



Piero Ferrucci. **The Power of Kindness**. New York, Tarcher: 2006.

EXCERPTS

Kindness? It may strike us as absurd to even approach the subject: Our world is full of violence, war, terrorism, devastation.

And yet life goes on precisely because we are kind to one another. No newspaper tomorrow will tell of a mother who read a bedtime story to her child, or a father who prepared breakfast for his children, of someone who listened with attention, of a friend who cheered us up, of a stranger who helped us carry a suitcase. Many of us are kind without even knowing it. We do what we do simply because it is right.

Kindness, as we will see, has many facets. But its essence is as simple as can be. We will find that kindness is a way of making *less* effort. It is the most economic attitude there is, because it saves us much energy that we might otherwise waste in suspicion, worry, resentment, manipulation, or unnecessary defense. It is an attitude that, by eliminating the inessential, brings us back to the simplicity of being.

Kindness has to do with what is tenderest and most intimate in us. It is an aspect of our nature that we often do not express fully – especially men in our culture, but also women – because we are afraid that if this vulnerable side comes to light, we might suffer, be offended, ridiculed, or exploited. We will find rather, that we suffer by not expressing it. And that by touching this nucleus of tenderness, we enliven our entire affective world, and we open ourselves to countless possibilities of change.

To be in the present is a necessary condition for any kind of relationship. If I am distracted and not present, where am I? And if I am not here, who is relating in my place? What ghost, what robot have I appointed to represent me?

To be in the present with someone else is a gift. The gift of attention is perhaps the most precious and envied of all, even though we do not always realize it. To be there. To be totally available. This is what we secretly hope other people will do for us, and we know it will give us healing relief, space, energy. I remember an extreme example recounted to me by a rather eccentric friend of mine. This friend was having psychotherapy session with a therapist who was equally nonconformist. At one point, my friend felt very sleepy, said she would like to go to sleep, and did so. She woke up the next morning. The therapist not only had made no objection, but had remained awake all night, near to her, present and alert.

This is an extreme, indeed heroic example. Yet think of all the people who have not given you the attention you needed: husband, wife, children, friends, colleagues, bosses, doctors, teachers, employers. Think of someone who, while you are talking to him, is looking elsewhere, or reading the paper, or mentioning a subject that is irrelevant to what you are saying, or just walks away. Inattention has a disruptive, depressing aspect, which saps our vitality and robs us of our self-confidence. It can arouse all our latent feelings of inferiority and make us feel like

nothing. In my work with people, I often hear stories of people who make love with their partner but meanwhile fantasize about making love with somebody else more desirable, or just imagine being somewhere else. To me that is the epitome of absence.

Patience is not as heavy and tedious as we may think. It is simply a different perception of time. Time inexorably devours our life and robs it of any meaning. Time is our body, which grows old and loses its power; it is ever-impending death, which hangs over and interrupts our life, turns our work to dust, and delivers us forever into oblivion. And so we try not to think about it, but must do as much as quickly as possible before being enveloped by perennial darkness. What a cruel joke. In this perspective, the person in front of us in the line who lingers to chat with the employee about trivial matters, while our time bomb keeps ticking away, cannot help but arouse our murderous instincts.

But what if we were to see our predicament in another way? Perhaps we would discover that time is a mental construct. That there is no need to be afraid or to be in a hurry, because nothing is running away from us. Then perhaps our state of mind becomes calmer, and we see the robbers of our time, big ones and small ones, with a more benevolent eye.

The idea that time is an illusion is variously expressed in all our great spiritual traditions. Maybe this idea is not the monopoly of

the enlightened, but more common an experience than we think. One way or another, all of us have had an inkling of eternity. Watching the stars in the night sky, or absorbed in sublime music, or with a beloved person, we may forget the passing of time.

Gratefulness is easily forgotten, but also easily evoked. Here is an interesting experiment: Think of all the people in your life to whom you can be grateful - all the main ones, that is. The hard part of this experiment is that the people to whom we may feel gratitude are often those toward whom we also feel resentment, for instance our parents. Resentment usually obscures gratitude, but the skill in this experiment is in bracketing our reproaches, however big, and in concentrating on good aspects, however small.

