack of empathy had taken root in me in ways much deeper and more dangerous than I had recognized. Mr. Rogers’s righteous indignation, his love of children, and his deep faith reminded me that to love and to be kind are immensely powerful responses to injustice and pain in the world. They are the right way to be.

I could not, would not, allow my commitment to kindness to be a casualty of the disheartening and demeaning political war raging around me.



It was as if I heard Mr. Rogers talking directly to me: “Bruce, you know that kindness is powerful. You have always known that. So get over yourself, get yourself in gear, and get back to it.”

Oh, how I do love to imagine being dressed down by the genteel cardigan prince!

After a few more moments of dialogue between the Fred in my head and me, I leaned over to my wife and said with some combination of resignation and excitement, “I think I have to finish my book on kindness.”

The very next day, I received an email from Brad, publisher at Chalice Press, checking in to see how I was feeling about returning to The Kindness Project. After a moment of thinking, *Whoa, that’s weird*, I said, “Yes. I’m in.”

So here I am, pleading my case for kindness.



## AN INTRODUCTION

I LOVE, LOVE, love it when people tell me what a stellar dad I am, or when they say my kids are lucky to have me as a parent. Suddenly, written on the sunny, blue-sky canvas of my mind in bold, rainbow-smoke writing, I see, “Yeah, I *am* a great dad.”

(Cue William Shatner with my pageant sash, flowers, and crown.)

Soon after my confetti-strewn metaphorical walk down the runway to accept my accolades and tiara, I come to the sobering realization that today the bar to achieve “good dad” status is set pretty low. In a society that considers it normal for a mom to manage a successful career and master household management all while looking perfect and put together, it’s not all that hard to be a “great dad.” Heck, even when I’m unshowered and in ripped jeans and a dirty T-shirt, if people see me doing a couple of school pickups and drop-offs or shopping for family sustenance at the local gas station food mart, I’m the star.

Seriously, sometimes it must suck to be a mom these days.

Sidebar: Honey, I love and appreciate you :-)

The same society that expects so much of moms expects so little from dads. We have made being a good dad—let alone a *great* dad—the exception and have failed to demand and hold people accountable for being merely a decent parent. And we dads, because we benefit from this situation, have unwittingly reinforced this narrative that has allowed us to shirk our responsibilities, feed our tender egos, and reimagine what it is to be

a good parent today. We buy into the low expectations. So we either stop trying, we fall into a posture of exerting minimal effort, or we come to expect the accolades as the norm.

We get lazy and start to believe the hype.

Repeat sidebar: Honey, I love and appreciate you :-)

Now if this social conundrum were just about the dads or only about my individual need to expand my understanding of my actions as a parent, we could simply continue to slough off some dads with an, “Oh, that’s just the way David is. He’s just a mediocre stepdad” (more on David, my mediocre stepdad, later) and be on our way. Who cares how other dads act as long as people still think *I’m* a great dad, right? The thing is, while it’s ego-feeding for me, this is a pretty shortsighted approach to the great parenting endeavor. This parenting thing is not just about us—dads, moms, nonbinary coparents, or anyone else who participates in the raising of children today (which, BTW, I believe is everyone). Every time we buy into this narrative that being a committed, caring, and loving dad is the exception, we pass on to future generations this flawed and destructive narrative. We will continue to expect women to live up to unreasonable and oppressive expectations of motherhood, and we dads will continue to be seduced by the idea that the world should be grateful that we are doing the bare minimum and that the bare minimum is all we need to do.

So what does all this have to do with kindness?

Just as buying into the low-bar approach is no way to go about being a parent, we must do our best to avoid setting the bar just as low when it comes to kindness.

Alas, I fear it is too late. We have lowered the kindness bar, and we have become lazy. Given the increased visibility

(through social media in particular) of expressions of violence, xenophobia, racism, misogyny, ableism, and more, it is no longer all that hard to be seen as a kind person because the bar has been lowered to the point that simply *not* being violent, xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, or ableist is all one has to do in order to be kind. Dehumanization and dismissiveness have become the norm to such an extent that when we notice the infrequent whisper of a kind act or word or response, we are shocked into whipping our out smartphone, recording it, and sharing it with the world. Nowadays even the simplest acts of kindness are newsworthy and become viral sensations: being patient with an older person in the checkout line, providing help to someone who is of another race, taking time to assist someone with a physical disability, and yes, being a dad who shows emotion and compassion to their child.

Kindness can and should be celebrated. Still, I fear that we are now at a point when highlighting kindness in such ways not only makes being kind seem like a herculean, heroic, and exhausting gesture, but it also diverts our attention away from addressing the root causes of oppression and injustice that have put so many people in positions where simple acts of kindness are needed in order to alleviate suffering.

Take, for instance, my general examples above:

*Example #1:* Yes, celebrate when people respect our elders. But let's also ask the question, "Why do we, in the United States, have such an anti-elderly culture?"

*Example #2:* Yes, celebrate when folks cross racial divides. But let's also ask the questions, "In what ways has the United States been built upon the foundation of slavery

and racism? What steps can I take to recognize and dismantle that foundation?”

