

Deliberate Acts of Kindness

By William Peterson

"For it is in giving that we receive..."

This famous line is paraphrased from the "Prayer of Saint Francis". This prayer is often incorrectly attributed to St. Francis himself. The author to this prayer however, still remains unknown. This prayer first appeared (1912) in a French spiritual magazine called "La Clochette" (Little Bell). Today people whom we admire on the world stage have quoted richly from this prayer. Mother Theresa for instance has made this prayer part of the prayer routine for her religious order while Desmond Tutu, the winner of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize, says that it is an integral part of his prayer life, his way of life.

Wherever I go the quest for greater levels of meaning, happiness, energy and health is profound and relentless. I believe that the ultimate solution is to be found through true inner transformation. If that inner transformation is genuine, then it will lead you to a wisdom that instructs you to go beyond yourself and your parochial needs, issues, stresses and concerns. It seems to me that when we take some of that narcissistic attention away from ourselves we actually forget about our troubles. At best, they are often not as bad as our debilitating ponderings and gnawing fretting might make them out to be. I can't remember where, but I once heard it said but that 80% of the things we worry about never really come to pass, but we

still worry and we worry! When we become less self-absorbed we tend to pay less attention and consequently give less power to whatever might be disturbing us. It does not necessarily mean that our worries go away. However, when we choose to do something good for another person our preoccupation with our own problems and issues tend to dissipate, providing us with new energy and perspectives.

Well known Psychologist Dr Martin Seligman put some students through an experiment where he got them to choose one self-indulgent pleasurable activity and one philanthropic/self-sacrificing one. The results were quite transformative for the students. While the students enjoyed the pleasurable activity they found that its effects faded rather rapidly. While, the fulfilment they received from the selfless act was profound and seemed to last much longer. Further, in an American Psychosomatic Society journal, it was reported that heart patients who were more optimistic were 30 to 50 per cent less likely to die in the ten years following their diagnosis than those who were pessimistic.

I know that too much caring can hurt and you probably have your own experiences to back this up. We all from time to time suffer from a bit of "compassionate fatigue". The kind of contribution I'm advocating however must come from an authentic place which will make your giving sustainable.

The giving I'm advocating in this article also does not have to cost you a cent. You can decide to give a little of your time or just do small acts of kindness (A simple kind word, praise or recognition). This works particularly well if you are able to be kind to people outside of your comfort zone, those you might have difficulty with and those who least expect your generosity, etc. You will notice that you indeed will feel better and more energised.

The acts of kindness can include:

- Good morning, how are you? Especially in that dreaded lift /elevator.
- Getting involved in your neighbourhood.
- Saying a sincere thank you.
- Apologising when you are wrong.
- Giving genuine attention to a little one who lacks your attention.
- Take a colleague for lunch.
- Making your colleague or team member some tea/coffee.
- Have something positive to say about South Africa.
- Pay attention how you treat others in conversation, allow them to speak.
- Don't always finish their sentences for them.
- Buy someone a bunch of flowers.
- Support an aged person who needs and will appreciate your help.
- Move across the colour and gender barriers and share own stories which brings understanding and healing.
- Etc...

If you are thinking what hogwash! Then suspend that critique and cynicism. Consider that being kind is actually part of our DNA. Evolutionary biologists seem to think that we have drifted from our true nature and capacity to be kind and generous. Maybe, our current societal model of rugged individualism coupled with unbridled Capitalism has eroded our sense of community and cooperative interdependence. They say that our evolutionary history seems to have handed down to us the capacity to be empathetic, cooperative and involved in unselfish endeavours, mainly to ensure the survival of the tribe! Now you might well call this enlightened self-interest, but eons ago we knew that by collaborating we can achieve more. Ubuntu!!

Nelson Mandela explained Ubuntu in the following manner:

"A traveller through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu, but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?"

When being kind, the intention must not be for self-gain or reward. That type of giving becomes twisted and deeply narcissistic. The intention must be for the benefit of the other, even if there is no reward or even a thank you.

Now here is the interesting part, evidence seems to suggest overwhelmingly that your rewards more often than not, exceed your act of kindness (Have you not noticed that?).

It would seem that when we open our small doors of kindness, the Universe flings wide open its doors of providence and we feel the effects.

I encourage you to find at least five kind acts a week that you can do. Do it in secret, don't tell anyone about it. Do it at home, at work and when you are socialising, wherever the need is.

I mentioned earlier that our evolutionary biology embeds in us the innate willingness to collaborate. Well, our biology seems to also have prepared an "inner reward" called, "helpers upper". Scientists increasingly are agreeing that altruistic behaviour releases endorphins in the brain which produces those positive warm woolly "Lekker" feelings. So, the body has its own way of giving you feedback about your kind acts.

While co-facilitating an employee engagement workshop with one of my clients, I was immensely encouraged by a throw away comment she made during one of our breaks. She said "if only we as managers can avoid getting sucked into our daily routines of meetings and targets, and pay more attention to the people who are doing the work for us, we can achieve so much more success. We should stop staring at these figures and start relating to our people."

Never underestimate how your seemingly tiny acts of kindness or contributions can impact, others, your family, those watching you being kind, your community, your organisation, your team members and your staff etc. The ground swell of goodness and sustainable positivity is now more than ever needed in our world. Help to create the butterfly effect, through your deliberate acts of kindness. Margaret Mead an American cultural anthropologist (1901-1978), seems to have understood this well when she said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has".

So like in the little bell (La Clochette) will you ring your own "bell" of deliberate acts of kindness and along with the powerful chorus line in Leonard Cohen's famous song called the "Anthem" remember to:

"Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in."