Let us think, then, about the people in our life to whom we are grateful. There are plenty of people - many more than we believe - who perhaps have done us good, even though we may not have fully acknowledged it: parents, friends, teachers, lovers, and in general all who have made our life a lot or even a little better, like the postman who delivers our mail every day, or the taxi driver who tells us a good joke.

If we give it some thought, we will find much more than we may anticipate because life is made of big and small favours, not only

of rudeness and arrogance. True, each one of us carries the wounds of injustice and outrage. We know this only too well. What we forget, because it is so obvious, is that even the lives of those who consider themselves most unfortunate and alone are interwoven with others and could not exist without their support.

If I think of everyone in my life to whom I can feel grateful, an interesting thing happens. Bit by bit I realize that all I have has come to me from others. From my parents I have had wonderful support. My teachers have given me essential instruments for my work, ideas, and inspiration. My friends have helped me feel good about myself. Colleagues have taught me tricks of the trade. Other people have opened me to entire worlds whose existence I scarcely suspected, or have taught me the importance of caring for others. My wife and my children have given me love and a wealth of surprises. And this is just the beginning. Gradually, as I continue, I realize that all I have - possessions, abilities, character traits, ideas - comes from others or has been evoked by the presence of others.

A Tibetan story tells of an earnest man seeking enlightenment. A sage passes through his village and the man asks the sage to teach him the art of meditation. The sage explains: Withdraw from the world, meditate every day in such and such a way, and you will attain enlightenment. The earnest man goes to live in a cave and follows the instructions. Time passes - but no

enlightenment. Two years, five, twenty pass. After so many years, the sage happens once again in that village. The earnest man meets him and recounts that, despite all his efforts, he did not manage to achieve enlightenment. The sage asks: "What type of meditation did I teach you?" The man tells him. The sage: "Oh, what a terrible mistake I made! That was not the right meditation for you. You should have done another one, completely different. But now it is too late."

Disconsolate, the man returns to his cave. He has lost all hope, abandoned every wish, effort, and attempt at control. He does not know what to do. So he does what he is best at: He starts meditating. And soon enough, to his great surprise, confusion dissolves and a marvelous inner world reveals itself to him. He feels light, regenerated. In a moment of spiritual ecstasy he attains enlightenment. When, in his happy state he leaves the cave, he sees the world around him transfigured: the snowy peaks, the mountain air, the blue sky, the shining sun. He is happy. He knows he has reached the goal. And in the beauty of the enchanted scene he thinks he can see the benevolent smile of the sage.

A recent study has shown that, if you want to be at your best in learning, humility is your tool. The humblest students, who think they know the least, do more tests and research when given a problem, and prove to be more efficient than those who think

they already have the answer. It is hardly surprising. A student who overestimates her own knowledge will fail the exam, just as a sportswoman who underestimates her competitors will lose. Being humble means you work harder and prepare yourself better.

So humility is linked to learning and to renewing ourselves. We often reach a point in our lives where, rather than remaining open to learning, we want safe and predictable plans. And we prefer the prestige of teacher to the humility of student. So we shut the door to reality; we take everything for granted and give up questioning, give up admitting that what we know is possibly no longer true, that our cultural equipment is beginning to be obsolete. For love of comfort, we renounce the labor of skepticism and research. In the extreme case, we become zombies. And what a pity, when things could be different. One of Goya's etchings shows a decrepit old man, and underneath we read the two words *aun aprendo*, "I am still learning". That is intellectual vitality at its best. That is humility.

A similar tendency happens in relationship with others. We can exclude a priori the possibility that others can teach us anything new. Or else we have the choice to recognize that all around us are people who, with their experiences, feelings, and ideas, their dreams and ideals, can enrich our lives - we need only look and listen.

Sometimes we do not know who we are. Being kind helps us find out. Virginia Satir compares our self-worth with a pot: What is it that fills the pot? Food, rubbish, nothing at all? And what do we contain? Security, good memories, intelligence, fine and positive feelings, or shame, guilt and rage? What do we have to offer? In being kind, we are faced with this question, and we are led to discover resources we perhaps did not know we had. Yet they are resources humanity has always possessed, because they are precisely the abilities that have enabled us to evolve: the care of others, communication and collaboration, the sense of belonging, sharing, empathy. If we gather these faculties, our self-image becomes more positive and complete. We may not know it, we may have forgotten it, but it's true: *We are already kind.*