

Strengthening the *KINDNESS* Muscle

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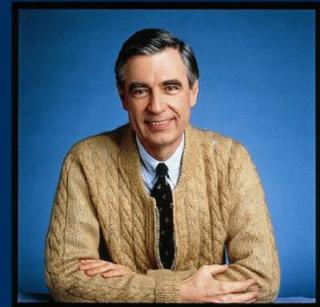
A couple months ago, former PC(USA) Co-Moderator Jan Edmiston wrote a blog article that captured my attention so much so that I tucked it aside. It's titled *Kindness Makes All the Difference*. In it, Jan reflects on a [recent article in The Atlantic](#) that examined the differences between marriages that work and marriages that don't work. Of course, there are many reasons why relationships fail, but research indicates that what often drives the deterioration of many relationships is a **breakdown of kindness**.

This pandemic has certainly made some tempers short(er) and sometimes that shows up in the church. Sadly, I'm aware of some incidences of unkindness within our own Presbytery. Several points made by the Atlantic article can also be said of congregations. Jan lifts up the following thoughts, adapted for our consideration:

- **Do you bring a spirit of kindness and generosity to your congregation** (or committee) **or do you bring a spirit of negativity and hostility?** Do you tend to criticize or are you generous about other's intentions?
- **Do you appreciate each other?** The person who has tirelessly served and never fully valued may feel unseen or become resentful.
- **Are you generous in giving leaders the benefit of the doubt** or are you scanning the room for mistakes others might be making while believing you could have done it better?
- **Do church members feel cared for and validated for their gifts** or are we mostly concerned that they "stay active" and "keep pledging"?

Hmmm, this is good food for thought. The term "acts of kindness" has become a bit cliché but in today's world—where the future feels uncertain and anxieties continue to rise—kindness may make all the difference between a thriving congregation and a dying one. A short time after my husband, Peter, died very suddenly in 2008, I came across a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye titled [Kindness](#). This poem spoke so eloquently and it seemed at the time, so directly to me that even the very first line—*Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things*—still brings a tear to my eye.

*What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness."*



**There are three ways to ultimate success:
The first way is to be kind.
The second way is to be kind.
The third way is to be kind.**

Fred Rogers

Friends, nearly two years into the pandemic, so much of what we have known in the church, what we have counted and carefully saved over the decades, seems to have gone. There are so many changes happening so quickly in this liminal season, we are afraid of the future, of the unknown. *It is only kindness that makes sense anymore.* The Atlantic article describes two ways



to think about kindness. You can think about it as a fixed trait: Either you have it or you don't. Or you could think of kindness as a muscle that can grow stronger in everyone with exercise. A great deal of evidence shows that the more someone receives or witnesses kindness, the more they will be kind themselves, which leads to upward spirals of love and generosity in all relationships. Yes, including the church!

So for my new year's resolution (which I normally eschew), I am committed to (re)strengthening my kindness muscle. I've pinned Nye's poem to my bedroom mirror and will be attentive to opportunities where I can practice kindness and generosity of spirit. Please hold me accountable to this. Perhaps we might even be companions along the way.

Let me start right now with a word of grateful thanks for the unexpected gifts I received at the end of the year from you, my Presbytery colleagues honoring our 20th anniversary of ministry together. The dinner certificate for the Owl House (I highly recommend!) and the certificate from the Little Theatre will be much enjoyed. After this covid surge, of course.

I am deeply honored and truly blessed to be your Transitional Leader/Stated Clerk. May this be a healthy, vital, sustainable new year for one and all!