

GREAT
LOVE IN
LITTLE
WAYS



Reflections
on the Power
of Kindness

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CONTENTS

Note to the Reader.....viii

Introduction.....1

REFLECTIONS ON SELF-KINDNESS

The Sunshine in Your Face...6 ♦ Plain Seeing...8 ♦
Taking Refuge...11 ♦ Letting Go...13 ♦ Endings...16 ♦
Waiting...18 ♦ Simple Pleasures...21

REFLECTIONS ON KINDNESS TOWARD OTHERS

Hospitality...26 ♦ Kindness In, Kindness Out...29 ♦
The Warmth in Our Hands...31 ♦ The Little Step
Backward...34 ♦ The Silence that Speaks...36 ♦ A
Work in Progress...39 ♦ The Kindness of a Tree...41
♦ Of Beauty Made...44

REFLECTIONS ON THE LIGHT OF KINDNESS

Living a Good Question...48 ♦ The Well Inside...50
♦ Being Somebody...53 ♦ The After Light...55
♦ The Gift in Limitations...58 ♦ Wholeness in
Boundaries...60 ♦ North Star Perspective...62 ♦
Dying Often...65 ♦ Being a Bridge...67 ♦ Alone
Together...70 ♦ Random Acts...72 ♦ 911...75 ♦
Loving the Earth...77 ♦ Play...80

Last Words.....84

Note to the Reader

Here in New England, where I live, you can walk its beautiful beaches and find pieces of sea glass. Those pieces have been tossed in the ocean. Their sharp edges are gone, and they are no longer able to cut your fingers. When you hold them up to the sun they reflect light through their many colors: yellow, white, green, purple, blue, and very rarely red.

The reflections in this little book are like those pieces of sea glass. There is nothing brand new written here. Experience has tumbled all the edges off. Yet I hope these perceptions can emit light. Gathered together they make a kaleidoscope you can use where the light of your own eyes and consciousness will shine through the reading of them, adding a new pattern and sparkle.

We may know many things with our minds. That does not mean we can embody what

we know. Living a desire to be kind is like being tumbled in the ocean. Our sharp edges get worn away. We realize how small we are. It is good to own our limits, but the light of kindness has no limits. It is vast. It can shine through us in its own ways.

This book appears to be organized in a certain way: being kind to ourselves, being kind to others, and cultivating a steady state of kindness. This is not a sequential process, however, but a kind of simultaneity. Just as in a kaleidoscope, all the pieces are there turning with the light. We are always being relational in a much vaster way than we know when kindness is our path.

My hope is that this book will be your friend, and that its edges will be worn by frequent use. May it encourage you. May it shine a little light on the ways you want to dwell in and cultivate kindness.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a kaleidoscope in your hands. Gazing through the glass you can see colorful pieces that make a lovely pattern. By turning the kaleidoscope just a little, the pieces fall into a new pattern. Almost at once something new is there to behold.

We gaze out at the world all the time and see patterns that are often thoughtless and cruel. The amazing thing is that we can change those patterns by turning our perception just a little toward kindness: a smile, a helping hand, a gentle word of encouragement, a bit of patience, and always the slow, inward growth toward wholeness and love. These are ways that can help to change our hardened, old patterns. Everything we have ever been is still

useful if we turn the glass and see things from the perspective of kindness.

Tiny ways of growing more conscious and expressing kindness point us to something much larger than any one of us can fathom. As much as the air we breathe, the water we drink, the earth we stand upon, and the sunlight that warms us, we need kindness. It is the fifth element that knits us together and sustains us.

We forget how central kindness is to existence. Without water, we would die. Without human kindness, given and received, we would soon perish. We need to recognize this truth, to value it, and to practice it.

We know we will fail to be kind on many occasions when we wanted to be so. Old habits of self-protection and judgment overtake us with surprising force. It is as if the old animal instinct to survive at any cost reasserts itself. From primitive times our brains were wired to look for what was wrong and could harm us. To this day our brains continue to have that kind of vigilance. But our brains have also

evolved and have learned to look for what is kind, and for what will help us, as well as what will help others. As a species we are all able to be more aware, to change, to transform, and to contribute. This is evolutionary.

Mother Teresa said that *we cannot do great things, but we can do little things with great love*. We can do so best over time by being constant, conscious, and caring in small ways. Learning to live in this humble way will change us at the core and create a pattern we can follow. In it we will be re-patterned to be not only human but also humane.

