

# THE KIND HUMANS **SURVIVAL GUIDE**

BEING *Kind* HUMANS  
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## LESSON 1

# THIS MIGHT HURT A BIT

I'm not a doctor and I don't play one on TV—but I've seen trauma up close.

Having lived half of my life as a minister and caregiver, I've had a front row seat to people in pain; I've been given access to their deepest grief and their most wounded places. I've served as a local church pastor for twenty-five years; spending the last six of those also overseeing a large global online community, and even though I'd grown somewhat accustomed to strangers baring their souls to me, over the past few years feels as if their pain and despair has escalated. People feel like the world is upside-down and they are reeling from the disorientation of it all—spiritual nausea.

A friend of mine captured the frustration succinctly one day over coffee. We were running through what seemed to be an endless list of cruel people and grief-worthy news, until finally she just she blurted out: “Doesn't anyone remember how to be a decent human being, for God's sake?” I reminded her that yes, lots of people do.

People of every religious tradition, political affiliation, and nation of origin, instinctively know there is a better way to live, and they want to figure out how to unearth it in real-time.

They want to live with gentleness and decency; to be the antidote to the despair that has so afflicted people. I imagine you're one of them. I bet you feel that same holy discontent the great storytellers have spoken about for millennia; that heavy burden on a human heart that compels someone to seek a deeper kind of living, a better way of being here, a more intentional ordinary. I think you share that same gravitational pull toward goodness.

These urgent yearnings are the reason I created this course: because these days are unprecedented, because there is so much at stake, and because complacency and inaction now are more dangerous than ever. I wanted to get with a group of human beings who care and to linger with that idea of caring.

I imagine that's why you're here, and I am so grateful you are. I hope this will be a challenging, encouraging time where you'll feel seen and heard. I hope you.

I imagine that's why you're here, and I am so grateful you are. I'm honored that you've chosen to be present with me and with people all over the world and I'm excited because I know the world is going to be a more compassionate place as a result.

I hope this will be a challenging, encouraging time where you'll feel seen and heard. I hope you feel like it is time well spent. You'll notice that this course isn't called ‘Being Kind Christians’ or ‘Being Kind Muslims’ or ‘Being Kind Jewish People.’ It also isn't called Being Kind Atheists. This experience isn't just for religious people or non-religious people, it's for people and the core of what we talk about and explore is ultimately about the best

way to be human, about being the people the world needs. So, let's talk about story because that is the center of Story Based Life Skills. That's because story is at the center of being human.

Story matters. We are moved by story. We are propelled by story. We have our imaginations awakened by a great story. When we meet someone, one of the most exciting and difficult tasks is catching them up on our story so far, and when we enter into relationship with them, they become part of our story. What story does is it binds us together, and reminds us of our commonalities, and it allows us to participate in events we were not present for. "Oh, let me tell you the story of when I..." And if we were present for an event, we celebrate the connection through storytelling: "Remember that time, we..." Our nations have a connected story. Our faith traditions are built on shared story. Our families are a legacy of a single story.

The reason we go to the movies or read a book or look at artwork or listen to music—is to see something of ourselves reflected back at us, to feel connected to other people, to find affinity in the experience of being human.

And the reason we create and express ourselves creatively, is to make that kind of connection in the opposite direction: to say: here is my story. Knowing we are part of a shared story is often what tethers us to hope when difficulty comes.

\*We are always fighting the feeling that we are alone in our worries, our values, our fears; that we are the last of an endangered species—especially when we are surrounded by so much discord, so many opposing opinions, so much tribalism.

Most of us wade into crowds of strangers every day on social media hoping to find people who sees something we see, who are outraged by something we're outraged by someone who is asking a question we are asking. Ultimately, we want to know, I'm not alone and I'm not crazy and if I'm crazy I'm in really good company.

I imagine part of the reason you're here is that you wanted to be in a community of like-hearted people: to gather with human beings who care about the world in the way that you do. We often use the derogatory label of the echo chamber, but we need to rethink that a bit. An echo chamber is often just a collection of people who make us feel seen and heard and known and give us respite from the places and the people who don't.

The myth about echo chambers is that we're trying to hide from the truth there, but that isn't accurate. We don't assemble such places virtually or physically to eliminate differences of opinion or silence opposing voices. We know those exist and we engage them all the time. We don't usually have a lack of dissenting voices in our lives. We can't get away from oppositional ideas. In our echo chambers (which I'll call tribes of affinity) what we're looking for is rest. We're looking for encouragement. We're looking for validation. We're looking for people who get us—because when people get us, the other stuff is a lot easier to endure.

When the Coronavirus pandemic began in March of 2020 and more than a year of shutdowns and travel restrictions started, it exacerbated a problem that was already

present: disconnection. We know that in general, this pulling away has been happening for a while, even as online community has grown exponentially. We've seen the evidence: people texting instead of calling one another, families spending less time eating dinner together, people less aware of their neighbors, human beings with less opportunities for meaningful connection with people around them. The pandemic introduced forced geographic distance in addition to emotional distance—and we have an epidemic of loneliness, which is why story-sharing is so critical. Loneliness is often at the heart of despair and stories make us feel less alone. One of the goals of kind humans is the genuine desire to make people feel less alone.

We want to be known. We want to be heard.

I do. You do. And here's a secret:

So do the people we don't like.

So do the people we despise.

So do the people whose politics make our blood boil.

2.7 billion people are all here together—and terrified of being alone.

That's going to be a recurring truth of this course that we'll want to hold onto over the next 5 weeks and moving forward: no one is immune from the side-effects of being human, as uncaring as they seem, as insensitive as we think they are, as callous as they may appear from the outside.

We're in a tough spot here. We want to be known and being known happens in relationship with other people. It's really difficult, almost impossible to experience the greatest parts of our humanity outside the space of real, messy, costly relationships. Solitude and silence and nature are restorative and productive, but ultimately, we require other people to practice our humanity:

So much of our humanity is predicated on connection: Compassion needs another person's pain to invest itself in and move toward. Generosity requires a needy recipient to be extended to and shared with. Kindness is best delivered to another human being in which you recognize need for it. Humor is magnified when it is shared laughter with a like-hearted soul. Funny stuff is funnier with other people.

Our gifts and abilities are by their nature, meant to be participatory—and so are we. That's not the problem. The problem is that it's in relationship with other people that we face the greatest injury: it is often the source of our most profound pain and our deepest grief. When I used to work retail, I used to say, "Retail would be great if it weren't for the customers." Every interaction with another human being contains both the possibility for connection and the potential for injury. I don't know why you're here, but I imagine you're here because you're grieving something.

You're here because you've experienced a relational fracture or a disconnection.

You're here because you feel a not-rightness and you know that people are the source of that, not just generally speaking, but specifically.

You have people in your life who really get on your nerves and you're trying to figure out how to tolerate them.

You don't share their politics or align with their religious beliefs and you can't seem to agree on much at all lately.

You struggle to find common ground with these people because they seem to be so different from you.

You work or study alongside them, interact with them on social media, you may even live with them.

They might be people you dearly love but don't like very much right now.

And in some way, you are likely grieving an old story of a person or a country or a spiritual belief: the one you had of the person or the one of your old connection. We often want the old story back, but that old story was usually based on information we didn't have before and now we need to adjust to the new story, which takes some work. Yes, you may be here talking about being a kind person because of a larger concern about "humanity" out there, about a voting block or political party or a religious group—but likely you have names and faces and stories for the issue. So, this grieving it's global, it's personal.

As we begin the *Being Kind Humans* journey together, I want to ask you a couple of questions to reflect upon: What are you grieving right now? What do you feel like you've lost? Where do you feel a mourning or a vacancy or a relational death? On a scale of 1 to 10 how much pain are you experiencing right now?

Because you're a compassionate person and because you're not happy with these losses, you've tried everything you can think of to repair the relationship, to create a compromise, to make things better between you but nothing has worked. You've since either emotionally pulled away, or maybe you've disconnected on social media, or you've even stopped communicating altogether—and it doesn't feel very good.

It's easy to tell ourselves the story that the people we are estranged from or disconnected from are fine, but that's almost never true. Grief is universal. A really important truth to remember as we talk about the conflict, we have with other people is that: relational grief is almost always reciprocal.

Story-Based life skills (empathy-centered approach) acknowledge the universal suffering out there and makes that suffering central. We see behavior and confront words and actions and we debate opinions and we call out injustices—but we understand that there is an invisible place of origin of those visible things. Story-Based Living is rooted in informed empathy, in understanding the very specific path each person has traveled and the way that path informs what they believe, and as importantly, how they express those beliefs. Think of that informed empathy as a translator between you and the person you disagree with,

helping to bridge the barriers of different life experiences. A question we can ask is as we engage with people we disagree with or are offended by or angry with: What might they be grieving? What do they feel like they're losing?

Story-Based Life Skills are essential, because they give us practical tools for navigating conflict and nurturing intimacy.

They help us develop personalized strategies for managing stress and depression that comes from conflict.

And they help us find or create meaningful, values-based communities of affinity.

Most of us drive past a house and we see the house from the road: We look at the exterior from a distance: the way it's decorated, how the landscaping is maintained, the stuff in the yard—and we try to get a feel for who's inside. And yes, those external things do tell us something about the people who live there, but to really get a clear picture we need to get closer. We need to go inside the house. Though, that's not enough either. Even if we're in the house with them, we still need something else, to be sure we know them accurately: we need to talk with them, to ask them questions, to be students of their unique journey.

Story-Based Living helps us go deeper than the exterior surface decorations of political opinions or religious issues or personality traits (the places we often get stuck), to get to the why behind them, so that we can begin to find commonalities. So, today as we begin this *Being Kind Humans* journey together, be mindful of the epidemic of loneliness out there, about the fact that no one is immune from the painful collateral damage of being human. Remember that sharing stories is critical because stories make us feel less alone and that loneliness is one of the fundamental sources of wounding out there.

Remember that the grief experienced in relational disconnection is reciprocal and we aren't mourning that alone.

# STEPPING INTO THE TRENCHES

Hello kind humans, welcome to session 2. As a quick review from our last session, I hope you've given some time to consider the universal grief out there, to the collateral damage of being human and the sense of loss that every single person you encounter in this world is carrying, and the prevalent fear people have of being alone—especially the people you like least. We'll need to keep that in mind as we face unlovable people, and we confront the unlovable-ness in ourselves.

A few years ago, our family took a trip to Universal Studios Orlando. On our inaugural day, one of the first things we did was to take in Shrek 4D, which at the time was a novel, if now common theme park experience: a traditional 3D movie viewed while being sprayed periodically with air or water and having your seat shaken or tilted to ratchet up the realism. It was billed as an “immersive experience” and my expectations were commensurately stratospheric, given the fact that I come just short of listing an organ on Ebay to cover the cost. As we finished snaking through the seemingly endless queue and prepared to enter the theater, we each were handed a pair of plastic yellow glasses and ushered quickly into the nearest row of seats. I hung my glasses around my neck and helped my children get settled in.

As the house lights went down and the soundtrack swelled, a jovial voice instructed us to put on our 3D glasses, and I promptly complied as the movie began. I was ready to be immersed in a state-of-the-art experience, and after a few seconds—I was not impressed. The picture didn't have the clarity I expected, given the location and price point, and my giddy expectancy dissolved into disappointment and a bit of buyer's remorse. I looked around the theater to see if there had been some sort of technical issue, or if anyone else looked as disappointed as I was—but they all seemed perfectly fine. I pitied them all for their low entertainment standards and prayed God would upgrade their expectations. I then turned to my wife, who I can often count on to mirror my displeasure in such social circumstances, but her face was beaming. “Well, she married me,” I thought to myself, “so really, who can account for her taste?” So, there for the next six or seven minutes I impatiently endured what I had decided was a sub-par, overpriced, less-than-experiential experience, until the film finally ended to unanimous (sans one) uproarious applause and the house lights came back up.

As I stood up and prepared to vacate my seat for the next waiting vacationers, my wife looked at me oddly, pointed at the top of my head and asked, “What's that?” I put my hands to where she'd directed me, and felt the unmistakable thin pieces of plastic I was handed seven minutes earlier upon entry, and my mind whirled as I immediately realized what had happened: As we'd entered the dark theater, in my excitement I'd inadvertently placed the 3D glasses on my head—and instead watched the entire film in a dark room with my ordinary sunglass. My wife (who as you can imagine, for many reasons, is long suffering) caught her breath after nearly hyperventilating with laughter and said with a roll of her eyes, “Let's go back around and get in line again.” I responded like a first grader being told



we could keep the puppy we'd found on the side of the road. We exited the building and returned immediately to the queue we'd occupied thirty minutes before. This time as we entered, I took careful note of the whereabouts of my respective glasses and as the house lights once again dimmed, I secured them over my eyes. It was amazing.

The lenses through which we view the world matter. As we live in community, alongside disparate people with very different experiences and values, it's tempting to imagine that everyone sees things as we do, that their filters automatically match our own, that we are having a similar experience of the same planet, the same country, the same religion. But the truth is, we each have incredibly specific story-shaped lenses that subjectively inform and color and alter life in front of us. We are not seeing things the same. These lenses were formed by the homes and families in which we were raised, the teachers we had, the faith communities we did or didn't grow up in, our individual life experiences, our personality types, and even our very physicality, they have customized how we see the world and they permeate our values, motives, and fears.

You carry your lenses with you into the places you live and work and navigate on your phone (even as you hear these words)—which is why talking about just about anything of substance is so messy and fraught with discord: because 2.7 billion separate complex, beloved stories are colliding every day. That's a ton of relational friction to sustain, whether we're deeply religious, decidedly undecided, or passionately anti-religion. And as we said last session, that is going to cause us to sustain injury and we'll have to work to see people accurately.

So, in relational conflict of any kind, on social media or at work or in our living rooms, we always want to think in terms of 2 stories, 2 sets of lenses. In every relationship and every interaction, there are two colliding or intersecting stories: yours and the other person's. It isn't just your opinion vs their opinion or your belief against their belief—it is the sum total of all your experiences encountering theirs. So, yes, whatever you're discussing, whether a political position, religious belief, or idea is important, it's really the part of the iceberg that shows above the water—but there's a lot underneath.

