

FRANCIS W. PARKER CHARTER ESSENTIAL SCHOOL
& THEODORE R. SIZER TEACHERS CENTER

49 Antietam Street, Devens, MA 01434
Telephone (978) 772-3293 Fax (978) 772-3295
www.theparkerschool.org

The Case for Kindness

“Be kinder than necessary because everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle.”

~ J.M. Barrie

I try not to watch the news for hours on end. I will admit that when the pandemic first started, there was a lot to learn and I logged some significant screen time watching the news and keeping up with every bit of information. Now, in our eighth week at home, I find that after looking at the day’s headlines, catching one news hour and reading an article or two, I reach my limit. I like to know the facts without going into information overload.

This week, I happened to see more of the nightly news than usual. In short, the stories were discouraging. I am not referring to increasing numbers of people infected with COVID-19 or the upward-ticking number of tragic deaths, all of which are horrifying. I am reflecting instead on the disturbing behavior of people who have forgotten to be kind, who seem devoid of empathy and who are more connected to cruelty than humanity. Bad behavior is nothing new. But shouldn’t a global pandemic generate a desire for us to be our best selves? Isn’t this a time to grow into who we are as generous beings for the sake of our communities and nation? Since when is screaming into the faces of health care workers acceptable? Since when is shoving a park ranger into water a thing? And most heinous of all, how can a person shoot a store security guard who, while doing his job, simply asked a patron to put on a mask to keep others safe?

I feel a sense of fury about this blatant disregard for others. The pandemic has brought out the best...and the worst in people.

It is both National Nurse Appreciation Week and National Teacher Appreciation Week, and the very thought of that gives me hope. I think of my friends in PPE who are ER nurses, and my friends who are school nurses and contact tracers. I think of amazing teachers working diligently to educate their students remotely. I think of nurses from all over the country who volunteered to help in places where they were most needed. I think of teachers who I know are working weekends and nights without complaint to meet student needs. And then, I think of our community – students, teachers, parents, alumni – who make Parker what it is – a place of decency and trust, and a place of kindness.

People sometimes mistake kindness for weakness. Kindness takes strength because it comes from a place of security, love, and wholeness. Cruelty, on the other hand, comes from a place of deep fragility. As I have said to students many times over, the kids who are kindest in our school are always the ones who feel happy to be who they are. When you feel okay being yourself, you can show kindness and care to others. You have plenty of respect to give. A person screaming in the face of a masked nurse reveals weakness and unmodulated anger. That is the image of an individual who is out of control. By contrast, medical staff stand on the street in silence, knowing

they are warriors about to do battle inside their hospitals. We can aspire to be what they are - steady, focused, undaunted. They are fearless. They are selfless. And they are kind.

Before students arrive at Parker each fall, posters with the above quote, attributed to J.M. Barrie, are placed on hallway walls throughout the school, along with other messages of acceptance, kindness, and diversity. The simple message “be kinder than necessary” asks us to take another person’s perspective and to push ourselves to think of others, even at times when we do not feel like it. We explicitly ask that community members work to develop concern for others even at times when that is a challenge.

Everyone is indeed fighting a battle, and if we think about that for a moment, we spring into action. Students made a Kindness Wall on which people add thoughts in chalk such as “you’re awesome” or “you are loved.” The Random Acts of Kindness community block made a tear-off flyer where acts of kindness were written on tear-off tabs. The flyer states, “In a world where you can be anything, be kind.” If inspired, anyone can tear off a tab and then complete a task. Recipients of an act of kindness might have a door held open, receive a compliment, or a find note of encouragement on their desk.

During home learning, those kindnesses continue. A student who had not been at advisory for a while was welcomed back, no questions asked. At a recent video conference, teachers compassionately told a student to focus on mental health challenges because “then the rest will follow.” A student re-established a friendship that was previously on hold. Another student supported a struggling peer. In a lovely act of kindness for seniors, parent volunteers drove to Class of 2020 graduates’ homes and placed celebratory signs on each lawn.

There is an oft-stated ethos at school: we look out for each other. We ask, what was the intention? What was the impact? We do not always succeed, and mistakes are made along the way, but we work at it with purpose. There is a fierceness to being kind, an intensity that not all people will understand. Those who demean people or enjoy bullying will not get it. But those who understand the steely resolve inherent in kindness will continue onward, quietly making positive contributions to the world. What if the ethos of looking out for each other was universal? I imagine a virtual tear-off flyer with tabs at the bottom. Any one of us can take a tab and complete a random act of kindness:

- ❖ Check on a neighbor.
- ❖ Send someone flowers.
- ❖ Reach out to a friend.
- ❖ Leave a tip for the mail carrier.
- ❖ Assume good intent.
- ❖ Apologize.
- ❖ Order lunch for hospital workers.
- ❖ Call a family member.
- ❖ Clean the bathroom without being asked.
- ❖ Hug someone who lives with you.
- ❖ Ignore the person who cuts you off in traffic.
- ❖ Take a breath before speaking and consider your words.

I plan to try out these ideas, and many more. I am inspired by people who put others first. And from what I can tell by the looks of the community around me, kindness is highly contagious.

My daughter Fiona, home from college, found this poem that speaks to empathy and kindness. It was written by Naomi Shihab Nye in 1995.

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
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.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Sheila Kelly
skelly@theparkerschool.org