

Random thoughts on kindness

12/27/2021

As I type this, there's a bright red sticky note taped to the upper left corner of my monitor. I remember putting it there to remind me of...something. And I've no earthly idea what that something might be.

And so it goes these days. Given my age I have to wonder whether this minor lapse is a harbinger of more dreadful things to come. It's a fear that lingers, quietly but undeniably, in the darker recesses of my self-image.

But today, another random thought rescues me from such unhappy mullings. An article on the NPR site included the phrase "raise kind kids" and that phrase stuck in my mind. What I'm working on today for my day job involves editing teaching materials and I really need to focus. So, about the fourth time that phrase popped into my brain, I jotted it down and taped the note to my personal computer monitor. Day's work done and this time, I did recall the meaning of the sticky note and here we are.

Raising kind kids – hm-m-m-m... Something I like to think – no, I know – Mary and I have accomplished when I consider our own daughters. I won't go into all the twists and turns, successes and failures along the way, but anyone who knows Angela or Rachel well would surely assign kindness as one of their definitive traits.

On the now-rare occasions when I peak around the virtual corner at the cavalcade of nastiness that passes for news, the thoughts that most often demand my conscious consideration are about how we came to this and, next, how we step back away from the brink. And sparing you my hours of analysis, mostly as I lay awake, I can only suggest that it won't happen quickly. And it may not even involve concerted action, not of the organized variety, anyway.

No, I don't mean we shouldn't come together to deal with matters immediate. I just mean we need to face up to the fact that the roots of our present discord have less to do with politics and religion than with failures of human decency. The backbone of this country, assuming we will turn out to have one, is stiffened not by speeches and 'follow me' exhortations but rather by an overwhelming sense of goodwill among us. And many of the most troubling incidents I see in the news are brought about by individual failures to display that goodwill.

Basic kindness – the impulse to consider and incorporate the other's best interests and feelings in one's decisions – must surely be fundamental to being or raising the kind of person we would like to encounter on the street. Or in the airplane or at the grocery store or, or, or...

I have been guilty of the unkind word or act far too many times in my life but Mary and I tried very hard to raise our children to be better than us. And whether it was our parental instruction or (perhaps more likely) the cumulative effect of the kids and teachers around them, they have both succeeded in becoming the people I wish I could claim to have been.

As a society, we've a mountain of repair work to do and frankly, I'm about in the middle on the hopefulness scale at the moment. But one simple thing we can do is model attitudes and behaviors that will at least not add to the hurt and possibly even help begin the healing.

Kids are watching – our own and others – and they will learn from what they see. In the words of Stephen Sondheim, “Children will look to you for which way to turn, to learn what to be. Careful before you say, listen to me. Children will listen.”

We could do worse than to encourage kindness in the next generation. And who knows, perhaps if only by muscle memory, acting more kindly will improve grumpy old Fudds like me, as well.