My good friend pastor Doug Hammack talks about the “thing under the thing” the acknowledgment that what we're dealing at any given moment of conflict with another human being, is not only the moment or the issue or the person, but it's usually something much deeper that may be largely unrelated to the moment, the issue, the person. We may be standing across from another person with a small army of those who've hurt them and us before.

Today, I want you to think about when and where and with whom you feel the friction of conflicting stories, those opposing lenses? Where are you struggling with people you love or interact with, in a way that is probably about much more than whatever it is on the surface? Where have you begun to realize that the issue a conflict started over between you and another person, only pointed you to a wider set of differences, and that it's difficult to get to those differences? Where do you realize that a particular person or issue triggers something in you that is a lot bigger than what they're actually saying? People often wonder why we are such a divided society and why everything is fraught with conflict. Certainly, there are reason for this: partisan media, politicians leveraging issues, religious leaders

manipulating people's fears of one another. Often the important topics of immigration or abortion or healthcare or even something as innocuous as the flag—are gateway issues that open us up to a much bigger more fundamental differences—and those differences are lenses issues.

I'm getting older. I've always had great vision. I've always been 20/20. Coincidentally I also haven't had my vision tested in ten years. I only recently realized that I no longer see as well as I thought. I was having trouble making out the description of a recipe and my wife said, "Here, try my readers." I put them up to my face and realized I could read. I'd gotten used to blurry. I'd begun to think a distortion was normal. Have you ever found yourself asking "How could someone believe this or support that? I say it a few hundred times a day. What we don't realize in that moment, is that these people can't see what we see? They have gotten so used to a false story or an inherited prejudice or an unhealthy mindset that they can't see themselves objectively. Before you get caught up with arrogance or superiority, realize you probably can't see yourself perfectly either.

In my travels I do some speaking, but I do a lot of listening, I hear hundreds of stories. I don't consider myself an author or blogger or even a pastor—but a collector of stories. A war correspondent. I travel to a new town and enter the trenches of life with people and say "tell me what's happening here on the ground so I can tell the folks back home." People give me proximity to their pain and they tell me their stories. I listen to the words people say, listen for the places their voices shake, I sit with them in their anger, I leave my time with them asking myself: What are they trying to say? What do they wish people around them could hear—and that's the place I write from. I filter their story through a lens of compassion that I don't necessarily have for people around me, for my family, and especially not for those on the other end of those stories. That's usually because my lenses lie about. Them. Sometimes those words are angry, they're words of grieving, frustration, confrontation. Sometimes those words bring turbulence because they need to—which is a key part of being a kind person that we'll talk about a little later: a passionate advocacy for humanity that doesn't avoid conflict.

People feel the divide: We are a divided nation. I imagine you feel it. But the divide isn't the one we think it is. This divide isn't a black vs white divide. It isn't a Republican vs Democrat divide. It isn't progressive Christians vs. Conservative Christians.

This is a vision divide—a difference in how we see ourselves and our world and other people and our resources. The vision divide is along the lines of empathy and sustenance. The people of compassion and those who lack empathy. It is people who live with open hands and those with clenched fists. It is those who see this world and opportunity and resource as abundance—and those who live in lack—a zero sum game, someone else's gain is my loss. It is human beings who see that we are one interdependent community, and human beings who only know America First. It is love and it is fear.

We're not all people of faith obviously but for those of us who do consider ourselves believers in some capacity, we face a fundamental lens problem in thinking and talking about religion: we all make "God" either slightly or substantially in our own image. These differences alter the way in which we view the world as it relates to spiritual things and to the working theology we practice.

Most of us think that navigating our relational conflicts is an impossible task, especially with people we disagree fundamentally with, those we've tried repeatedly to get along with. We either feel like we're just running over the same ground with the same results (which is super frustrating) or we've stopped communicating altogether and don't know how to begin again. Figuring out the path forward can seem pretty daunting, but it's actually something so elemental and simple: live with curiosity about the person across from you.

I loved Larry King because he seemed to openly disclose his lack of knowledge about his subjects, but he wanted firsthand information. Good interviewers genuinely like learning about people. They are aware of their lack of knowledge about people. We seldom acknowledge our information gap, especially if someone makes us uncomfortable or we've already decided we know their story. That kind of arrogance about someone else's motivations is dangerous.

The fundamental mistake we make in our interpersonal conflicts, is thinking that we really know people: that we fully understand not only what they think and feel at any given moment, but why they feel that—but that's almost never true. With every single person we interact with, we are almost always dealing with incomplete information at the time. We encounter some people from a great distance on social media, where we see only what they choose to share: their very selective, edited, filtered honesty—and we use that to determine a lot about their feelings and motives.

People think they know me because they've read blog posts or a book. They have a limited window. Maybe you feel that way. I'm sorry to disappoint you. You're probably slightly wrong. I've edited this video a hundred times so you'll see what I want you to see. It doesn't matter how many posts or books someone reads; they could read them all and still only be getting 100 percent to what I choose to share. That's why story matters because we are all selectively sharing out there, and the more accurate stories we get the better treat people.

Others, we may know a bit better than social media, either from work or the neighborhood or from school or church, where we have a deeper and more extended experience of them, but still far from complete. Most of us are putting up the best version of ourselves to stay in community, be successful, be liked. We aren't necessarily lying, but we're sure showing the good stuff. And even the people we have the greatest proximity to and intimacy with, those we live with and know the most about—we don't know everything about. In fact, usually the people we live with and spend the most time around are the people we stop being curious about. In every case, a posture of curiosity will lead you to a more empathetic response. You won't necessarily like them more, but you will more accurately see them. When you remain in a posture of curiosity it's impossible to pass judgment on a person because you are always aware you might not have the whole picture.

I lost my father a few years ago and we had an amazing relationship, though of course we had our disagreements from time to time. Looking back after he died, I remember realizing that there were huge parts of his story that I simply didn't know: about his childhood, about what he wanted to be and do, about the struggles he went through—and if I had known any of those things in a greater capacity, it would have made me better able to navigate our differences or miscommunications.

I think about all the questions I'd love to ask him know, the stories I'd have him tells me, the directness I'd approach him with. Let me ask you: What kinds of questions would you ask someone you can no longer ask? If you could see someone you've lost again, what might you want to know. What is preventing you from asking those questions of people who are still here: awkwardness, worries about their response?

The first step in Story-Based Living, is admitting when we are having a disagreement or disconnection with someone, "I don't know this person as well as I could"—and then, figuring out how to learn something more in order to solve the relational disconnect.

I'll never forget a Thursday afternoon in art school three decades ago. We were about to draw a still-life: a collection of ordinary objects laid out across a table. As we prepared to capture the rather mundane assortment of pottery and fruit sprawled over some simple fabric, our professor said we needed to put our pencils away first. He said, "The job of the artist is to show people the beauty in ordinary things that they no longer see—and to do that you have to become a student of what you draw: to learn as much you can from your subject: to look at the way it reflects light, to notice its texture, its weight; to linger and be curious. Then, after you've really studied it, you can begin to try and capture for others, something about it.

Likewise, if we want to be better able to navigate differences, we have to become students of the people we disagree with; to realize that they are unique and complex, and that we have something to learn about them. Instead of putting our energies into debating or criticizing people, if we can first cultivate curiosity about them, we will stay open to understanding them. What curiosity does, is acknowledge those alternative lenses the other person sees through, and it says to the person across from us: Let me try on your lenses and see what you see. That's the biggest change we can make in the interpersonal dynamic. Instead of just trying to get people to agree to see how we see things, we can make sure we better understand what they see. We don't come with an agenda to convert but to know them. Conversion tends to make us feel like we're winning but it rarely leaves us very empathetic about the other person.

This deeper knowing of people happens best with direct and simple questions, but sometimes that simply isn't practical, so we have to sift people's words and opinions and say "What if I thought the best about this person? If I thought the best about this person, what might be the source of their position?" Kindness is an expression of empathy, but empathy only comes with accurate stories. You can't feel for a person without having an understanding of what they're feeling. Have you ever been angry or upset and had someone say, "I know how you feel" and that made you even angrier and more upset—because you felt less known.

Most of the time our interpersonal conflicts break down over a lack of information or an assumption?

## WAYS TO BE A STUDENT OF OTHER PEOPLE

- 1) **Ask a question you think you know the answer to.**
- 2) **Listen more intentionally.**
- 3) **Try to remove your lenses: the filters you have regarding that person or the issue.**
- 4) **Be willing to be wrong.**

# TWISTED IN YOUR BOWELS

We have a poverty of empathy right now. People feel it. There is an exhaustion that comes when we encounter sustained and pervasive cruelty and they are drawn to it because they are so starved for it. Today, I want to talk about leading with compassion, about empathy at the center. We hear that word compassion all the time, but I think it's good for us to define our terms before we get too far in this journey together. What is compassion, anyway?

The word we translate as compassion has its original roots in the word bowels. It was originally believed that our deepest feelings were housed near our vital organs; which makes sense because behind the word compassion is the idea that one could feel so deeply witnessing another's pain as to become internally disturbed, to the point of sickness. This is why it's not inaccurate when we say that someone's story of suffering moves us. In the phrase, we're expressing that same gut-level solidarity with a person that reaches down into the very core of who we are, as we imagine their specific pain and feel some measure of it. You surely been sick to your stomach seeing an injustice.

Compassion moves us. Compassion. Bowels. So, compassion is a bowel movement!

I said that to a group of folks in a workshop and he said, "Yes, because we give a shit!" There's a phrase that refers to "being twisted in one's bowels," being unsettled by the world. Question: What twists you in your bowels? What cause or issue or suffering makes you feel that way? Compassion (which is the genesis of kindness) is that stepping into the shoes (or the lenses) of another at the center of most faith traditions and moral codes. The Golden Rule of doing unto others as you would have done to you—is predicated on reciprocity on trying to imagine another's pain. And though such vicarious distress on behalf of another is an incredible gift, it's becoming more and more rare—and in fact is treated by some as a weakness. Bleeding heart liberal is a slur a criticism. Compassion (this twisting in our bowels) propels us from our places of selfishness and comfort and into other people's lives.

You can't argue or lecture or speak someone into caring about another human being. People have to be shown or to be placed in situations where they are surprised by compassion, to have those empathetic muscles used for the first time. We have to model compassionate community, to see the affinity in the need in the world: the way it transcends every other category or barrier we create commonality of suffering.

If you call your local cable provider to order service, at some point in the conversation, invariably the customer service representative will make you an offer. They will tell you that if you'd like to also add Internet and Phone, that they can package these services, and they will be much more affordable than if you purchased them separately or elsewhere. This is what is known as Bundling. Life is supposedly better when you bundle. Life is easier when you bundle. I like bundling because it makes me feel like I'm getting something for free—and I've had lots of practice at that.

I recently turned 51 years old, and I'm more than a little embarrassed to say that it took far too many of those years to even begin to understand, that as a white, cisgender-heterosexual man who identifies as Christian that I have the Privilege Bundle—and it was pre-paid long before I arrived. I was grandfathered (or great-great-great-grandfathered) in, so to speak. The color of my skin, my gender, my orientation, my profession of faith, my very physicality (I began to learn) all buffered me from many varieties of adversity, formed a barrier against a great deal of struggle others experience as routine, they opened doors they I never realized had been opened, and afforded me a vast multitude of advantages—some of which I'll become aware of and others (despite all efforts) that I'll remain oblivious to. At the core of this learning is the realization that I have been the beneficiary of inequity.

But that wasn't the story I would have told you through the first few decades of my life. I lived with a set of assumptions based largely on the particular arrangement of my privilege. (You have one based on yours, as well.) Back then, I would have told you that anyone who wanted to work hard had the same opportunities to succeed (even though, if my mother were writing this, she'd tell you that I often didn't work very hard and still somehow managed to usually find success.) I would have told you that everyone who desired one, had equal access to an education—all while attending a private school that many families couldn't afford, having two parents who were fully engaged in my life, and never wanting for a meal or clothes or transportation or well-paid teachers or conditions that allowed me to thrive. I would have told you that anyone who followed the rules and obeyed the law would have nothing to fear during a traffic stop—yet I can remember being in backseat of our car when my father was pulled over for speeding in a school zone, and before the officer even reached the window, my father yelling “Just give me the fuckin' ticket!” (And miraculously, he just gave me the father the effin' ticket.)

So, even though so much of my experiential evidence testified loudly in opposition to my working assumptions about the world, I held tightly to those fictional stories because I needed them to be accurate. I stayed committed to a narrative about the world I needed to be true, because the alternative was to have my world turned upside down by the inequity around me. This is the seductive power of privilege: The more you benefit from a system, the easier it is to defend that system. The greater advantages the status quo provides you, the more tempted you'll be to resist changes in it. When you've always had the best and most comfortable seat at the table, it is really difficult to imagine that there are people waiting outside. When you are an inequity beneficiary—equity often isn't a priority. When you are an inequity beneficiary, you will be naturally be oblivious to or shielded from injustices experienced by those inequity most endangers—and your religion will be affected. You will have biases that get incorporated your belief system without you realizing it. When you are an inequity beneficiary, equity may bring some discomfort with it. I want you to think about your arrangement of privilege because that shaped your story, because that story can be your greatest teacher if it gets a little help.

I started off with two great stories in my life: of a family who was for me and a God who loved me. And those stories were handed to me before I ever stepped outside my family and my home of origin. Once I did, so much about the world reinforced these beliefs, declaring me as the baseline regarding race and gender and sexual orientation. I was the default setting. Along with these stories, I inherited some false stories ... about gay people,

about people of color, about Muslims about poor people. These false stories told me that I was just a little bit more deserving of the love of the great big God I believed in than they were. The people who shaped my story were only around people who looked and talked and thought and believed and worshiped and loved the way that they did. If you're only around people who are like that—you're going to naturally have gaps in your understanding of the world, and you will have an incomplete picture of what is happening.

