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# Putting the Kind Back in Human



How do we put the kind back in human? How do we move forward into living with generosity as a spiritual practice, with open hearts and open hands when—in our country—fear, polarization, and cynicism tell us to close ourselves off except to those who believe, think,

behave, vote, and perhaps worship like us? How do we break habitual one-liners on social media and judgments (whether spoken or unspoken) such as: “If you are a Christian you couldn’t possibly have voted for such-and-such a candidate”?

We need to prioritize our ability actually to listen with intent to understand, with intent to honor the other as being created in the image of God, with intent to construct something that is mutually beneficial based on core values. Yelling louder and coming up with pithy memes is simply more of the same. Right now the last thing we need is more of the same.

To put the kind back in human is how we will find our common humanity. Let me differentiate: I’m not using *kind* and *nice* interchangeably. Some of us were raised with the advice that Thumper (in *Bambi*) received from his mother, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” And I happen to live in Minnesota, with its reputation for “Minnesota nice.” Don’t get me wrong—I’m all for politeness, respect, and civility, but “nice” has been used

as a way to avoid challenging conversations, as a way to support the status quo; nice can even become passive-aggressive. Sometimes the truth that needs to be spoken isn’t nice to hear. Recently I’ve been working on becoming “Minnesota *kind*.”

Brené Brown, a grounded theory researcher, has some helpful insights for us. For the last 14 years, she has listened to people’s stories of struggle, courage, shame, and vulnerability. She studies the human condition by starting with lived experiences. I love that she starts with story because those of us in Christian churches also teach through story; we even know ourselves as co-creators in God’s story. At this point, Dr. Brown has over 200,000 pieces of data. I have facilitated her research for the past six years. Over and over again I see how this research makes people feel known and seen because Brené is naming their reality in ways that they recognize.

And so, what, according to this research, stops us from putting the kind back in human?

## Vulnerability

Brown defines vulnerability as “risk, emotional exposure, and uncertainty.” Anything we do that is courageous involves risk, emotional exposure, and uncertainty. When we are vulnerable and own a truth that may not conform to majority culture, we know we will be judged. When we risk saying, “I need help; I don’t understand,” we are open to being wounded.

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Many of us tell ourselves that we will have hard conversations about race, religion, immigration, debt reduction, or our own family histories only when we're better prepared, when we've got all our facts straight, or after we've studied the topic more. In part, we believe that if we had all this organized, then having hard conversations would not be hard or uncomfortable or jarring. We believe that we could achieve a noble outcome without ever really changing:

without having to say, "I have white privilege and that shapes my biases,"

without having to say, "what you just said is giving me pause to re-think my view,"

without having to say, "this conversation is really hard for me and in the past when I've tried to talk about these things, I haven't felt safe to express my perspective so just showing up here is a huge ask of me."

And yet, the truth remains that vulnerability is the path back to each other. And God created us for each other. When I risk a bit with you, and you risk a bit with me, we now trust each other a bit more and are more deeply connected. We've seen God in each other.

Brown teaches this: "When we stop caring about what people think, we lose our capacity for connection. When we become defined by what people think, we lose our willingness to be vulnerable."

## Courageous and Playful Truth-telling

I have volunteered with an organization called Better Angels, whose mission it is to de-polarize the United States through highly facilitated conversations between republicans and democrats. Last fall, on a rainy evening, a group gathered to engage in these conversations; the event was open to the public to watch, and the Minneapolis/St. Paul *Star Tribune* newspaper sent a reporter and photographer. Through a series of questions and exercises, participants were asked to reflect on and critique their own political party. Everyone was asked the question, "What don't you like about your party?" The initial answers were about smaller policy issues, but eventually a woman said, "I don't hold the same view on abortion as my party and I feel like I can't say that—that there is no place within the party for me to say that."

What do I most profoundly remember from that night? Of course, it is this woman speaking her courageous truth.

But there is another side to courageous truth telling, and it gets us back to the issue of kindness. I believe that God created us to play, to laugh, to create, to have moments of collective joy together. Jesus even prayed at the Last Supper that his followers would have joy!

"When any system—whether it be a family, a business, a faith community, a country, or a college—is anxious, playfulness is a way to stay connected through the conflict."

Many of us often think we will do those things only after we've done the big things, when we have time. That isn't getting us where we want to go. Instead, Dr. Stuart Brown, who studies play, writes, "The opposite of play is not work—the opposite of play is depression." If you've worked in higher education for a number of years, have you seen the rate of depression among students increase? The opposite of play is depression.

According to family systems theorist Edwin Friedman, when any system—whether it be a family, a business, a faith community, a country, or a college—is anxious, playfulness is a way to stay connected through the conflict. When there is anxiety, we become serious to protect ourselves because it feels less exposed. But vulnerability is how we share our common humanity.

How would *your* world change if you played, connected, dwelt in joy and kindness more? And how would that change *our* world?

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