

May 13 Message

Hello 2 All of You! I'm Thinking of You with Love! Let's see what else I have found on the subject of kindness...and empathy. ML

Is empathy for others something we learn or something we are born with? Until 1990, it was widely believed children do not begin to act altruistically (altruism n. selfless concern for the well-being of others) until age seven. Freud said children are not altruistic until they are old enough to act based on societal values instead their impulses. Child expert Jean Piaget held that children could not be altruistic until they developed the cognitive skills that would enable them to see things from someone else's point of view.

But world-renowned psychologist and scholar Piero Ferrucci disagrees. In his book *Inevitable Grace*, he cites a study done with children ages eighteen months to two years. In some 1,500 incidents where toddlers were exposed to someone else's mild suffering, like a parent coming home tired or disappointed, or someone getting a minor burn from a hot stove, the majority of these very young children wanted to help or comfort the person who was hurting. Empathy and a spontaneous feeling of concern for others are not imposed from outside, nor are they factors of mental maturity, Ferrucci writes, "Instead they are natural, original attitudes of our being."

(This is me talking about a photo Hannah sent to me when Oliver was about 7 months old. She had been in bed with a stomach virus all day. Dad took Oliver to visit her in the bed and she took a selfie. Oliver's face was so full of empathy and the desire to comfort. I was amazed! It seems it really is *just in us!*)

"I've been watching young children most of my life and they are more often kind to each other than unkind. The early instinct to help someone is powerful," writes Vivian Gussin Paley, a retired kindergarten teacher whose numerous widely respected books on young children are published by Harvard University Press.

If Ferrucci and Paley are right - and I certainly want to believe they are; don't you? - then what happens to our instinctive empathy for others when we grow up? Does the dearth (dearth n. a scarcity or lack of something) of kindness in our adult world mean that although we may feel empathy, we often choose not to act on it? And if so, why? What gets in our way? Well.....

We might be sorry. We might fail and taking risks *does* make us vulnerable.

But maybe being vulnerable is part of the reason kindness works.

Here's why. By definition, kindness involves two people: one person who needs kindness and one who is willing to give it. What about the person on the receiving end?

For most of us, receiving doesn't come easy.

Have you ever been involved in a conversation that went like this:

“Let me treat you to dinner tonight.”

“Oh, no. You don't have to do that.”

“It would be a pleasure.”

“Still. That's okay. I can pay for it myself.”

We seem to feel we aren't worth another person's kindness. And if we get talked into accepting someone's gift, we think we have to pay it back. Sound familiar? And how much easier is it to accept someone's kindness when they are meeting us as an equal, when we both have something – perhaps pride, perhaps self-esteem – at risk. When we risk being kind, we ante up our own humanity. We connect. We offer genuine human contact. Yes, it takes courage to be kind. It calls for exposing ourselves, for putting ourselves on the front lines. That's why it's so important not to be daunted by others' opinions. We must let go of what other people think in order to lead them by example.

Kindness is a revolution that needs as many leaders as possible. When will we know we have succeeded? When we look behind us and see no followers, only people walking beside us, doing their best to meet life with an open heart.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.