Fortunately, I started getting better stories when I went to college in Philadelphia. There, I experienced diversity and poverty not as intellectual exercises or political talking points or theological debates—but as flesh and blood people with names and faces and stories that I became part of. I started hearing the stories of people whose experience of America or Church or opportunity or acceptance or safety or law enforcement were different than my own—and those newer and better stories, started to change me and to teach me. As I started to reckon with the existence of inequities and the reality of my privilege, my first instincts were to defend myself, to described how I was being misunderstood, to make the case for the ways I had experienced pain and struggle. I started using those empathetic muscles.

Our stories all have a specific geography, a precise place and time where we find ourselves—a neighborhood where we have our assumptions built and our prejudices formed and our blind spots created. It's also where we build relationships and impact lives and engage the brokenness. So does everyone else around you. You may not be able to learn everything about that specific neighborhood, but you owe it to people to at least remember it.



# TURBULENCE IS COMING

In normal circumstances, I travel all over the country which puts me in airplanes several dozen times a year. That might be welcome news to you, but it isn't to me, as I'm not that great a flyer. Normally, what happens is that some time during the flight I realize I'm in a large metal tube hurling through space and I become uneasy.

One flight to Albuquerque, New Mexico I was enjoying myself (for someone who is certain he is going to die on an airplane). I'm in my elementary school chair and I have my Barbie doll sized bag of pretzels and my Dixie cup of soda and I'm preparing for my time here with you—when I'm interrupted by a voice. It's the captain. I know it's the captain because he tells me it's the captain. “Uh folks, captain speaking here. Going ask you to return to your seats and ask the flight attendants to suspend drink service because we're expecting to hit a little bit of chop.” Chop ... I think to myself. I know what he means. He continues, mentioning weather systems and again says, “It may get a little choppy.” “Choppy” is airline captain-speak for “We're about to be shaken like a snow globe in the hands of an angry child!” It means, I am about to face my morality one more time while wedged between two strangers. It means, I'm about to make a lot of promises to God about what I'll change about my life if we land safely, none of which I intend to keep. The captain was telling us very matter-of-factly: “Turbulence is coming.”

I'm here today to tell you what you probably already know as you've spent time on the planet: Turbulence is coming. Actually, I'm a bit late, aren't I? I think turbulence is already here. I think, that's probably why you've chosen to participate in this course. You are in the middle of some shaking. When I say the word turbulence, I bet you can describe exactly what and who that turbulence looks like. You can name the source of the shaking. Take a second and do that now. Make a short or long list of who and what is causing your internal agitation.

These are especially turbulent days in this world, but really the collective agitation is nothing new. We are always experiencing the shaking of being human. As we live alongside people and find our identities and love people and engage the world—we are going to experience turbulence in the form of opposition and conflict and difficulties: things that bring worry, grief, anxiety. Turbulence and fear often come as a package deal. The storms come and they create anxiety. When turbulence comes, we find ourselves having to choose between peace and fear, and fear can be very persuasive. Fear knows what buttons to push in us because we are the storytellers. This is true of the actual storms in our home too. Whenever thunderstorms approach, we have two responses in our house. Our dog used to jump into the tub. My daughter would freak out. The dog would be frozen, my daughter would be frantic.

Fear is universal. It comes with our operating systems. None of us are immune to fear. None of us can escape its debilitating side effects, no matter how much we try to fortify ourselves or how brave a face we fake or how we try to live defensively. African American

theologian Howard Thurman talks about the universal nature of fear but reminds us that not all people experience that fear equally. As we discussed last session, privilege is a buffer from a good deal of struggle. Though the color of our skin, or the number of zeros in our paychecks or other qualifiers can provide some protection—nothing fully insulates us from the terror that visits from time to time through circumstances and people. Turbulence is coming and fear is there waiting in it.

And the positively gut-punching thing about fear is the way it matures along with us, how our nightmares grow-up as we do. Yes, our childhoods may have been plagued with vampires and ghoulish monsters beneath the bed—things that now seem largely ridiculous to our adult selves (though at 51, I’ll admit that circus clowns still merit a concerned and lingering side eye). But we don’t let ourselves off the hook from it all when adulthood approaches. We never outgrow fear. Question: What fears do you still contend with from your childhood? What new fears have you picked up? Where in your relational or interpersonal conflict might fear be motivating you or steering you.

We don’t discard Fear as a traveling companion as we get older—we just trade in the terrors for more age-appropriate models. Sure, we may leave behind creepy baby dolls and shadowed boogymen in closets—but we pick up financial disaster, relational collapse, nuclear war, dying alone, and worrisome spots on CAT scans. As a result, at every age we are equally susceptible to a poverty of courage and a wealth of fear. And no one is at their best when they are afraid.

When the Coronavirus outbreak here in America quickly blossomed from some distant footnote global news item into a screaming doorstep emergency, as cases started to climb rapidly, and the seriousness of the situation was becoming clear—and almost overnight everything changed. In a span of just twelve hours, Disney World closed, the NCAA tournament was canceled, all professional sports were postponed, national and international musicians’ tours were halted, and travel from Europe ceased for thirty days. Church services were called off, schools shut down, and so many usual corporate expressions of community were suddenly nonexistent.

The normal rhythms of life had been interrupted for all of us and it was genuinely disorienting; like trying to feel secure on an untethered rowboat in a raging tempest: there was nothing stable to hold on to. The relentless changes and conflicting updates and news briefings were difficult to keep up with. You could see the tension spilling over into stores and parking lots, as people frantically scrambled to stock things like hand sanitizer, wet-wipes, and toilet paper, which had all suddenly become worth more than gold on the online black market.

During one of the initial and most chaotic days of the crisis, I came across two women in the paper goods aisle at a big box store, I thought about that as I watched a frazzled middle-aged woman with a shopping cart piled to overflowing with toilet paper, unwilling to give a single roll to another woman who was literally pleading with her for it.

She said, “This is the last package in the store, and we only need a few rolls,” she said to the stranger. Why don’t we split the cost and share them?” The woman with the cart laughed and hurried away. I don’t know anything about the laughing woman, but I do know, fear

had the wheel in that moment. She responded in a way that she likely wouldn't have, had she not felt lack. Lack or scarcity or not-enough or uncertainty can bring out the worst in us and in other people.

There are three kinds of fear:

**Real:** a genuine present threat that needs to be appropriately addressed.

**Imagined:** a threat that we are creating right now that does not exist.

**Anticipated:** a future threat that we believe is coming and alters our present.

In the work I do as a pastor, caregiver, and consultant, people tell me things they don't feel they can tell anyone else—and that's good news for you, because you're in relationships with them. Often, when I meet people in my travels on speaking tours, we don't necessarily have a lot of time together. They might come up before or after a talk, tell me something deeply personal, and in a quick moment and without knowing any of their backstory—they're hoping I can give them something that they can take home with them to help them.

Here's what I tell them: Look for the fears and the false stories: find out what people are afraid of and figure out why those fears might be misplaced or addressed—because no one is at their best when they're terrified. When we're in conflict with other people, whether we're debating politics or religions, finances or work problems, parenting issues or strong opinions on any topic—the other person is almost always afraid of something—and that fear drives them (and us) to hold or defend a certain position:

A father of four is afraid that his family will lose their healthcare.

A man who has experienced religious discrimination is afraid of others experiencing the same.

A member of our family is afraid they're not being heard.

A teenager is afraid of the damage climate change is doing to the planet.

A couple is afraid their jobs will be moved overseas.

An elderly woman is afraid she will be forgotten.

These fears are not unfounded. They are not necessarily false stories. The false story is what we tell ourselves about these threats, the way they shape us and change our behavior. Is our response appropriately proportioned to the threat? People's fears or the false stories will manifest in the politicians they support, their religious beliefs they hold, the way they respond to adversity. Part of the job of being kinder humans, is trying to undercover people's fears and validate them because no one is at their best when they're terrified.

*“Of all the liars in the world, sometimes the worst are our own fears.” — Rudyard Kipling*

False stories are inherited. They are taught. They are given to us by people who want us to imagine they are true. Pastors, politicians, partisan media. They want to control fear narrative. Some false stories are curated by us. When you encounter another person's fears, you're slamming into their back story, their personal mythology, a long personal history. Sometimes we're trying to overcome years or even decades of words spoken into people. Sometimes we're trying to overcome their parents or pastors or politicians. Sometimes we're even having to overcome their God.

If we look for the false stories and work to diffuse them, we can be effective in being in relationships, have conversations about difficult topics, and understanding them—not agreeing with them. That's what I want to make sure you hear during our time together:

**IMPORTANT:** You don't need to like everyone or agree with everyone. You can show compassion and still end with irreconcilable differences. Remember, we're not necessarily trying to get people to agree with us, but to give them differing information or a better story—and take away their phantom fear. Fear of what is happening (real fear), seems to be happening (imagined fear), may happen (anticipatory fear) are always at play. Warning: People will cling to their false stories simply because they are comfortable.

Many times, people's fears are well-founded (or at least they make sense given their experiences and false stories) but often those fears are based on a false story: a set of believed circumstances or accepted truths that aren't always accurate, and in our interactions with them we might be able to give them a perspective that they don't have—not to win an argument or change their minds, but to take away their fear. But the bottom line is, whether we feel people's fears are justified or not, the net result is the same on them, and our empathy-centered living should consider that.

*"Fear is only as deep as the mind allows." — Japanese Proverb*

Where does fear come from? It often comes from the feeling that we cannot control our circumstances. If I lose control—I fill that control space with fear. That's why turbulence on an airplane is so terrifying to me, because I realize that I am powerless to change the present conditions I am in. I texted someone as I got on the plane headed to Albuquerque and she said, "Be safe." I said, "I'll just be sitting there, tell that to the pilot and the weather!" The pilot and the weather are outside of me and it's easy to believe that my fear (or my peace) rests in those external things outside of my control. And yet, though I can't affect the pilot or the weather. I do have control in this turbulence. I do have control over my response to it. I can alter my inner weather.

I can change the weather of someone else. Our responsibility is to leverage our lives and our privilege and our platform to be peace givers and not fear bringers, to speak into injustice, to decrease the turbulence people experience, to risk that shaking.

## SOME WAYS TO THINK ABOUT FEAR

### **1) Inventory your own fears and false stories, to see where you need to right size the threats.**

Where are you motivated to escape or protect yourself from something or someone.

### **2) Be aware of your phantom fears.**

Sit with the things you're afraid of and decide what is real, what is imagined, and what is participatory and adjust your strategy.

### **3) Look for the fears and false stories in others.**

As you face disagreements, different political views, or ideological dissonance, consider how an out-sized fear or a false story might be responsible and help the person get a more accurate perspective.

### **4) Offer truth and presence.**

To those you are in relationship with, keep giving people information that helps them tether to reality and stay present as much as you can, to let them know they are not alone in the things they fear.

Over the next couple of days, try looking for the fear and false stories and see if that doesn't change how you interact with people. Thanks for your time today, and we'll see you next time.

# DON'T BE A JERK.

In our last session we talked about the emotional turbulence we all experience in this life, the collateral damage of being human, and the way this turbulence creates in us and in everyone around us, either real or false stories that make us fearful. We talked about the debilitating effects of that fear on the people we interact with and the way it magnifies or reinforces their prejudices and phobias or general hostility. And if we are to be people who lead with empathy, we want to be sensitive to that universal shaking out there and do our best to be agents of peace. A more compassionate planet cannot happen without that.

But that isn't the full turbulence story. The other reality we want to be aware of is, the shaking people are enduring because of other human beings, and the ways in which the injustices and inequities around us (and our care and concern for those affected by them) is going to generate relational turbulence. (Fractures between ourselves and others, even those we love.) As we engage the world about the things and the causes and the people who matter to us, that will invariably place us opposite other human beings and to some degree we need to be okay with that. As much as we don't want to seek conflict, we can't avoid conflict either—because other people are affected by our silence or our dodging disagreement or hiding. Later on, in the course we're going to talk about navigating the minefield conversations of politics and religion, but today I want you to be certain you don't have to give them up to be kind.

I've always marveled at families or communities or people who say, "We don't talk about that stuff because it ends up in a fight. We don't discuss religion or politics." I always think to myself, "So, what else of consequence is there to talk about?" How much can we talk about the weather and TV shows and what our kids are doing, before we end up in relationships that stay on the surface?

You are not obligated to leave your convictions at the door when with the people you love. We know we can't always run full steam ahead with our deepest convictions on hot button issues knowing they will put people on the defensive. We may not want to always lead with a point of disagreement, but we also can't afford to edit out the deepest contents of our hearts with the people we know and live with and work alongside—not only because that is unfair to us, but because it impacts people who are not in that room. This may be the only representation vulnerable people have there in that space. The goal for us as compassionate people is to have authentic non-superficial relationships—not necessarily easier ones. If a relationship with someone I love has to face turbulence that helps someone I don't know, that is acceptable.

A couple myths about relational turbulence:

**MYTH 1:** One of the biggest misconceptions is that 'healthy relationships are going to be marked by a lack of argument or conflict' but that simply isn't true. Kind people would rather have honest opposition than phony agreement.

**MYTH 2:** Another myth is that if we are good hearted and choose our words carefully that as compassionate people we will be universally received well. We will not.

“You’re doing damage” is not a moral evaluation or even an assigning of motives, it’s offering to describe what we see from where we are. “This is hurtful” is appealing to another person’s humanity and asking them to respond. You can have respectful, substantive relationships that sometimes include hard words and raised voices—and you can do everything right and still be thought of as or called rude or unreasonable. To put it bluntly: the relational challenge of we who aspire to empathy, is to make sure that while we’re speaking with clarity and authenticity—that we’re not being jerks while we do. Someone recently said to me, “John, you’re a jerk. Why would you lead a course on kindness?” 1) Because I’m a jerk. 2) Because there’s a fine line between jerk and kind human and I want to be on the right side of it.

