

# Living a Life of Loving Kindness

## Small Groups: February 2014

“Kindness, it turns out, is hard - it starts out all rainbows and puppy dogs, and expands to include...well, *everything*.” (George Saunders, Commencement Address, Syracuse University, 2013)

I don't know if dorm room assignments are randomly generated or if someone matches people. What I do know is the year I spent living with a Buddhist nun in my first year of seminary taught me a great deal about living a life of loving kindness. When we met on that first day, I was 23 years old, beginning my journey into ministry. Le-Hang was in her mid-fifties and had first entered the temple near her home in Vietnam when she was 13 years old. My lessons had begun.

Loving-kindness is a central principle in Buddhism, which describes an attitude of compassion for all life, seeking the benefit of all living beings through a lens of love and actions of kindness. Regular meditation, in particular a loving-kindness meditation is a part of cultivating this perspective in one's life.

I have both an appreciation and tension with loving-kindness. Loving-kindness resonates with our first principle, the worth and dignity of all. But love without shape can perpetuate injustice, if it teaches us to be silent in the face of wrong, or deny our pain for the interest of harmony. Luckily, Le-Hang taught me there is more to it.

Le-Hang showed compassion for everyone. I always felt valued and loved in her presence. When I was sick, she immediately made homemade soup. She listened and made time to offer counsel to those who were in need. Yet she was also tough and honest. If she witnessed unkindness toward others, or people being unkind to themselves, showing disrespect or giving into bad habits, she would name it clearly. When we lived in an apartment together, she once told me, “Susan, your vegetables are rotting in the fridge. This is wasteful.” While on the surface this may not seem like loving kindness, it was true and a good reminder about approaching all things with attention and care.

Love is not just a sympathetic emotion, but one that challenges us to speak truthfully in the face of injustice, and buoy us toward our better selves. This is never easy. Loving-kindness is also about discipline. It takes practice and only seems easy until you try it. It is far easier to be judgmental, to strike out in anger, to be dismissive. In the practice of loving-kindness meditation we are encouraged to invite peace and happiness for ourselves and for our loved ones, but also those who we find challenging. When Le-Hang offered correction, it clearly came from seeing a greater potential in others. This didn't always make it easy to hear - but the lessons and reminders have stayed with me and continue to influence my life actions these many years later.

Following a month of exploring integrity, it is important to remember balance in all things. Honesty and truth telling need loving-kindness, otherwise they can turn into pride and judgment, of others or ourselves. The most effective challenge any of us receives is the one that comes with true care - and knowledge of the loving kindness within all of us. May we all support one another in living a life full of this intention.

Yours in the journey, Susan

# Living the Theme: Experiencing Loving-kindness

Use these exercises to reflect on how you experience loving-kindness and what living a life of loving-kindness might look and feel like. Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to live loving-kindness and what you learned from the practice.

## 1. Practice a Random Act of Kindness

Find a time this month to do something kind for another person for no reason. For example, buy a cup of coffee for a stranger behind you at a coffee shop; let someone have the better parking spot if you arrive at the same time (or even if you got there a little earlier). Hold the door for someone, give an unexpected gift or favor to a neighbor or friend.

There is one rule. The act of kindness can not be in return for something; it can't be to say thank you to someone for their work. It needs to be random and done with no expectation of something in return, or in exchange for something. Come to your group ready to share what you did, how it went and what did experienced or learned from it.

## 2. Practice a loving-kindness meditation

Buddhist teachings talk about the "4 limitless ones": Loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. We are taught that our ability to grow these qualities with meditation and practice is limitless.

The basic steps of Loving-kindness meditation are to sit quietly and comfortably, and recite this meditation. (There are several variations of the meditation included in the reading section. Choose one that resonates with you). Feel free to have a card with the meditation written on it to help you recite it. Imagine yourself surrounded by light and these good blessings as you recite.

May I be safe  
May I be healthy  
May I be happy  
May I be at ease.

The next step involves wishing the same for someone close to you. Think of a family member or friend, picture that person in your mind surrounded by light as you offer the recitation for that person, "May [my friend] be safe, ...."