*Example #3:* Yes, celebrate when people go out of their way to help someone. But let’s also ask the question, “Why do we still see disabled persons as less than?”

*Example #4:* Yes, it’s great that dads are in touch with the emotional needs of their children. But let’s also ask the question, “Why do men get parades for doing what should be assumed (and is assumed about women)?”

I am not against celebrating acts of kindness. But I am perplexed by the attitude that being kind is beyond most mortals’ reach, so why bother? No—every single person has the capacity to be kind. Being kind is not a superpower; it is a way of being that we must and can choose every day.

Am I overstating the lack of kindness? Try the following:

- Name the last two or three acts of kindness that you witnessed, read about, or watched on social media, television, or in person.
- Name the last two or three hurtful, hateful, or dehumanizing acts that you witnessed, read about, or watched on social media, television, or in person.

How long did you have to think? I bet that examples of the latter came to you far faster than the former. Has it always been that way? Why accept that as a good reason? If people are always going to kill other people, should we no longer try to stop the killing? Even if there will always be those who become addicted to

drugs or alcohol, does that mean we should stop educating people about the dangers of addiction and substance abuse? If there will always be people in the world who find fulfillment in their lives by belittling, bullying, and dismissing others, does that mean we should stop trying to lift people up, stop fostering self-worth in our children, and stop creating a more hospitable and welcoming society? It is precisely because so much that is not kind has become normalized that we must be that much more kind in response.

The positive pressures to be kind simply are not as prevalent as they once were. From small gestures, like offering a seat on the bus to an elderly rider, to how we engage in political discourse on Twitter, our ways of being have changed—and not for the better.

Being kind is a challenging endeavor. It's a way of being in the world that we have to practice. But when we model mediocre kindness, we give in to a world guided by intolerance, indifference, and hostility.

This must change, and I choose to believe we can and must make it happen.

Before you start to believe that the world is entirely devoid of goodness and joy, let me say that I do believe that many acts of kindness occur every day. We do not always notice them, but from the subtle to the stupendous, I do know that kindness exists. I will talk about more kindness in a viral sense, but here are just a few subtle moments of kindness that come to mind from my life:

- The barista who on occasion just waves me off when I try to pay for my “Iced Greater Haze, sweet and creamy, Stevia, and cinnamon and nutmeg in the filter” coffee (don't judge—it's joy in a cup)

- A friend who drove to the airport at 3:00 a.m. to pick up our sixteen-year-old daughter who was stranded after her flight was canceled
- Our new neighbor knocking on our door wondering if that “white dog wandering down the street” belongs to us

These are not earth-shattering acts of kindness. They indict change in my life by the everyday simplicity with which they are offered. Kindness as a lens through which we live our lives does not need reinvention; instead, to see the world of the future as building on the actions of kindness of past generations, we must reinforce, recapture, and reimagine the healing, power, and liberation that kindness brings the world.

I will dive deeper into what kindness is before long, but I know that some of you are already thinking, “Kindness is all well and good, but being ‘nice’ simply won’t cut it.” I understand. But even or particularly in the most conflicted of situations, is there really no use for kindness, graciousness, and decency? Are we really willing to feed the idea that the normative way of interacting today is *not* to be nice, let alone kind?

Kindness challenges those people who are fed by being hurtful and who find worth by tearing others down. This is not the posture that I intend to live in the world. The posture of tearing another down believes that the only way to “win” is to gain power over others, to make the other feel less than, and to get to a point of submission and victory. That is a sure way to bankrupt our souls.

Kindness has power if we not only believe in it but also live it into being. I choose to practice standing on the side of kindness. It may be a struggle, but to quote the fictional



character Jimmy Dugan talking to a discouraged baseball player in Penny Marshall's movie classic *A League of Their Own*, "It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great." Yes, to be kind can be hard. If it were easy, everyone would do it. But seeing Mr. Rogers again reminded me that I want to rediscover the power of kindness, to witness how it can move us through even the most difficult of situations, to be an agent of kindness myself.

*In Defense of Kindness* is for two sorts of people. If you are someone who already strives for kindness every day, I hope the company of this book and its stories will encourage and energize you to continue knowing you are not alone in this endeavor. If, on the other hand, you understand the concept of kindness intellectually but are still unsure whether being kind is worth the time and energy, this book will remind you—and I hope convince you through theory and practice—that by embracing kindness in new, contextual, and intentional ways, you will make the world a healthier, more liberating, and kinder place.

If, on the other hand, you are a card-carrying, hard-core anti-kindness activist, this book will only give you nightmares—nightmares of hope, optimism, and rainbow-farting unicorns, but nightmares nonetheless.

You have been warned.

I choose to believe that being kind is the most powerful way to invite positive change into the world. But I know that, even on my best days, being kind is more aspirational than actual, and I cannot do this kindness thing all by myself. Having you for company will make me more likely to be kind. Won't you join me on this journey?

**For Reflection:**

More than anything else, what prevents you  
from being kind?

Where is kindness most needed?

**Try This:**

Make a list of three people you know who exemplify  
a life of kindness.

Send them a note to thank them for being kind.