I’m a jerk and so are you. Not always, of course, but sometimes, and that sometimes is what we want to pay close attention to if a compassionate expression of our values really matters to us and we’re truly burdened to alleviate the damage in the world and not contribute to it. In order to better do that, it might be helpful to define our terms before going any further and answer the elemental question, So, what’s a jerk, anyway? This may not be as simple as we imagine. In 1964, in a case deciding the nature of pornography, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart remarked that although defining obscenity was a challenge, recognizing it was not. He famously declared (with unintended hilarity) “I know it when I see it.” When it comes to the jerks in our lives, we can usually spot them without much difficulty, even if specifying their defining qualities proves difficult—and with a little thoughtful reflection or sincere prayer or honest thought, we can surely recognize the jerkiness in ourselves.

Sit back and review the day you’ve had today, for example, your interactions with spouses or partners, with children, with friends, coworkers or neighbors—and I bet you can recognize it without much effort. You know when either on social media or at home or at your job, you’ve set out to hurt another human being and succeeded. Congratulations, you’re a jerk. Generally speaking, it isn’t necessarily our particular theological worldview, political perspective, or personal opinion that is problematic (though it might be to some degree), but the manner in which we wield them and our purpose for wielding them the way that we do. It isn’t always the message that needs to change, sometimes it’s the heart of the messenger. We often imagine that being a loving person means never causing injury or initiating conflict, but it’s more complicated and subtle than that.

Most of us don’t like to be told we’re being hurtful or rude or selfish—we rarely receive such criticisms well, at least initially. Defensiveness is likely going to be our first response because when it comes to our stories—we’re usually the hero, until we realize we’re not. In this life, you’ve surely hurt other people and you’ve done so in one of two ways: either you’ve accidentally damaged someone by saying or doing something that you weren’t aware was offensive or painful to them—or you’ve intentionally wounded them because that was either partially or fully what you were trying to do from the beginning. In the former case, you were human and in the latter case, you were a jerk—and often times you’re the only one who knows the truth. The first instance (inadvertent injury) requires self-awareness and honesty to repair the relational damage.

While the second (the intentional wounding) necessitates regret and a severe attitude adjustment, and that's a much taller order. All that to say, that as we incarnate our belief systems and make the theoretical tangible, motives matter.

Yes, in relationships with other people, we will cause inadvertent pain through ineloquence, privilege, carelessness, haste, or arrogance—and those wounds can't be dismissed and need to be reckoned with. (We can't just ignore the collateral damage of our words and actions simply because we didn't mean to hurt someone or didn't know better.) That's part of adult accountability and personal growth to not give those excuses to ourselves. But there is something far more toxic in desiring to inflict trauma, especially if we do so while simultaneously claiming righteousness in the process.

You've probably experienced a moment when you came across someone on social media you wanted to put on blast. Or you've been in a conversation at work, knowing what you were about to say would set your coworker off. Or you've been at a family gathering, holding on to a litany of insults or rebuttals that you were waiting to unleash at the right time. Or you've been with someone you live with and chose to press a button you know will be painful. In these cases, it wasn't necessarily your rightness on the topic but your agenda that was unkind. Many times, it's the pause that can change us.

I have become a polarizing public figure talking about faith and politics. In my work as a polarizing public figure talking about faith and politics, I regularly encounter people who show up in my inbox or on my timeline or in my comment section because something I've written or said has caused them ... extreme discomfort. They arrive unannounced, and unceremoniously unload a fierce and brutal verbal assault in protest or dissension often peppered with vitriol, punctuated with profanity, and littered with expletives.

That's not to say these replies don't sometimes include valid criticisms, but the packaging can certainly be less than pleasant.

Pause: In those moments and in the conversations that flow from them I have to continually pause and ask myself the questions (which I'd like you to consider):

Am I trying to understand this person or am I trying to defeat them?

Is my agenda to know them or to win, whatever that victory looks like for me?

Am I burdened to show them something I've seen or experienced that they haven't—or to show them how much smarter or more enlightened I am?

Am I genuinely seeking to change their hearts—or am I trying to make them feel like an a-hole?

If I succeed in the latter, I haven't really succeeded. These questions require more than just a passing consideration, they require daily almost hourly investigation, because we are all pretty resistant to self-criticism. And regarding these questions about my motives, I know which answers my morality or my faith demand of me. I also know how addictive the alternative can be: how the cheap temporary high of putting someone on blast or



verbally dismantling them is. I bet you do, too. We all understand how intoxicating winning an argument or making someone feel stupid can be—but we also know that’s not what kindness does, don’t we? We almost always look back retrospectively and can see where we’ve blown it and where we got it right. Again, that isn’t to say that just because we get it right that people will respond well to us. We aren’t responsible for their response to us, only our intentions with them.

I grew up as a person of faith, and in my Christian story Jesus wasn’t always received with open arms and appreciative hearts so I can’t expect to.

We need to remember that there is no inherent wrong or evil in acknowledging disagreement or naming opposing views, but there may be if your disagreement is marked by extreme prejudice or premeditated cruelty.

For me, loving my neighbors and my enemies does not come with guarantees that I won’t offend or bring discomfort or create discomfort (as sometimes love surely does those very things) but I need to work to keep my heart as blameless as I can while I do.

In a coming session, we’re going to talk about the ways privilege can make us initially oblivious to the pain we cause, but for today, focus on the damage that you willfully do and spend some time reflecting on the people or the places or the topics that tend to pollute your motivations. The path to a kinder world begins with kinder people—and the way we become those kinds of kind people (as with many of the truest truths of this life) is both startlingly simple and incredibly elusive: we try to live in such a way that we hurt people less.

The Latin phrase *primum non nocere* is part of all health-care students’ education, serving as one of the unspoken core principles of those who go on to serve as doctors, nurses, and other caregivers. Roughly translated as “First do no harm,” it is the promise to protect a patient from undue injury, to do everything in your power toward that goal, and to avoid doing further damage to someone in the process of trying to save a life. I suppose if we were to commandeer and paraphrase these sentiments for the purposes of becoming the kind of people the world needs, and to craft a good rule of thumb regarding the hurting, heartbroken people crossing our paths every day, the pledge might be restated: Don’t be a jerk.

The path to being a kinder human isn’t in making someone like you more or in being able to avoid hard words and even hurt feelings—but it is in seeking to do no harm.

# THE BEST KIND OF ANGER

A family member I hadn't seen in a few years texted me, seemingly out of the blue:

"You're coming across as really angry, lately," he said. "Good," I replied immediately." I was afraid I wasn't communicating clearly." Not properly appreciating my sarcasm in the spirit in which it was offered, he continued sternly, "I feel sorry for you, for all that anger—especially a Christian." "Don't feel sorry for me," I said, "I know why I'm angry and I think it's worth it."

I am of two minds when it comes to anger. One on hand, I have fully embraced my anger and felt it propelling me to respond to injustice, and on the other hand, I have felt and seen its destructive capabilities firsthand; those times in my life when it was a liability, a trouble starter, a relationship killer.

I know there is a tension there and that we all sit in the middle of that tension every single day. I feel that tension in my own life.

Anger tends to get a bad rap, historically speaking. In fact, that's often the way people dismiss us if they don't like what we have to say: you're so angry.

But as we think about being compassionate people, it's important to clarify that anger and kindness aren't mutually exclusive; that in fact, sometimes what appears to be the former is actually a profound prompt by the latter. In other words, it is precisely because of the depth of our feelings that we feel this internal unrest. Many times, anger is that holy discontent that internally disrupts us to the point of action. Yes, the spiritual traditions and the great thinkers before us, all rightly warn against the potential toxicity of unhealthy, cultivated anger.

I was looking for a defense of anger and I was running into roadblocks:

Buddha said: Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.

Albert Einstein wrote: Anger dwells only in the bosom of fools.

Plato said: There are two things a person should never be angry at, what they can help, and what they cannot.

Jesus taught: But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

And, actress Betty White said, "Anger tears me up inside: my own or someone else's."

I may be able to argue with Gandhi, Buddha, and Einstein—but I’m not going up against Betty White. I was running into a roadblock on the positive aspects of anger. As a fairly fiery spirit prone to passionate responses to the world, this kind of wise consensus against anger, well it really pisses me off. However, the Greek philosopher Aristotle offers up a different way of thinking about the redemptive possibilities of anger, writing: ‘Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way - that is not within everybody’s power and is not easy.’

So, the right person—right degree—right time—right purpose—right way, The object, level, timing, purpose, and manner of my anger matter. These who, how much, now, why, how questions, can give us a really useful filter for assessing the appropriate nature of our outrage, and a productive expression of it (which is inherently spiritual.) Because it can be difficult to gauge such things, can’t it? Motion clouds when we need clarity.

My friend, minister Doug Hammack, talks about “the thing under the thing.” The idea that when afflictive emotions surface, it’s usually not about the present moment and the seemingly obvious source: Your spouse doesn’t put a dirty dish in the dishwasher and you blow a gasket—probably isn’t about the dish, but it’s about feeling disrespected, not listened to, about feeling frustrated with ability to keep the house clean—and even deeper things like feeling financially insecure, emotionally disconnected, grieving someone’s loss, things you’ve been carrying around for decades—It ain’t the dish you’re angry at.

But, there are times when the present moment and the obvious source are in fact the right person and the right time—then all we have to do is decide the right degree, purpose, way. There are times when we are angry at the right thing for the right reason and in the right way. As empathetic people, that means we invite our morality or our spirituality into the initial anger and we let our response be the answer to a prayer we can’t even find words for.

Once we’re angry it’s very hard to be objective so we need to do a couple things:

**1) Prepare in advance before we enter into the trenches of this life.**

The best time to think about healthy ways to process our anger is not when we’re angry. We do better when we’re at war if we’ve prepared in peace time.

**2) We need to invite time into our initial anger.**

Anger is a natural, almost involuntary response. It is this combustible moment where we find ourselves passionately perturbed—and this works the same whether the moment or person is deserving our not. We really can’t prevent this sort of emotional ignition, but we are not defined by that moment itself. If we allow some time to pass, even a few seconds, we are able to sift the situation, to decide if it merits our outrage, and to craft a productive response—or respond in a destructive way.

**3) Transform our anger into something else.**

Anger as a catalytic moment is often necessary, moving us from complacency or ignorance and propelling us into movement. We’ve seen the virtue of outrage in this Resistance movement over the past few months. That doesn’t happen without anger. But as a cultivated condition, anger is almost always toxic. If we sit with that rage too long and

nurture it too intently without transferring it, it slowly begins to pollute us, seeping into our bloodstreams and contaminating the compassionate hearts that caused us to be angry in the first place. Little by little, we become used to a posture of irritability and defiance. Gradually we can become more about the fight itself than about anything or anyone we're fighting for: We can begin to live angry.

During the BLM protests in the summer of 2020, I watched the Line of Moms in Portland: women locking arms to defend protesters from a heavily armored, heavily armed paramilitary presence sent there precisely to provoke and harass and to use force against. These mothers were inarguably angry, but their anger was fueled by their love for humanity and by the imminent threat to it; an anger that propelled them out of their homes and into these far more treacherous streets. There was nothing hateful or destructive in their actions, even if they were being received by the officers as adversarial and being greatly vilified by those opposing the BLM movement—in fact, their defiance felt like a profoundly sacred act. It was holy ground there on the pavement in Portland that resembled Jesus as much as any carefully crafted sermon. It turns out, hatred often is in the eyes of the beholder.

Religious people tend to justify themselves with the phrase righteous anger, which I'd just as soon jettison, because the truth is whether you're conservative or progressive, everyone believes their anger is righteous, their cause is just, their motives are pure (I know I usually do.) But if there's any kind of anger people of faith, morality, and conscience should aspire to it is redemptive anger, focusing on what results from our efforts and our activism: Do they bring justice, equity, wholeness? Are more people heard and seen and respected in their wake? Is diversity nurtured or assailed?

Is compassion for vulnerable or marginalized people the product of that anger?

Come to think of it, the word anger may be the problem altogether, since it's gotten some pretty bad PR over the past few million years. I suggest we replace anger with ferocity: the way a family dog fiercely defends a small child from a coyote, the way a parent fiercely defends their spouse if there's a fire, the way my wife fiercely defends me when there's a spider in the bathtub. Ferocity for humanity is what birthed the civil rights movement, women's movement, the fight for LGBTQ equality, and it's what has sustained decent Americans over the past four years. And ferocity for human beings made in the image of God was the fuel for Jesus turning over the tables and calling out the religious leaders and declaring solidarity with the poor and allowing himself to be executed. I think that's an under-appreciated part of my faith tradition that tends not to get featured in needlepoints and memes: righteous ticked-offness; his passionate objections to seeing the powerful preying upon the vulnerable, watching the religious hypocrites pollute the system, witnessing the well-fed living close fistled toward the hungry.

You can't have this passionate response to the world without anger as its initial propellant. This ferocity for humanity will always be interpreted negatively by those seeking to do damage to humanity. It will always be labeled angry and hateful by people who benefit from inequity and injustice—and religious people on the opposite side of our convictions will always attempt to shame us into silence in the name of Jesus they probably would have had a real problem with. The beautiful collective anger of good people is actually the

antidote to hateful religion. That not-rightness is what propels us into the lives of other people in sacrificial acts of love.

Questions: Where and when do you feel this “holy ferocity” I’m talking about? What people or causes tend to illicit that passionate response from you? We cannot afford to grow so tired or complacent or apathetic that we lose our ability to be outraged. I think we have to hold on to our intolerance to injustice because it comes from a source that will tether us to other people. It propels us into the places where the least live. When you take certain medications for a long time, you can eventually build up tolerance to it. It no longer works. We can’t build up a tolerance to inhumanity, which is incredibly easy right now because we see so much of it. Focus on those with less privilege and less of a voice. That is what is happening right now. We are feeling this profound discomfort because we are fiercely defending lives from danger.

This ferocity for humanity will always be interpreted negatively by those seeking to do damage to it. It will often be labeled angry and hateful by people opposing you.