Next, picture a neutral person who you see often; someone in the grocery store, dry cleaner, your mail carrier, and offer this recitation for that person.

Next, offer these blessings for someone who you find difficult to be around; not someone who you are deeply angry with, but someone who you find somewhat challenging to be around. Again, picture that person in light and surrounded by these blessings.

Finally, send these blessings to all people, to all living things. Imagine all the people you've thought of, including yourself, and more people if you wish, all held in light, as you recite these blessings for "all." "May all be safe. May all be healthy..." You might even imagine the earth, inviting this positive intention for all living beings.

More explanation and description at [http://www.buddhanet.net/metta\\_in.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/metta_in.htm)

# Some Questions to Think and Talk About

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into - and break open - your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

- 1. Who, in your life, do you remember most fondly, with the most undeniable feelings of warmth? Does it correspond to people who were kind to you?**
- 2. A friend of mine from college set aside a month to do one random act of kindness every day. Guess what? He found it very difficult. His attempts at kindness (to pay for another's meal, to help someone) were returned with suspicion and awkward questions. So, what's our problem? Why are we suspicious of kindness? Have you ever experienced this? Is this an obstacle to all of us being more kind?**
- 3. What have you found to be obstacles to being kind, either personally or otherwise?** Why are we - all of us - not more loving, more open, less selfish, more present. How might we become kinder?
- 4. Often our first response to an unpleasant situation or person is to judge or get angry. What if we recognized those reactions in the moment, how might we turn our outlook more quickly toward loving-kindness? Do you have practices or tricks that you use to try to respond with more loving-kindness in the world? Are there ways you have found to cultivate more loving-kindness?**
- 5. Where do you struggle to have compassion for yourself? When do you find you are most in judgement of yourself? Do you find you judge others along those same traits?**
- 6. Has there been a time when you needed and were able to have loving-kindness and deep compassion for yourself? How did that make a difference to what you were going through?**
- 7. Do you think loving-kindness is a natural, ingrained trait within humanity, or something we need to work on to exhibit?** Do you see it only as an evolutionary benefit, or does it have more pressing and important implications for our species/society/world.
- 8. How do you treat a difficult person and/or a difficult situation with loving kindness? Do you have a story?**
- 9. How does "tough love" relate to loving-kindness?** Can "tough love" be the loving and kind way to go?
- 10. The opposites of loving-kindness could be said to be: hatred, mean-spiritedness, greed, thoughtlessness, even war. To me, impatience is sometimes what keeps me from doing the loving, kind thing. Do you have similar challenges?**
- 11. Are you ever conscious of performing acts of kindness? What kinds of things do you do for family, friends, or strangers that are efforts at loving-kindness?**
- 12. How has the invitation to reflect on loving-kindness impacted your week, your month?**
- 13. How do you feel when you receive kindness?** What kinds of loving things have others done for you?
- 14. How can we be kind to ourselves? Are there things you do to show loving-kindness to yourself?**
- 15. Have there been times in your life that were marked by more kindness and love than other times?** What factors, situations, people in your life, or your own circumstances were at play in each of these times? What things affected the differences between these times?

# Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

## First Thoughts and Wise Words

### **Loving- kindness:**

1. tenderness and consideration toward others.
2. tender and benevolent affection

### **Kindness:**

1. the quality of being warmhearted and considerate and humane and sympathetic

### **Loving**

2. feeling, showing, or indicating love and affection

Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.

- Dalai Lama XIV *The Art of Happiness*

“What I regret most in my life are *failures of kindness*. Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded...sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly.” - George Saunders, *Advice to Graduates*

Three things in life are important:

The first is to be kind.

The second is to be kind.

And the third is to be kind. - Henry James

A human being is part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. - -Albert Einstein

## Loving-kindness mantras and meditations:

Below are forms of loving kindness mediation.

With each begin with “I” and visualize yourself.

Next visualize a loved one, using “he” or “she” or the person’s name. Next, visualize someone neutral, “he” or “she” or the person’s name. Next,

someone you have some difficulty with. Finally,

move to “we” picturing everyone together, and “all” for all living beings.