Whether directed to ourselves or to someone else, an attitude of kindness has the power to gentle and to slow the speed at which we live our lives. In its embrace we become more mindful, more effective, and more loving. It is no surprise that mindfulness creates kindness. Being fully present and genuine, we lose nothing in sharing small acts of kindness. We are just lighting another person's candle with our flame. Nothing is lost. Only more light is gained.

REFLECTIONS
ON SELF-
KINDNESS



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*Good people, most royal
greening verdancy
rooted in the sun, you shine
with radiant light.*

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN



THE SUNSHINE IN YOUR FACE

All of us know the feeling of a polite smile, or the smile we use when we have been hurt and need to cover up our feelings. We know the party smile that begins to ache after an hour or two. Then there is the have-a-nice-day smile that is automatic, not unlike a handshake that will not be remembered.

What is a real smile? Is it not a lifting of the heart—making recognition and participation visible on our faces, for we cannot help but smile when something has reached our inner

being? Our smiles join us to the goodness in the world.

There are therapies that ask people to smile, even if they don't feel like it. Science has proven that when we smile, we are sending an astounding amount of helpful messages to the chemistry in our bodies. We actually warm up the endocrine system. It may seem artificial, but if we smiled at our image in the mirror every morning even if it is a bad day, we will soon sense the self-kindness we have generated. It is a bit like a kindness bank account. We will find the balance growing. Haven't we noticed that the kindest people are those who think nothing of it? They have a fortune.

When two people genuinely smile on one another, they create a mutual radiance. Imagine what this might be like if there were hundreds of thousands of people smiling on one another this way. The world would glow.

A genuine smile is kindness made visible. It is a sign of welcome. It is the good in goodwill. It is sunshine in your face.

*The eye through which I see God is
the same eye through which God sees me;
my eye and God's eye are one eye, one
seeing, one knowing, one love.*

MEISTER ECKHART



PLAIN SEEING

One of the most wonderful and tender ways to navigate in the world is to see it plainly, without adding opinions to what we see. It is a kindness practice that will never be over if we decide to embark on it.

We may choose to look at something, a blue sweater, for instance. When we see the sweater without adding anything—such as, *that's an ugly blue sweater*, or *that's a gorgeous blue sweater*—we are simply seeing it. The sweater can be what it is, without being layered over with

qualifications. We are so used to adding evaluation to our seeing that we don't even know we are doing it. Suppose for a single hour we decided to catch ourselves at it. We would be amazed at how much we judge and evaluate even the most ordinary parts of our lives. To see and let things be what they simply are is a holy way to see.

We will never know what something really is, whether it is a tree, a cat, or a human being. We can only be *with* the tree, the cat, or the human. Being *with* is a different kind of seeing. Dropping our automatic opinions frees us, and everything else, to be what it is. We will be liberated from constantly trying to improve things or disparage them.

One hour of simply seeing is an adventure into freedom and inner kindness. In essence, it is simple, but it is not easy. If we would like to experiment with this, we can cover our eyes with our hands. We can warm them, appreciate the gift of them, and intend to see without opinions for a morning. We would notice how

images enter our eyes. The images are for that moment inside us. The eyes let the images in without our conscious consent. We are in the world and the world we see is inside us. This is actually objective and a clean, sacred way of seeing.



*The smallest thing
will not be forgotten.*

JULIAN OF NORWICH

TAKING REFUGE

Safe places are places of refuge and nourishment. A safe place can be an actual location or a relationship that we count on and trust. A safe place can be a strong belief system or a discipline we are committed to. Having a refuge and taking refuge keeps us steady as we grow and unfold.

Kindness is a refuge and is found everywhere if we would just notice: the door that is opened for us, the smile for no reason, the offered ear, the comforting word. Such random acts happen in the trillions. Kindness is built into us as part of being human, and we are remiss to take it for granted.

Beginning with ourselves, what refuge in kindness can we offer our bodies? More rest? Less food? Time spent in nature? A warm, comforting bath? Understood as kindness, these small things become much bigger. They become lived regard, a steady caretaking we give to ourselves. Our homes need kindness

too: keeping order, dusting the furniture, sweeping the floors, changing the sheets, and watering the plants. Doing the household chores in the spirit of kindness will make our homes into sanctuaries.

Refuge does not mean avoidance of the world, other people, and the challenges that are part of living. Cultivating kindness means we are taking the refuge of it with us everywhere we go. Think how a snail moves over the ground feeling everything as it travels. We can be that close to our circumstances, feeling our way forward in a kind of living Braille. Living that closely and intimately with what we encounter is a brave way to live. We can do it when, like the snail, we have the home of kindness at our back, a space to withdraw where there is refuge from reactivity. It is a wordless state of being, and it will always be available.