2020 interrupted the cycle of curated niceness and conflict-avoidance for many families, circles of friends, faith communities. The reverberations of the murder of George Floyd, broke that tenuous truce in many local faith communities and denominations, disrupting the surface civility and daring to expose the raw wounds and scalding passions of our core beliefs on race. The simple words Black Lives Matter became the lumbering elephant in the room of religious white people that simply could no longer be ignored. It’s created genuine conflict within communities that were able to sidestep it before, and though invasive this is a welcome moment. Places where people of faith, morality, and conscience gather should be courageous environments where the absolute most difficult aspects of being human are laid bare.

As much as by our kindness and hospitality, we should be marked by our awkward conversations, our uncomfortable silences, and our upended tables. We’ve inverted community by imagining it should be the most comfortable, most pleasant part of our week; a place we just feel good feelings and think happy thoughts. I’m not sure that’s Biblical or helpful or loving, because there are people outside our building who don’t have that luxury; they’re outside living with urgency as their default setting. As a pastor, sometimes I wanted the people in my care to leave a church service feeling comforted, but just as often I wanted them to be burdened to run from it and into the places where pain is commonplace in order to make it less painful for them. I think that’s what love does. I think real love doesn’t let up.

I am OK being labeled angry: I’m just going to keep making sure my anger is at the right person—right degree—right time—right purpose—right way. Stay angry, good people: Hold on to your ferocity for humanity.

# THE ADDICTION TO NICENESS

I was leading a leadership retreat at an aging Presbyterian church. We were discussing the reality of a disruptive, social justice Jesus, and why that reality should compel a church (especially a predominately white one like this one) to be active, explicit, and vocal on human and civil rights issues (and the problem of so many similar communities of faith remaining silent) when a sweet woman from the ministry team said, “John, we’re nice people, and we’re known as a nice church.” And we don’t want to lose that.” She continued. “We believe in justice and equality, but we still want to be nice!” I smiled and said, “It’s nice to be nice but maybe it’s time to stop being nice and started being loving.

I said, “You’re Christians, people of faith, you are a community seeking to emulate Jesus, right? So, it’s probably important to realize or remember that Jesus wasn’t nice. He was passionate, bold, loving, compassionate—but not nice. He took clear stands on many issues and spoke with pointed specificity and because of that he was hated. I said, maybe instead of being nice, you could be audaciously loving and see what happens. Maybe it’s time you started embodying the compassionate activist heart of Jesus.” There were a couple of quiet “Amens” and a lot of silence. I knew I was asking a great deal from them. I knew it was a lot easier to make some trays of egg salad and be welcoming to people and have friendly exchanges. There’s certainly nothing wrong with those things, (in fact they’re necessary, too) but regardless of whether we hold a religious worldview or not there is more that we can and need to do as agents of empathy here. The question we want to ask today is—is niceness inherently kind—and the answer should be the same whether you’re a religious person or not, of course.

Most bold, honest people are hated by someone; most strong leaders, passionate activists, outspoken human beings—people you look up to and aspire. That comes with the territory. If you’re a person who is invested in the lives of other people or the work of equality in the world, that will often have you delivering a message that is not welcome news. Sometimes our geography creates our niceness threshold. I lived the first thirty years of my life in the American Northeast: New York State and Philadelphia—and I’ve lived the past twenty years in the South here in America. Very different environments. Obviously, there are wonderful loving, decent, good-hearted people everywhere, of course, right, but in general the Northeast tends to be known as a fairly direct place: you kind of know where you stand with people. There isn’t a lot of nuance or mystery, especially when it comes to disagreement on issues. Often people mistakenly label people from this region as rude or course, but that might be because they aren’t used to unadorned directness, it may be because they have been indoctrinated into unhealthy niceness.

When I moved to the South, I was introduced to the phenomenon of “bless your heart.” Bless your heart is a phrase that on the surface seems like gooey sweetness but it often conceals a deeper brutality: “He’s not too bright, bless his heart.” “She’s a mess bless her heart.” Bless your heart has a thin veneer of decorum and politeness that fools you into thinking you’re liked or loved or accepted or agreed with. Bless your heart is heavy on nice

but can be low on honesty—and on kindness. It took me a long time to get used to the idea that in matters of consequence, on matters of importance, in my work on issues of race or sexuality rights or gender equality, I had to dig a little deeper to make sure I knew where people stood.

This course is called *Being Kind Humans*, not *Being Nice Humans*. That course might exist somewhere, but for obvious reasons I'm probably not the one to teach it. The differences between kind and nice are more than semantics, I think they get to the heart of what motivates us, to our sense of identity, and to our respect for other people. Certainly, there are legitimately, honest to goodness—nice people out there; people purely motivated by a desire to be gentle and benevolent and sweet (and you may be one of them)—but if we look at the toxic tendencies of surface niceness, we can see why it's often problematic.

Niceness can be motivated by a need to be liked. We can so crave affirmation and approval that we begin to edit ourselves so as not to risk being criticized or judged. Self-esteem tends to be low in perpetually nice people because they don't trust their own worth enough to stand and be who they are.

Niceness can be motivated by a desire to be included. We all crave community and because of this, we will often censor ourselves because we know (or at least we believe) that a more honest version of ourselves might leave us outside of that community, circles of friends, church, even family. (I can't tell you how many times every week I hear stories from people who say, "I agree with you on this issue or that issue, but I can't really say it because I will be excluded or pushed to the periphery")

Niceness can be motivated by a desire to avoid conflict. Many people think I enjoy conflict, but I actually really hate it—it just happens to be where my work and my words take me. Honesty can bring uncomfortable conversations and it can interrupt our daily plans with unexpected relational friction—and most of us really don't welcome such things, so superficial niceness can be a way to at least temporarily avoid them. Emphasis on temporary ...

Niceness can also be motivated by an effort to not hurt people by shielding them from the truth. You've probably asked someone if your hair or an outfit looked alright, and yes you may have genuinely wanted to know—but you also really wanted one answer more than another, right? You wanted truth that didn't necessitate any change. And you've been on the other end of those questions, thinking: what answer do I give here: an honest one that may sting or one with a little less truth that will hurt a little less? That's the trap that niceness pulls us into.

And listen, that desire itself isn't at all sinister, (do no harm we've talked about that) but it also underestimates people's capacity to deal with reality. Or the importance of necessary conflicting information or dissenting opinions.

I have an aunt who is super nice, but she isn't honest unless it is comparatively and retrospectively honest. She always says, "your hair looks great" until a year later when she says, "I like your hair so much better now." So, you didn't like her hair then, but you said you did? So, do you really like it now or do we need to wait a year to find out what

you really think? That's just about the very easy, surface things. Can you imagine ideas of actual depth and gravity? In general, niceness can be motivated by a favorable response or result, it is a socially-conditioned behavior—and at its heart it can come from a place of profound insecurity that says I would rather be liked than known. I prefer to be accepted as a partially authentic human being than rejected for being a fully authentic one. It's really easy to become addicted to niceness because usually, niceness brings less obvious friction, it keeps a tenuous peace for longer, and gives us a favorable approval rating for a while. But what happens when that benign search for niceness continually conceals our convictions, slowly softens our language, or when it keeps us from speaking directly into the world? What if niceness actually increases the suffering of other people and becomes to them an unkind act.

In my work as a “collector of stories” a “war correspondent” there are patterns to what people share with me, especially if they come from historically vulnerable marginalized people groups: Transgender teenager, Muslim activists, Migrant father, racial justice workers. They never say, “John, could you be less bold, less loud, less confrontational.” They never say, “Could you be nicer.” What they say is, “Why are so many people of privilege so silent?” Usually because we can afford to be. Often that silence or that conflict-avoidance, comes from those toxic forms of niceness that don't want to disrupt our relationships or the community, or the comfort we have, and kind humans need to confront this selfish tendency. Kindness is an advocacy for humankind, it uplifts our shared humanity, it defends it, it fights for it.

## WAYS TO AVOID THE DISEASE OF NICENESS

### **1) Find your identity outside of the approval of others.**

Begin to ask yourself what causes and beliefs and opinions you would be clearer and more explicit about if you weren't worried about someone thinking less of you. Spend some time reflecting on the places and times you compromise to be liked.

### **2) Don't be dependent on a good response.**

Embrace opposition and unfavorable feedback as the bi-product of asserting your moral or spiritual center and as a necessary evil in stretching people into the discomfort change brings. We are kind humans not because reward will come, the kindness is the reward.

### **3) Remind yourself, that the truth (even delivered kindly) may not feel good to someone and you may have to be the bearer of unwelcome news.**

There is no way to shield everyone from unpleasantness, and though you work to responsibly verbalize your beliefs with tact and empathy—remember that will not be enough to keep your approval rating unblemished.

### **4) Remember that justice always needs people willing to be disliked.**

I don't care if you aspire to Jesus, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, AOC, you are going to face push-back because that is the price of bending the moral arc of the universe as Unitarian minister Theodore Parker described—because someone will feel that bending is a threat.



Kindness comes from treasuring humanity.

Kindness is fierce and audacious, courageous, and bold.

Kindness doesn't sit quietly while bigotry bullies the most vulnerable.

Kindness will not be tone policed into making nice with discrimination.

Kindness does not apologize for its passion for other human beings.

Kindness will not wilt when it is labeled too political.

Kindness is dangerous to injustice, it confronts ugliness, it welcomes turbulence.

Kindness will drive us out of our privilege and into the trenches.

Kindness will be called angry and declared not nice, and it will be itself anyway.

Don't sacrifice kindness for niceness ... bless your hearts.

# PEOPLES AND PRINCIPLES, SYSTEMS AND STORIES

Let's talk about the people who test the limits of your empathy and derail your kinder nature, which is huge because when it comes right down to it, compassion is all relative ...

Your grief probably has a name. You're not here merely because of relationship issues as an idea, but specific people in your life who you feel a distancing from, people you love who you no longer speak to, those you avoid or who avoid you. The division you feel is real and is personal. It's more than a political divide or a culture war—it's a lot closer than that. You're here because you feel the fractures and the disconnection and the emotional separation. You've experienced the ghostings, the unfriendings, the blockings, the fighting, the coldness, and it isn't a one-time or one person struggle. It's multiplied dozens, even hundreds of times. Normal grief: you lose someone one time and you spend the rest of your life processing that loss, but this grief is a perpetual losing and it is, a daily grieving, and it's multi-relational.

Welcome to the BIG TENSION, it is the one compassion will always have us in. Kind humans are doomed to sit in this tension, and that is the tension:

Between your relationships and your convictions

Between who you love and what you believe

The tension between people and your principles.

Interpersonal compassion and systemic compassion

We often think about empathy as a strictly relational, interpersonal reality, when actually it is expressed between people and it is expressed globally.

We always want to acknowledge that we're dealing with relationships and with bigger realities. We're dealing in stories and in systems. Your uncle who may hold racist beliefs or prejudices that you're trying to engage, but he is part of a systemic problem, and you are always at the nexus of both of these conflicts simultaneously. This is why story is so important. We ultimately need to confront systems—but we often enter those systems through stories. When a person stretches you, that's when things become problematic, when proximity with another person challenges or pulls you from your core beliefs. So how do kind humans navigate personal relationships when our principles are threatened? The answers are going to be entirely specific to you and your particular relationship and the precise timing or season of that relationship. Let's look at some tactics and things to remember to help you decide how to respond in the most empathetic way:

# TENSION TACTICS

When relational conflict comes we can choose a variety of approaches:

## 1) Silence and Distance

Ghost them on social media, cease contact, stop calling or texting them.

*Pro:* quieter without the skirmishes and arguments and there is less obvious emotional wear and tear

*Con:* Time is passing and you are losing daylight with those people.

## 2) The Uneasy Truce

We stay in the shallow and the surface, we talk about the weather and sports and the kids.

*Pro:* Sense of peace, a working functionality to the relationships.

*Con:* Less authenticity, facades, self-editing in the places we should be the most honest and most open

## 3) Scorched Earth

Guns blazing, saying everything, not mincing words.

*Pro:* Clear the air and eliminate ambiguity. (I never knew you felt that way.)

*Con:* We can do irreparable damage if we go purely on emotion.

## 4) The Pause

Call a time out, avoid them for a bit, a temporary cease fire.

*Pro:* Get a break from the conflict

*Con:* Postponing honesty and letting stuff fester and hoping things improve and they get more receptive.

## 5) Selective Engagement

Pick and choose limited exposure.

Seasonal approach- holidays, graduations,

*Pro:* You retain the family history.

*Con:* You can live in a photo op.

Your tactic will alternate within the same relationship depending on the day and the issues and the other person. One piece of this is the willingness of the other. Sometimes you will be the initiator and sometimes the recipient of these tactics. Some important truths to hold onto as kind humans, seeking to balance people and principle:

**1) Every relationship is individual and time-sensitive.**

Relationships are in continual movement, they are not static, even if there is silence or severing. Your separate stories are still in progress.

The fractures now not always be present. You will not always feel the way you feel, and the wounds may not be as raw. Post-election injuries, heightened emotions

The divides might decrease, or they might grow. Relational/intimacy fluidity is always present.

**2) Not every issue is a deal-breaker, but it's okay to have them.**

Right now we're all hyper-sensitive and we have a hair-trigger block finger, and the polarizing nature of politics and social media can fool us into believing everything is urgent and massive and disqualifying. Remember, kindness is rooted in empathy and while we have empathy for those who are part of our lives, we balance that we people who are not. The essence of mature empathy is acknowledging our interdependent shared humanity.

I once made a statement on social media: A child half a world away is as valuable as the one in my nursery. A woman responded, "So in a choice to save your child or another child you'd choose another child." I said, "I realize that in matters of justice or opportunity or care or resources, that's a choice I almost never have to make."

Everything isn't and shouldn't be a deal-breaker, but some things are. Choose your hills to die on and make sure they're worth it. What are your non-negotiables? Decide and be consistent.

**3) Not every relationship is forever.**

People evolve and our stories change.