*May I be filled with loving kindness.*

*May I be safe from inner and outer dangers.*

*May I be well in body and mind.*

*May I be at ease and happy.*

*(may he, may you, may we, may all)*

*May I be filled with loving kindness.*

*May I be well.*

*May I be filled with loving kindness.*

*May I be well.*

*May I be peaceful and at ease.*

*May I be whole*

(“Filled with Loving Kindness” from Singing the Journey – singing it may help you remember the mantra.)

*My heart is happy*

*Loving kindness*

*May my body be healthy and strong.*

*May I be filled with loving kindness.*

*May I be happy.*

*May I be really happy.*

*May I be at peace ...*

"Be kind whenever possible-  
It is always possible." - The Dalai Lama

*Why I Wake Early*  
by Mary Oliver

Hello, sun in my face.  
Hello, you who make the morning  
and spread it over the fields  
and into the faces of the tulips  
and the nodding morning glories,  
and into the windows of, even, the  
miserable and the crotchety --

best preacher that ever was,  
dear star, that just happens  
to be where you are in the universe  
to keep us from ever-darkness,  
to ease us with warm touching,  
to hold us in the great hands of light --  
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day  
in happiness, in kindness.

No act of kindness, however small, is ever wasted.  
- "The Lion and the Mouse," Aesop's Fables

Your acts of kindness are iridescent wings  
of divine love, which linger and continue to uplift  
others long after your sharing." – Jelaludin Rumi.

That best portion of a good man's life --  
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love.  
- from "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above  
Tintern Abbey" by William Wordsworth

"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great  
battle." - Philo of Alexandria

Kindness is ever the begetter of kindness.  
- Sophocles

Ask yourself: Have you been kind today? Make  
kindness your daily modus operandi and change  
your world. - Annie Lennox

Kindness in words creates confidence. Kindness in  
thinking creates profoundness. Kindness in giving  
creates love. - Lao Tzu

"Would You Harbor Me?" (Song)  
by Ysaye M. Barnwell of Sweet Honey in the Rock

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?  
Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

Would you harbor a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew,  
A heretic, convict, or spy?  
Would you harbor a runaway woman or child,  
A poet, a prophet, a king?

Would you harbor an exile or a refugee,  
A person living with AIDS?  
Would you harbor a Tubman, a Garret, a Truth,  
A fugitive or a slave?

Would you harbor a Haitian, Korean, or Czech,  
A lesbian or a gay?

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

"Character isn't inherited. One builds it daily by the  
way one thinks and acts, thought by thought, action  
by action. If one lets fear or hate or anger take pos-  
session of the mind, they become self-forged  
chains." — Helen Gahagan Douglas

"I try to use unconditional love in small amounts,  
she said, so people really appreciate it. The rest of  
the time, I just try not to yell." - Brian Andreas

"Loving-kindness—*maitri*—toward ourselves  
doesn't mean getting rid of anything. *Maitri* [*metta*  
in Pali] means that we can still be crazy, we can still  
be angry. We can still be timid or jealous or full of  
feelings of unworthiness. Meditation practice isn't  
about trying to throw ourselves away and become  
something better. It's about befriending who we  
already are. The ground of practice is you or me or  
whoever we are right now, just as we are. That's the  
ground, that's what we study, that's what we come  
to know with tremendous curiosity and interest."  
- Pema Chodron from "The Wisdom of No Escape"

I opened the doors of my heart  
And there was music within  
And a song. - Jean Ingelow

“Why loving kindness? A loving heart may enable the events of our daily lives to flow more openly and freely.” - Small Group Ministry Facilitator

“Robert Thurman was the first American to be ordained a Tibetan Monk by the Dalai Lama. In August 2009 at Chautauqua NY, he delivered a TED Talk titled “Expanding Your Circle of Compassion.” In his introduction, he asked, “Why are we sometimes sensitive to the suffering of another and want to help him but are at other times not willing to do so?” According to Thurman, our human default reaction is to help. Our first impulse is to be like “The Good Samaritan.” We empathize with another's misfortune and desire to alleviate his suffering; we wish to extend help. This may be our default reaction but today it is often overridden and stifled by narcissistic self-focus. In our selfishness and self-involvement, we are too often oblivious to another's distress.”