You may be fortunate enough to have the same friends you had in 5th grade, but likely you don't. You don't owe people permanence you owe them dignity, authenticity, honesty

**4) The end of a one relationship often means the beginning of another.**

The present conflict is the manure out of which the future flowers of relationships grow.

Engaging the bully—I don't engage the bully to change the mind of the bully, I do it so a bullied person knows they are seen and worth fighting for.

Re-Tribing: You may be doing life with different people than you originally planned.

## THINGS TO REMEMBER

When it comes to our relationship conflicts and the tension between people and principles:

**1) One person and one issue didn't create this.**

Revealed it. Embraced it. Nurtured it.

**2) An election won't change this.**

Racism, bigotry, homophobia, transphobia, anti-semitism, xenophobia

A political reality or an election result doesn't define a relationship, but it likely illuminated it, it clarified what mattered to each of you.

**3) Life is measured relationally.**

So people are the most valuable, even above principles.

Compassion has to be the genesis of who we are and what we do.

The stories point us to systems. Kindness is interpersonal and systemic.

**4) There is power in your story and resonance in your voice.**

This includes the people you might be fighting with and the people you're fighting for.

**5. You have 75 years or less.**

What do you want to do with the time you have left?

How I determine when to keep trying with someone:

Is there willingness?

Is there listening?

Is there still respect?

Is the issue a deal breaker?

This stuff is not stuff, this stuff is people. Refuse to compromise. Your inconvenience is worth them feeling seen and heard. Remember why you do what you do, help you fight well.

# RELEASING RESENTMENT

As the doctor who was giving me a shot recently said to me, “This is gonna hurt you more than it hurts me.

Have you ever broken a bone and not known it? You just walked around with a fracture and weren’t aware of it for days or even weeks. You may have had discomfort, but you didn’t quite realize the source or the seriousness of it. That can happen when we have pain because we don’t see anything on the surface and so we may not have urgency about it. But if the pain persists long enough you eventually get an MRI or an X-ray and you suddenly realize it’s been broken all along. That kind of undiscovered trauma is surprising but understandable.

But if you’ve ever had a compound fracture, well that’s a completely different story. You didn’t wonder with that, right? When stuff that’s usually on the inside is suddenly on the outside—you know “this is serious.” I think many people are looking around at the world or their country or their church or their family and saying, “Whoa, that looks bad.” Maybe, people who suspected there was something wrong are suddenly realizing the seriousness of the situation. It’s like, there’s no doubt this is bad. You can see it.

If you’re taking this course, you’ve probably been looking at the world with this deeper x-ray vision all along, you’ve been paying attention to the not-rightness, you’ve been aware there’s a problem. To some degree, you’ve known the brokenness has been there for a long time, but maybe the political landscape or the events of the day have kind of pushed that bone through the skin and more people around you are alarmed, too. So many people, even those who can’t name the causes, are feeling the fractures—and as kind humans, we need to be part of the collective healing process ahead, which isn’t going to be easy or pleasant—especially because, let’s face it: we’re pretty ticked off.

A little over a year ago I was in Boise getting ready to speak and I was having a conversation with a couple in the front row, and one of the women was talking about how upside-down things seem and how frustrated she is with people she knows and loves, and she said with sarcasm, “John, I’m 59 years old and I’ve been suicidal many times, but until recently I’ve never been homicidal.” She laughed afterward, realizing the darkness of the statement—but I knew what she meant. We’ve all been surprised at our anger. Though some of us cope with all this sorrow and discord with gallows humor, most of the time we just feel terrible because we know this all affecting us and changing us—and not necessarily for the better.

In Minnesota a woman stopped me in the lobby of a church where I was giving a talk and asked if she could speak with me for a second. I said, sure. She started crying almost immediately and said, “I’m just so angry all the time. I hate how angry I am.” I said to her. That’s probably partly true. Yes, you’re angry but you might be something more than that. Maybe you’re grieving. Maybe you’re in mourning right now.” She said, “Wow, I never thought of it that way, but that’s it. This is grief. I feel like I’ve lost so many people. Grief

and anger can often look the same from the outside. If we don't know what's happening inside, we can easily mistake one for the other.

In previous weeks, we've already touched on both grief and anger as natural bi-products of being a compassionate human and witnessing the fractures out there in the world, but today we're going to talk about what happens when that grief and the anger become a toxic cocktail and lead to something really unhealthy and unhelpful: and that is resentment. If I could name the greatest and most common barrier for people trying to be kind humans right now, that's probably it. Resentment is that step beyond the natural grieving or anger at another human being and into something worrisome. And this resentment (at least in myself) it comes from a desire to make someone pay: for their vote, their politics, their theology, their hateful words, their beliefs. We want people to be held accountable—whatever that looks like to us.

And for us, them paying or being accountable, usually involves us wanting them to feel remorse or sorrow, right? We want them to confess, to show contrition, to express regret or at least to admit they've done something wrong. And that problem is, these are often things they aren't able or willing to give us at least right now, otherwise they wouldn't be where they are, and we wouldn't be in this conflict with them. We want them to pay, we don't want to let them off the hook, and we resent them usually because we're frustrated that we can't manufacture that sorrow in them and get them to agree with us. There's an irony in all of this grudge holding for me, because I realize that I find it extremely difficult to have compassion for people who seem to have no compassion! The people I struggling to manufacture empathy for are the people who rarely manufacture it for others—and the fraudulence and hypocrisy and inconsistency isn't lost on me.

Today, I want to suggest a way to re-frame the people in our lives in a way that might help us transform or diffuse that resentment and it isn't going to be easy. I'm going to ask you to start with a working assumption, that may be challenging. The working assumption I want you to start with, is that most people are essentially decent; that they are (generally speaking) goodhearted people who don't want to intentionally harm other people, that they're trying to do the right thing—even if we disagree vehemently on what the right thing is. There are certainly exceptions obviously, but the assumption required is: most basically, people are decent.

Now, I know that can be a difficult assumption because we all know ... well, people—people who seem to openly challenge that assumption every single day, but if we can embrace it—then we can see their harmful position or belief or words or actions or politics or theology—as something that is hiding or impairing or getting in the way of that goodness. It is an obstacle to that goodness being revealed. Now, this is important: This is isn't going to mean we excuse or allow or tolerate hateful, discriminatory, violent beliefs or actions—but it means we see them as the ugly bi-products of the story they've walked through, a result of the information they have.

So, for example, imagine a person you know has hostility toward migrants crossing the border that gets expressed in their words or political affiliations or legislation they support that feel dangerous or offensive or perpetuate stereotypes: if the person in front of you is essentially good, their position is the result of a lack of some kind, it's either the result of :

Intellectual ignorance: so a lack of information or knowledge

It might be the result of a believed lie: so a lack of truth

It could be the result an irrational fear: so a lack of security

It could be the result of an inherited bias or blind spot—so a lack of wise people around them.

So whether that person is in need of information or they've believed a lie or they are irrationally fearful or they've been taught incorrectly—are any of these realities punishable? In other words, are we right to feel punitive toward them, or can we feel a measure of sorrow for them? Are these lacks in their understanding or these deficits in their upbringing grounds for the kind of retribution that resentment often calls for? Again, not saying any of the people you disagree with's thoughts or words or actions or beliefs are acceptable, but if we can assume their goodness we can see them as casualties of a bad story.

We've talked a lot about knowing and learning people's stories, yet this is a spot where our knowledge of people may actually hinder our willingness to show empathy. It might be easier for us to forgive someone we don't know well or only see from a distance, or to make peace with some faceless, nameless person, than someone we know well and live alongside—because the injury is specific and personal. I'm usually much more tolerant with people who aren't hurting me. The issue in resentment isn't whether or not I agree with someone. That's almost irrelevant. The question for people of empathy is, how do I express that disagreement and what does it do in my heart toward those I disagree with? Does it yield more kindness?

Often resentment involves us using our presence (or more often our lack of it) as a weapon. We want to coerce them into feeling badly. In order to get people to pay for their beliefs we want to withhold our presence or our intimacy—but that's probably not really all that helpful or compassionate, is it? Resentment damages other people for sure, but it always hurts us more than the other person, because it leaves our peace in the hands of someone else: needing their sorrow or their admission of guilt or their confession of wrongdoing in order to be released from our anger—and that makes us dependent on something that may never come. What if these people never have that moment of clarity and understanding—a moment that as basically good people—we should want for them? Are we trapped in permanent resentment.

The idea of vendetta or revenge or payback is an emotional intoxicant. It feels good to want justice, to demand consequences, to take moral high ground—but it doesn't really do anything aside from satisfy a desire in us to meet violence with violence, which is a slippery slope. We don't want to oppose something monstrous by becoming monsters. So, what are we looking for in our resentment isn't really worth chasing. And here's the bottom line: if we can agree to the assumption that people are inherently good, then we should honestly want to show them the suffering that they are causing, we should want to inform them of the damage, to reveal to them a blind spot they can't see.



So, if a person's position is based on a lack of information—we try and give them information. If their position is based on an irrational fear, we try to assuage that fear. If their position is based on believing a big lie, we want to give them the truth. We may do these things as we disconnect with them, but we can probably do them better by staying connected. This lesson on their wrongness, can be a middle finger on the way out, but it might be better as part of a continuing but difficult conversation. Do we want to punish people for what they don't know, or do we want them to know that stuff? Resentment doesn't care as long as someone gets what's coming to them.

An important caveat to this resentment stuff: this obviously doesn't mean staying in proximity to emotional or physical damage or remaining in a relationship that is abusive or dangerous. You are never required to endure that for any reason. At that point the disconnection is an act of self-care, self-empathy. So as part of being a kind human is to not demand that you keep proximity with people who hurt you. This is only if you feel you can engage them relatively safely. And as difficult as this letting go of resentment is, I'm not asking you to go to a place of forgiveness, either. That is a few steps down the road. (That's a 'Being REALLY Kind Humans' course. That's graduate level stuff and I'm not willing to go there myself.) This isn't forgiving (as important and emotionally emancipating as that can be) this is the gateway to that forgiveness, which is recognizing how complex people are, believing that they are essentially decent, and seeing the beliefs or theology or political views that may be causing this conflict between you as barriers to them embracing or reflecting that deeper goodness—and those barriers are about a lack they are experiencing somewhere. Lucky for you, you've seen what you've seen and know what you know.

But, if you believe the person you're in conflict with is at their core a decent human being who is being negatively impacted by a bad story or wrong information, maybe you can let go of the resentment that wants to make them pay and develop some mercy that wants to make them understand. Like I said, this isn't easy or painless, but it's probably necessary.

# THE COST OF GIVING A DAMN

Earlier in the course we talked about redemptive anger: that ferocity for humanity that we feel at the injustice in the world, and that's worth celebrating, after all it's why we're here together to share in the commonality of caring deeply for people and the planet—and that caring isn't easy. One of the truths about empathy-based living is that it's really hard to convince other people to live this way: it is difficult to argue someone into caring about another human being. It comes naturally for you, but not for everyone. And that natural ability long ago set you down a very specific and treacherous road: the road to compassion fatigue.

As I mentioned previously, I'm a big comic book fan and one of my favorites is a teenager named Anna Marie (A.K.A Rogue) and she is a member of the X-Men; a team of young mutants with disparate abilities. Anna's superhuman gift is the ability to touch a person and to instantly absorb their memories and to feel their feelings. In an instant she is downloaded with everything they've ever gone through. Anna spends much of her young life resenting her abilities, believing them to be a curse. She even wears gloves to shield herself and others. For her, stepping inside another's skin is usually no picnic, as she gazes upon things she'd much rather not see and has to walk through a hell she'd just as soon have avoided: encountering all the grief, all that fear, all that injury. For Rogue, empathy comes involuntarily. She doesn't have to try—as she is hit upon contact by an immediate and disorienting flood of feelings, thoughts, memories, and desires. They're all downloaded into her body in an instant and avoiding them is all but impossible. We have to work a lot harder than that to care that deeply. We can't simply place our hand on someone's shoulder and suddenly understand him or her, or engage in some cursory, drive-by empathy and imagine it is correctly informed. We need to slow down, to spend time with people, to get close enough and linger long enough to learn their stories. Real compassion comes from taking the time and the care to listen, really listen, and offer sustained, steady attention to the needs of another. Many people don't allow for such inconvenient interruptions to their schedules, but you do.

When I was student pastor, I described that my occupation as being a demented storm chaser: I'd see a bunch of teenagers and say “that looks horrible, let's go there. I sought out situations and more importantly people, many others avoid. We who practice empathy understand the tremendous strain of realizing someone else's burden and feeling the responsibility to move like a foolhardy storm chaser toward it. We know the emotional toll that kind of work can take on the human heart.

Can you remember when you first began to use those empathy muscles, what started you down the road of others-oriented living? What was a pivot point for you, can you remember? Earlier in our time I share about the first 17 years of my life as a boy in the bubble; raised in suburban Central New York and extremely well-loved by an amazing family who was for me. I was surrounded by people who pretty much looked, talked, and worshiped the way I did. I had everything I needed and most of the stuff I wanted.

My heart was well insulated there. Then I left the bubble. When I moved to the heart of Center City Philadelphia for college, I saw it all; poverty like I'd never known, diversity I'd never experienced, and the kind of unfiltered, unsanitized, messy real that the bubble just doesn't provide. I say that I traded in some false stories for some real ones. And I didn't experience these things as an intellectual exercises, political debates, or theological concepts—from a safe distance, or with a buffer of protection. I had a front row seat to it all. I had names and faces of people lives whose stories I was a part of. It was then that my heart was first exposed and wounded.

That was the beginning of a life trying to be others oriented. Once you find and begin using those empathetic muscles it's almost impossible to not use them. You can't shut the news off or stop caring or retire from empathy. You were doomed to a life of kindness and since you can't not care, the question becomes how to care in a sustainable way. The dilemma you're in is that you care and because you care you are on the front lines and that's where you get hurt. Lately, I'm not so sure I want to do that anymore. Compassionate people are easily wounded. I think you're here because you are a deep feeler, but because of that, you are easily and more frequently injured than ever, your system is so taxed. Compassion is costly and I want to talk a bit about that.

It is a spending of yourself on behalf of someone else. It can make you emotionally and physically ill. I call kind people like you the damn-givers. It's exhausting to give a damn, isn't it?

To be a person of compassion in a time when compassion is in such great demand—to wake up every day in days like these and push back against predatory politicians and toxic systems and human rights atrocities and acts of treason and leadership failures in the church and Presidential Tweet tantrums—the volume and the relentlessness of the threats can be wearying. You may have noticed. That's because empathetic people carry around two heavy weights. You're carrying around big picture larger systemic and political realities, healthcare and immigration and women's health and LGBTQ rights, but you're not simply carrying these big picture, larger systemic and political realities—you're also carrying the people these behind these realities, the names and faces and the lives of specific human beings who are under duress right now; people whose stories you listen to and know and are living within, people you love.

These big realities and these individual stories begin to accumulate upon your shoulders and in your clenched jaw and in your elevated heart rate and in the knot in your stomach that returns every morning when you check Twitter or turn on the news or step out into your community—and you see reason for grief, places compassion is needed. That's when compassion fatigue becomes real. You may recognize some of the symptoms in you: irritability, impatience, physical illness, eating emotionally, addictive behavior, loss of faith, the inability to be present to the people who love you, obsession with social media, fixation how bad things are. Take a few minutes and inventory the symptoms you recognize in yourself? Where might these be alarms that you are approaching or reaching compassion fatigue.

I'm not sure why you're here but you're probably here because you're a damn-giver; because you are a fierce lover of humanity—and as a result you probably walk into this

place pissed off, disconnected, isolated, worn out—exhausted. Whether you're an activist or a minister or a caregiver of just a citizen of the planet who is moved by other people's suffering—you feel the heaviness of these days (speed and activity can mask it for a while) but if you stop long enough, the reality of the fatigue catches up to you—you can measure the toll it's all taken on you. I kind of want you to let that fatigue catch up with you. What has your compassion cost you? Emotionally, physically, financially, relationally? What have you lost in order to be twisted in your bowels for the world? There will always be a sacrifice we will make, one that we should make, in doing the work of compassionate activism, but we do want to make sure that we are not ignoring self-empathy.

I want to have a talk about the resources; the working capital of caring for people—and the way it is tied to generosity.

We all have three powerful but ultimately finite resources in this life: time, money, and influence, and we begin walking into the life we're meant to have (the kind of life that can repair the planet), by learning how to wisely and responsibly use these resources to alleviate suffering, to generate goodness, to rectify injustice. Our ability to help and give hope is the sum total of these three resources.

Generosity is an investment of yourself, in something that is beyond yourself. It will involve some initial sacrifice. It will involve giving up a resource that you originally intended to use or hoard—whether you measure that in material things or time or presence or energy or emotional bandwidth. It may be the cash you'd carved out for a new pair of shoes, the rainy afternoon you'd designated for a nap, the weekend hours you'd like to have spent on another Netflix bender, or just a moment to quietly rest uninterrupted. Somewhere along the way to being kinder humans we will need to reallocate our resources to become the kind of generous person we need more of, people who are willing to be inconvenienced by someone else in need. All the really generous people you meet have one thing in common. They operate within a very specific, counterintuitive mathematical understanding: if they part with something on behalf of someone else, it will be returned to them tenfold. They trust that they will get back what they give, and then some. That can same asset, can be a liability if we stay in resource deficit too long. It's usually a lot easier to measure that for money than time and influence. You can see pretty clearly when you in the red financially but emotionally or physically not necessarily. The question becomes, how can we have this compassionate heart and not be swallowed up by it?

One of the ways is by paying attention to what I'll call outrage addiction. We can become so conditioned to the battle that we become dependent on it. Many people fall into an addictive pattern of opposition. The last few years you may have actively pushed back against a politician or a party or a piece of legislation or a religious movement, and now, even if that has been resolved you can't figure out how to stop fighting. (NFL players often talk about not being hostile and aggressive off the field.)

You've probably heard that expression "I'm a lover not a fighter?" I always used to joke, "I'm a runner, then a lover, then a fighter." And I think that perfectly encapsulates how I'd like you to approach the emotional and physical toll of this work. Fighting, loving, and running. One of the keys to fighting outrage addiction and the fatigue of the fight is in our energy orientation: realizing where our energies are being expended, where we are putting our

resources, and where we are directing our attention and making sure we have diversity of experience.

So, for example, in my work if I'm fighting racism, I should expend some of my energy in confronting system injustice or opposing policies or debating people. I should be in that kind of fight—but I also need to make sure I'm spending time with people who are under duress and caring for them, that I'm living in diverse community with people, that I'm partnering with organizations doing anti-racism work. So, sometimes I'm name privilege and I'm pushing back political movements or systemic issues—and sometimes I'm living in relationship with people who are affected by these movements and systems. Both combat racism but they are very different energy allotments.

If we exist only in a battle posture and only fight, we are going to become negative and exhausted, we need to make sure we are channel some of the energy into loving people. And then we need to know when to step away from both of those things and to simply be. The question I'd like you to consider today is: when and where do you need to re-allot or reorient your energies today? This might involve a social media fast or getting out of your own head. It might mean you spend less time in confrontation and more time in contemplation. It may mean you avoid toxic people, or that you spend time in community with people who've transformed their anger into something more productive. We can easily become complaining communities: people who come together because of their opposition to something but who get stuck in a negative expression. The more energy you expend complaining about or stressing over people you believe are hateful or ignorant, the less energy you're going to have to create or participate in generating an alternative and more productive counterpoint. That is perhaps the greatest danger for those of us who feel deeply: not becoming passionate martyrs, not being destroyed by our own hearts, not becoming so consumed by suffering that we succumb to it. Your expiring is not the goal or the desired outcome here, friend, so save some of that compassion for yourself.

Think about your resource allotment and your energy orientation today. Spend some time fighting, some time loving, and when you're tired, some time running from it all. More on this next session. Stay kind out there.

# THE MISSING PIECE

In normal times, I spend a good deal of my year traveling the country, talking about compassion and equality and justice, and about how people can care about the world without being overcome with despair or exhausted from the fight, all things we talk about here. One weekend I was leading a compassion fatigue workshop and I provided a list of some practical tools for staying healthy and encouraged, which I'll share in our next session, and at the end of the list, a woman raised her hand and said, "This lesson is great John, but you're missing something." (So, I proceeded to have her removed from the building). No, of course I said, "What am I missing?" And she said, "You're missing gratitude." And I said, lady you just said a mouthful: I am missing gratitude. She was righter than she knew. We all do some things well and some things poorly. I do some Compassion pretty well, humor, outrage, sarcasm, honesty—but not gratitude.

Some days I think I'm gratitude impaired. I'm embarrassed to say that I don't usually do thankful very well. It isn't that somewhere deep within me I don't truly appreciate the abundance in my life, I like to think I do. It's not that I don't treasure a family that loves me, a fairly intact body that still responds pretty well after nearly a half century, or a career doing something meaningful that gives me great joy. It's just that I'm often so busy being outraged by the failing state of the planet that I get preoccupied—well, with being outraged. In the course of an ordinary day, I find myself frequently distracted by the fight for what should be, and I forget to be grateful for what already is. It makes me irritable and impatient, it gets in the way of simple joy—and it's a problem.

You may have noticed this same appreciation-deficiency in you lately. It is a common affliction for compassionate humans in tumultuous times. We ordinary activists are by nature change agents; always looking ahead and pushing hard toward that new thing coming—and troubled by the present thing. We are adept problem solvers, which means we're also keenly aware of the problems themselves to begin with. In the face of so much discouraging news to weed through, we easily default to unrest, because resting feels to us like surrender to the bad things—our inaction, like complicity with the malevolent people. In some fundamental way, all aspiring superheroes want to create a different reality (which is a good and quite beautiful thing), but as a result they tend to fail to appreciate reality as it is currently configured; prone to exasperation, to frustration, to anger—to not being able to look at life in the moment and simply say "Thank you" to it.

If we're going to strive to people kind humans, we need to talk about gratitude, because it is the rich soil where the kind things can grow. It is a prerequisite for the kind of people we want to be and the kind of work we want to do in the world. Kind people tend to do hopeful pretty well, to look on the horizon and want a better world, but hope is only half of the story. Hope is by its very nature aspirational, it is a propellant forward—toward a time and a place where something is better than it is in this moment, where some of the wrong is made right. It is a view of something just beyond the horizon. Hope exists perpetually in the future; a soon-to-be, a yet-to-come, a one-day-soon, which means it's always just a little out of reach.

Gratitude, however, is something we can hold in this moment, it is present-focused—savoring this breath, appreciating this version of life, celebrating this day. It sits with contentment in today, and it dwells on what is already good here.

This is invaluable, because when things get as divisive and turbulent as they are right now, the most difficult place to be and to be grateful, is the intersection of Here and Now—and we can't afford to miss that. We need to find gratitude in the second we're standing in because it leads us to the next step. This is true for you and me; gratitude is the fuel for our empathy. Grateful people are the boldest activists and the most selfless advocates because they are fierce lovers of this life. All movements of justice, equality, and diversity require thankful hearts that see something worth preserving or someone worth defending. As we do the work of changing the world, gratitude is the way we properly appreciate what we already have, even if nothing changed.

I can still remember the day I met Amiee Copeland. She came across my news feed in a video where she was talking about her recent Thanksgiving, as Aimee Copeland's family was going around the table sharing one thing they were thankful for, she gave what would be for many, an unusual reply: her right knee. (She's also recently talked about deep affection for elbows; the way they allow us to bring food to our mouths and perform all sorts of other amazing feats.) Such tiny and seemingly insignificant body parts might not merit a great deal of gratitude or even attention from you, but Aimee doesn't miss the small things anymore. Every blessing is a big one. On May 1st, 2012, at the age of 22, after falling from a homemade zip line in Georgia, her body was invaded by a flesh-eating, bacterial infection, which shut down her vital organs and eventually claimed both of her hands, right foot, and entire left leg.

I knew that I had to reach out to Amiee and through a mutual friend, was able to email her and asked if we could talk and she share more of her story. Amiee recalled the moment in the hospital while still in a thick, drug-induced haze, seeing her father holding up her severely damaged hands in front of her, asking for her consent to have the doctors amputate them in order to keep her alive. For her, and in that moment—the choice was easy: “I knew I wanted to live.” Aimee said, ““I wanted to live so badly I would have let them take everything. I would have been happy just being a head in a jar!”

During those first excruciating and confusing days, Aimee remembered a quote by Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl that helped clarify this pivot point in her journey: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedom—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. In that moment of unthinkable adversity, Aimee chose her own way, and it has been a road paved with a sense of awe and thanksgiving and connectedness to the world.”

Aimee tells me that before her accident, like most people, she often operated from what she calls a “not blank enough” mindset: the feeling that she was not smart enough, not pretty enough, not successful enough.” She was perpetually frustrated. The gratitude came when she began realizing that at any given moment, even with these new monumental challenges and obstacles—she actually always had more than enough. Her sense of abundance now yields a heart that is continually thankful, and not just for the pleasant things. Aimee dispels the rumor that doubts, anger, and self-pity never visit, or that she

doesn't have those dark night of the soul, "why me" moments? She does. She simply sees them as reasons to be grateful too. "There is beauty in the raw tenderness of a broken heart," she says. "The anger and the sadness are part of being human." She accepts pain and grief as tethered to her appreciation for this life.

When I ask Aimee how she is different today than the young woman she was on that May morning six years ago, she finds it difficult to quantify it all. "It was a complete paradigm shift in how I see the world," she says. "Before I saw life in one square inch. Now I see the into the wider periphery, I notice how much bigger my perspective is." But with that more panoramic set of lenses to view everything, Aimee has discovered a beautiful smallness too. She's found a way of dwelling on the countless blessings that simply allow for our existence and that are so easy to miss: the sun shining, the rain falling, the breath in our lungs, our ability to move. When I ask her to define Gratitude, Aimee tells me that she sees it as "focusing on what you have, not on what you don't have."

This is both elemental and revelatory, because our inability to be grateful often comes from our perceived deficits; what we don't have, what we haven't achieved, what we can't do. When you've survived doctors giving you a one percent chance to live, and the loss of your appendages—you tend not to do that. You tend to see the victories and catalog the achievements and celebrate the milestones. And since her accident, Aimee has made her life's work about helping other people find the same gratitude in times of struggle. In the midst of her long physical and emotional personal recovery, she began turning outward. She received her Master's in Social Work and launched the Aimee Copeland Foundation, a community dedicated to "helping people of all abilities to find their purpose."

Aimee has uniquely synthesized her desire to bring others emotional healing, her love for the outdoors, and her relatively new insight into living with disabilities—and created something that is helping countless people; something that would have never existed if not for her personal tragedy. In a very tangible way, Aimee has transformed her pain into purpose. Out of incredible loss, she's mined the priceless gifts that she'd once taken for granted, so that she can help other people do the same. Aimee has overcome insurmountable odds to be here, but she realizes that she's not here just for herself—she's here for people like you and me who need someone to show them their inherent goodness and their untapped capacity to persevere—and to remind them to be grateful.

Gratitude is a gift because it allows us to be present. We need to be fully present to truly see people, to be aware of their pressing need, and correctly positioned to respond to it. And these three critical things: people, their need, and our response are all so very easy to miss because a million things threaten to distract our attention away. Most of us are perpetually missing the present moment; always being pulled by discontent or worry just slightly into the past or a few steps ahead of wherever we are. Gratitude helps us be available for our lives already in progress. Your children are growing at blinding speed, your friends are struggling with divorce, your parents are getting older. They deserve the best of you. Yes, staying informed and engaged in changing the coming world is critical, but there is life happening across the table or on the couch or playing in the backyard—and we can't afford to miss it, or this once-in-a-lifetime second.