- Small Group Ministry Facilitator

“Why are we not kinder? Here's what I think: Each of us is born with a series of built-in confusions that are probably somehow Darwinian. These are: (1) we're central to the universe (that is, our personal story is the main and most interesting story, the *only* story, really); (2) we're separate from the universe (there's US and then, out there, all that other junk – dogs and swing-sets, and the State of Nebraska and low-hanging clouds and, you know, other people), and (3) we're permanent (death is real, o.k., sure – for you, but not for me).

Now, we don't *really* believe these things – intellectually we know better – but we believe them viscerally, and live by them, and they cause us to prioritize our own needs over the needs of others, even though what we really want, in our hearts, is to be less selfish, more aware of what's actually happening in the present moment, more open, and more loving.”

- George Saunders, *Advice to Graduates*

“I had a friend, now long deceased, who was not very attractive physically but who had a wonderful personality and sense of humor and was generally adored by all of us. She once told me that one of the most treasured moments of her life was when a friend said to her “You have beautiful elbows!” I've never forgotten how this incredibly small act of kindness made such an enormous impression, and have tried very hard to remember to let people know the things I admire about them.”

- Small Group Ministry Facilitator

“One activity I like to do to flex my loving kindness muscles is engage in people-watching. As people go about their business I look to find things to appreciate, things their families might cherish about them or ways in which they may affect the people around them. There's always something to love.”

- Worship Associate

“Watch how much people can blossom when you show them loving kindness. They may start to see the potentials you see, to gain confidence in their own gifts and share them with others.”

- Worship Associate

In the Buddhist text, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva writes:

Verse 5.75

Praise all who speak the truth,  
And say, "Your words are excellent."  
And when you notice others acting well,  
Encourage them in terms of warm approval.

Verse 5.76

Extol them even in their absence;  
When they're praised by others, do the same.  
But when the qualities they praise are yours,  
Appreciate their skill in knowing qualities.

Buddhist teacher Dzigar Kongtrul calls this "rejoicement therapy". When we begin to appreciate the kindness and courage of others, we can find sources of pleasure and joy everywhere regardless of what might be happening in our own lives at that moment.

- Worship Associate

“Boundaries are so important. Not to have or not to respect yours is to forget to be loving to yourself. You don't deserve that.” – Worship Associate

“True kindness is a better social lubrication than any alcohol could be. And it lasts longer too.”

- Worship Associate

“I think it's essential to put behind fear. How can we give of ourselves if we're afraid of the other person/people? It's a state of holding back. It helps to remember we all want the same things - to be loved, understood, cared for.” ... This is not to suggest opening yourself up to everyone all the time. That can be dangerous. You make a nice sitting room for new people and let them spend time in there before you decide whether to let them into the rest of your house.” – Worship Associate

### *The Greatest Gifts*

by Kathy Davis

May we break boundaries, tear down walls, and build on the foundation of goodness inside each of us.

May we look past differences, gain understanding and embrace acceptance.

May we reach out to each other, rather than resist. May we be better stewards of the earth, protecting, nurturing and replenishing the beauties of nature.

May we practice gratitude for all we have, rather than complain about our needs.

May we seek cures for the sick, help for the hungry, and love for the lonely.

May we share our talents, give our time, and teach our children.

May we hold hope for the future very tenderly in our hearts and do all we can to build for bright tomorrows.

And may we love with our whole hearts, for that is the only way to love.

“Libby Roderick’s words in *Singing the Journey* capture a significant meaning of loving-kindness: “How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything less than beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you, you were less than whole? How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle? How deeply you’re connected to my soul.”

These lyrics capture a core premise of Unitarian Universalism - each of us has a deep connection to all people, to all living beings, to the One Life – even though we often fail to realize it. Loving-kindness means living each day with the intention of noticing our connection to others, seeking that connection, and approaching people – whether they are familiar or unknown to us - with the recognition that there is far more to every individual than meets the eye. There is beauty, worth, and potential.