A couple of years ago I was really busy. As usual, I'd piled far too much on my plate and



found myself at the end of another day, hovering over a screen and keyboard, feverishly typing, furrowing my brow—and feeling annoyed at the seemingly insurmountable, important things still unfinished. I was arguing with a few Twitter trolls, worrying about the latest bit of breaking bad news, and feeling my blood pressure rising. My daughter came bounding into the room (which in itself felt like an interruption at first). I answered her succession of rapid-fire questions abruptly without looking up—hoping she’d get the hint that I was preoccupied and stop asking. She didn’t. Then she said that she’d set up a light show in her room and asked if I’d have a dance party with her. For a split second I considered declining and excusing myself; telling her how much work I had to do and how tired I was and promising her we could do it another time. Then it occurred to me that she didn’t want to dance another time. She wanted to dance with me now. I realized that there are a finite number of times I’ll get such an invitation—and I’d never again get this one. I knew I’d never be face to face with this specific version of my daughter; at this precise age, in this exact moment, offering this once-in-History chance to dance with her. And boy did we dance.

There in the rainbow strobe lights of her room we twirled and giggled and spun; each taking turns prompting the other to follow. We banged on drums and tossed stuffed animals and jumped off the bed. I felt my brow unfurrow and my jaw soften and my anxiety subside in the presence of this deniable joy. I looked into my daughter’s eyes as she bounced wildly in front of me, her face beaming. I could see that this was all she wanted in the world right now; to dance with her Daddy—and I was grateful that I stopped the world so that I was there with her. I was glad I didn’t get fooled into believing there was anything else more pressing, more urgent, more important than that moment. I’m glad I didn’t miss this chance to dance.

There is a direct tether running between our sense of peace in the present and our ability to be grateful. The former can’t be reached without the latter. We know this because we experience it physically on an almost cellular level. When stress and anxiety come, our breathing gets shallow and labored, our heart rates rise, and we struggle to get enough oxygen to properly fuel us. (And this is just when opening Twitter.) It isn’t until we intentionally slow ourselves that our lungs can expand and contract fully and our breath returns to normal. Maybe that’s a good way to think of gratitude as we engage a world where there is so much to be overwhelmed by, so much that can make us internally turbulent: it is as fundamental as breathing. When we’re able to notice and celebrate the beauty and blessings in the present, a new healthy normalcy comes. Like the inhale and exhale of our lungs, the more we practice gratitude the more it becomes second nature. The more alive we feel.

A CNN reporter asked Aimee Copeland if she’d still ride that zip line, knowing what she knows now. Her answer, not surprisingly, is overflowing with thankfulness. “Knowing the impact that I have and will continue to have and knowing how this experience has shaped my life for the better, a million and one times, I would go on that zip line again,”

Friends, each moment here is a singular gift, so do your best not to waste it. Ride every zip line, pursue every dream, accept every dance party invitation, savor every second. You’ll never regret such things. There is nothing more pressing or urgent or important than being both present for your life currently in progress and having gratitude in it. This will make

you more available to people who are suffering—not less. So, while, the work of resisting injustice, of protecting diversity, of demanding equality has never been more necessary or urgent—while we spend ourselves on behalf of these things, we need to make sure that we don't miss life happening right in front of us. In days like this, living well isn't just the best revenge, it's also the greatest resistance.

Be grateful today for the sun on your face, the wind through your hair—even the tears in your eyes and the pain in your body. It is all beautiful, none of it is insignificant, and it all merits gratitude. Give thanks for your knees and elbows.

# THE KIND HUMANS SURVIVAL GUIDE

My son and I are avid Philadelphia Eagles fans (a very different religion, the euphoric highs and expletive-laden lows of which merit another book altogether.) As the kickoff of 2020's strange, fan-less, pandemic-altered season approached, our team had already somehow been decimated by a litany of training camp injuries that left us feeling dejected well before the first game even began (a default setting for the perpetually perturbed Philly faithful). In the national pre-game show, a local beat writer reporting from the nearly empty stadium read the names of all the nearly dozen players confirmed to be out for the approaching contest but said of one of the most critical of them, "He's playing hurt, but he'll be playing." We were relieved but we also knew this player's dubious medical status didn't bode well for our chances. Playing hurt, essentially means someone is physically compromised, in considerable pain, certainly not at full capacity—but is showing up anyway and contributing to the team as much as possible despite their various limitations. The phrase resonated loudly with me on this particular Sunday, because I too was playing hurt. It was my father's birthday and the seventh anniversary of his sudden passing while on a Caribbean cruise, and I was having a painful out-of-body experience. Even though I was physically there in our living room laughing and helping my kids dispatch a glorious, glistening tower of transcendent Buffalo wings, had earlier delivered a rousing virtual message on staying hopeful for a local church, and was later going to host an online conversation with some local activists about the upcoming election—I wasn't at my best by a long shot. For most of the morning, I'd been continually fighting back tears, struggling to concentrate, and feeling far less than at full strength; though in moments like this I take comfort in knowing I am in good, grieving company.

Two days prior, America had paused en masse to remember the nearly three thousand people who died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001, and anyone old enough to remember the abject horror of that day was surely carrying the heaviness around with them in silence, the still seemingly fresh images and the emotions that simply defy description. And they were doing it all in the middle of an already gut-punching year absolutely upended by a relentless pandemic, explosive civil rights protests, and the most divisive election season of our lifetimes (and their own specific set of personal challenges on top of it all). On that day of collective sadness, they too had obligations and deadlines and responsibilities that didn't disappear simply because they'd rather have fully devoted themselves to grieving. They too had to go about the necessary work of living with a lingering sadness residing just below the surface. So, they suited up and participated while nursing injury. They did the laundry and processed paperwork and made dinner and fixed the kid's bikes, and they limped and winced all the while because that's what good humans do in bad times.

That's always the case, which is why as people of faith, morality, and conscience we're lucky to be here on such fertile holy ground right now. As jacked-up as the world is, we get to be the people who show up and remind it that goodness still inhabits this place, that loving human beings haven't called it day—and that's a pretty easy thing to forget.

Even without 2020's exacerbating issues of a global health crisis or any national tragic anniversary to alter us emotionally, it would still be true without exception that everyone around you is playing hurt: all nursing hidden wounds, all living with chronic emotional pain, all carrying invisible burdens, and all doing their very best to show up even though they're at far less than full capacity—because someone is counting on them to be present and to make them feel seen and heard and valued.

That is the sacred space we're invited to step into, carrying with us whatever we feel we can bring. This is how we live with compassion in the middle of physical and emotional trauma: knowing that our meager, seemingly insufficient offerings change the situation, and they change us, too. And the opposite is as true: when we sidestep the need around us, when we ignore the pain in our path, (or worse when we intend harm) we can make an already painful journey unbearable—not just in the moment, but for a lifetime. But the key to all of this kind humanness is our ability to care for ourselves. Self-empathy is critical because we are going to need to give out of overflow and not resource, to make sure we have a lifestyle of sustainable compassion.

## KIND HUMAN TOOLBOX

Here are some daily practices to help you maintain a lifestyle of sustainable compassion:

### **1) Engage and withdraw.**

In addition to your activism, take time for “in-activism” Withdraw into whatever allows you to breathe and recalibrate silence, solitude, nature, prayer, meditation.

### **2) Get on social media.**

Find tribes of affinity, be informed, look for ways to perpetuate goodness by using your voice.

### **3) Get off social media.**

Have your fears and threats right sized by not having them artificially multiplied or enlarged. Step away when you feel overwhelmed so you can get some perspective on all you're worried about.

### **4) Laugh.**

Intentionally spend time with people, read things, or watch things that make you laugh. That laughter is empowering. It helps you remember that as difficult as things may be, if you can laugh you haven't been fully overcome

### **5) Play.**

Do something that intentionally gets you out of your head: walking, exercising, playing a sport, playing with your dog or grandchildren. Sweat, allow your blood to follow, and allow your body to take the focus of your mind.

**6) Create.**

Whether it's painting, playing an instrument, scrapbooking, cooking, gardening, or whatever it is that helps you stay connected to your muse, do that because it will remind you of your humanity and keep you connected to the humanity of others.

**7) Take a hope inventory.**

Intentionally note the people, stories, organization, and movements that give you reason to see good things on the horizon, because those things can sustain you in the moments you begin to feel your energy and attitude skewing negative.

**8) Cultivate gratitude.**

Ask yourself what is good and worth celebrating right now, even if nothing else changes? What about the present gives you cause to be thankful, even in the small and close.

**9) Know who you aren't.**

It's important to hold on to the humility that realizes that even though you can do many things, you can't do everything. Take time to step away from the fray and trust that the world can hold it together without you for a while.

**10) Share the load.**

Community is medicinal. Sharing life with other people makes the work of being a kind human so much easier. It helps keep you lighter, protects you from despair, makes you feel less alone, and fills in the gaps of your gifts and experience.

# THE ARC BENDERS

*“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”*

In 1871, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker first spoke these words in opposition to slavery here in America. In 1958 Dr Martin Luther King Jr. repeated them to a nation still fighting for equality for all its people. These have been words spoken as solace in times of adversity, a coping mechanism against despair. They are words we say as declaration or as aspiration. In days like today they can feel more like the latter. In these days of uncertainty and grief, these words desperately need to be repeated again, though not as solace for weary spectators—but as battle cry for warriors for the common good.

I may be the wrong person to deliver this message, because patience is not my defining trait. I’m doubtful it will crack the top 40. In the “12 items or less” line, I’m the guy behind you counting your items to make sure you don’t exceed a dozen. I’m the guy creating a passing lane on the sidewalk because you’re walking too slow. I’m the guy waiting for a quicker option than minute rice because sixty seconds is more time than I have. And my impatience in the trivial is magnified exponentially regarding things of consequence: equality, diversity, and justice—when people’s lives are being altered, when their inherent worth is being questioned, when any group’s voices are being silenced. I have a really difficult time waiting for those things to work themselves out. The arc of the moral universe may bend but I’m all for giving it a good nudge.

The idea of a long moral arc of humanity that bends toward justice can be useful in not allowing us to be overwhelmed by the discouragement of the day. It can give us perspective of stepping back a bit, but it can also be an excuse for apathy, a reason to shirk responsibility, it can prevent us from living with urgency. So, while the hope is that yes, over the entire arc of our human story here on the planet shows and evolution toward decency and goodness and equality—we also need to confess that in this spot in the story (which is the only spot we occupy) it does feel like there’s been a sudden and disturbing plot twist, a glitch in the program.

We who occupy this space and time need to understand that the arc of the universe does not bend without us. It never has. It never will. Humanity is the irresistible force shaping the crescent we stand upon together; every single life and every infinitesimal, seemingly unimportant decision adjusts its path in ways we can’t always perceive. With each decision, the curvature changes ever so slightly. It is changing in the seconds it takes me to speak these words, and you to hear them. Every single moment is a movement, one way or the other: toward or away from kindness.

Friends, this means that we are the arc benders. We are not passive victims of the difficult times in which we live, we are powerful participants in them; mighty co-authors of the story we find ourselves in, and together we can twist the plot. We can write something redemptive to mark this day on the planet. Time and space and our abilities, talents, and

passions are all forces we bring to bear on that arc. And so, we live intentionally. There are no inconsequential choices and there are no “ordinary, meaningless” days. The question is: “How can we hasten the arrival of justice? How can we be peacemakers—creators of shalom?”

We arrived here because of the arc benders that came before us: Rights of women/civil rights movement/LGBTQ equality. If they chose to be passive and let the arc bend on its own, we would be in a different place today, and rest assured of we choose to become passive now, others will be more than happy to bend it back. Just look at the last four months.

Walking toward a destination illustration. If each step is pointed toward that place, there’s a good chance I will arrive there, but if I deviate slightly, my path over time is altered profoundly. I need to pay attention to how my life is oriented at any given moment: the things I say, the stuff I post, what I do with my time, my money, where I place my energy.

This is difficult enough personally, individually, where I have some autonomy, but we don’t exist individually, we exist in community, we exist in relationship. So how do we move forward toward justice while inextricably tethered to a diverse group of people with disparate goals? We bend the universe in the close and small: our families, marriages, friendships—we have the small world. We find other arc-benders and join them in their work. We maximize our efforts for justice. We treat those opposing us with a dignity that they are not willing to provide us.

There are children yet to be born who will inherit the world we leave them. There small portion of the moral arc. It’s the baton we pass to them. With each beat of our bleeding hearts and every breath passing through our scorched lungs; as we speak and struggle, push-back and pray, resist and engage—the universe bows a bit more. With each act of love, each word of truth, each brave step, justice comes a little closer.

Yes, the arc of the moral universe is long, and we may not see all the movement we wish to see while we are here but make no mistake—it will bend far less severely and far more slowly if we simply wait for it to do so. And while we are waiting, others may decide that we are bending too quickly toward equality and diversity, and they may move in opposition, arching us away from the progress of our forebears. And if we are not diligent and relentless and steadfast with these moments, we risk leaving those who come after us, a world that is veering off course.

This is why we keep going now. It is why be brave the difficult conversations and the exhausting days and the sleepless nights. It’s why we don’t sit in the comfort of our privilege, and why we face this day with urgency: because people of kindness will hasten the bending if they choose to.

And I choose to.

I want to be an arc bender.

I want to live leaned toward justice.

I want my choices in the small and the grand to contribute to the beautiful momentum of the planet.

I want my presence here to yield more compassion, more goodness, more decency than when I arrived.

I want my abundance and privilege to be spent on behalf of those who have less of such things.

I want to spend the remaining of my days shoulder to shoulder with other passionate, resolute arc benders, deliberately altering the curvature of the universe toward justice, by the sweat of our brows and the defiance of a love that will not cease.

We don't wait for the Universe to bend, my friends.

We move together—and we bend it.

I am impatient, but that impatience can either fill me with anxiety and bitterness or it can be the fuel for an intentionally lived life.

Blessed are the arc benders.

Be encouraged.