Our “lizard brain,” the ancient part that often makes quick judgments for our very survival, must be purposefully set aside, especially as we encounter people who are new to us. This is difficult to do. Whether we like it or not, there is a reptilian part of our brain that automatically lumps people into categories based on our memories, previous experiences, and the associations we make with the characteristics we first notice about someone new.

To practice loving-kindness, we must intentionally struggle against these snap judgments. We must set them aside. It’s hard work, but it gets easier with practice. We must tell ourselves that it doesn’t matter how well or poorly dressed someone is. It doesn’t matter whether or not s/he shops at Walmart or eats at McDonalds or votes for someone different than we might have chosen. It doesn’t matter that we don’t make the same amount of money, live in the same neighborhood, have the same skin color or speak the same language. We are related, all part of the same human family.

To practice loving-kindness, we approach others with openness and friendliness. We do our best to rid ourselves of any ill will. We ask ourselves to notice how others are more like than unlike us, yet we seek to appreciate their uniqueness and acknowledge the beauty and value in some of the ways they are unlike us. Above all, we do our best to constantly cultivate the awareness that, at the deepest levels, we are one.”

- Rev. Linda Lawrence

“It didn't occur to me then, though it certainly does now, that it was years since I'd roused myself from my stupor of misery and self-absorption; between anomie and trance, inertia and parenthesis and gnawing my own heart out, there were a lot of small, easy, everyday kindnesses I'd missed out on; and even the word `kindness' was like rising from unconsciousness into some hospital awareness of voices, and people, from a stream of digitized machines.”

— Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch*

‘None of us ever find enough kindness in the world, do we?’ - character of Boris, *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt

“In Israel, there is a team of volunteers, mostly Orthodox Jews, known as ZAKA. After bus bombings and airport shootings, they arrive in teams to comb the wreckage for body parts, even sopping up the blood, doing their best to insure that the dead are made as complete as possible before their burials. It is the truest kind of kindness, because it is a kindness that can never be repaid.” - from “Kenneth Feinberg: The Nation’s Leading Expert in Picking up the Pieces” by Chris Jones, *Esquire*

## Online Articles, Videos and Podcasts

The full speech of George Saunders’s Advice to Graduates:

<http://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/31/george-saunderss-advice-to-graduates/? php=true& type=blogs& r=0>

“Kenneth Feinberg: The Nation's Leading Expert in Picking up the Pieces” by Chris Jones. *Esquire*. December 16, 2014. A story of one man’s journey from analytical to caring, from being a rising-star lawyer to becoming “a really good listener” (he held more than 900 personal meetings with the 911 families on their settlements). [http://www.esquire.com/features/kenneth-feinberg-interview-0114?click=main\\_sr](http://www.esquire.com/features/kenneth-feinberg-interview-0114?click=main_sr)

“Overview of Loving-kindness Meditation” with Ven. Pannyavaro

[http://www.buddhanet.net/metta\\_in.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/metta_in.htm)

“Loving Kindness Meditation and Change” by Angela Wilson. How Loving Kindness meditation can lead to positive life and health benefits. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kripalu/loving-kindness-meditation\\_b\\_3961300.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kripalu/loving-kindness-meditation_b_3961300.html)

## Books and Movies

**What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Franke** by Nathan Englander. The story of four adults who ask each other the ultimate question: Would you have hidden me from the Nazis? The adults vote who would and who among them would not.

### **Taking Chance** (NR)

Based on an article by Marine Lt. Col. Michael Strobl, this HBO original film tells the story of Strobl's emotional experience traveling across America as a volunteer escort officer for the body of fallen 19-year-old Marine Chance Phelps. Along the 2004 journey to Phelps' hometown in Wyoming, Strobl (portrayed by Golden Globe winner Kevin Bacon) witnesses -- and is moved by -- acts of respect by everyday Americans.

### **Sunshine Cleaning** (R)

Financially on shaky ground yet determined to send her son to a top private school, Rose Lorkowski (Amy Adams) teams up with her unreliable sister, Norah (Emily Blunt), to start a new company that specializes in bio-hazard removal and crime scene cleanup. Tired of doing all of the work for other people, whether in her job cleaning homes or in her failed relationships, Rose is finally ready to use her entrepreneurial spirit to tidy up her own life.