

The Possum Experiment and the Choice to Be Good
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Beacon UU Congregation
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When she first moved to LA, Jessica Williamson worked at a pole dancing studio as a receptionist. She shares her story with Ira Glass on the podcast, “This American Life.” The pay wasn’t great at the studio, and she was bored. One day, during a lunch break, she spotted a handmade sign on a telephone pole declaring that a pet had been found over a picture of a cat. Jessica found this curious. Why not just say “Cat Found?”

So, she made her own poster (as you can see on the screen) with “Cat Found” above two pictures of possums that she had printed off the internet. One of the possums looks like he’s crouching, disturbed by the invasive camera lens. And the other possum is downright hissing.

And then the scrawled bullet points: Male, no collar, not very friendly. I think he might be scared. Then, “not housebroken either” with a sad face drawn next to that. And finally, found on Sunset Blvd. If he’s yours, please call, with her actual phone number.

Jessica made about a dozen copies and put them up around her neighborhood. This idea that some hapless, well-meaning person would put up a poster like that, thinking they had a cat, just seemed really funny to her. It was obvious to her that it was a joke. She didn’t expect the calls or for her antidote to boredom to result in a social experiment in kindness.

She recalls, “Within two days, the phone just wouldn’t stop ringing. I had to turn off my phone because it was just constantly, constantly ringing.”

And then she started listening to the voicemails and could sort the calls into three distinct groups. It turns out that the largest group (70% she reckons) were genuinely kindly, just calling to tell her it wasn’t a cat; it was a possum.

Caller 1: I just wanted to call to let you know that the lost animal is a possum, and you should probably call animal control. It could have rabies.

Caller 2: Hello. Kind of a wildlife guy. That’s a real possum and you should release it into the woods. I can help if you want.

Caller 3: That’s a possum and you should get rid of it before it bites you or destroys everything in your house. Anyway, that was nice of you to try to help a poor little soul like that. God Bless.

The second group, approx. 20%, were calling like they were in on the joke.

Caller 4: Hey, you have my cat. His name is Giorgio.

Caller 5: Hey that’s my cat. If he acts out, just thump him in the nose.

So, Jessica had a good laugh and also a sigh of hopefulness about humanity.

But then, there was the 10% of callers who were downright mean. For instance, Caller 6: Yea, that cat? It's a flippin' possum, you idiot.

As she reflected on her unintentional experiment, Jessica realized that she had tended towards cynicism and discovered that people are surprisingly nice. Surprisingly? Sad, isn't it? She concludes that many things in life come down to whether you believe people are nice or not, if they are going to try to do the right thing. She laments, and I concur, that it runs all through our politics and our personal interactions and especially, the digital cesspool of social media.

What do you believe, sitting here today in this Sanctuary of beloved community? Are you a cynic, a realist, an optimist about whether people will choose to be good, whether you choose to good and kind when confronted with an opportunity to be coarse, snarky, or downright mean?

Science loves this quandary. My research for my sermon this morning unearthed a treasure trove of studies about kindness, coarseness, empathy, and whether we are, in fact, born to be mild, and learn to be cruel (the classic nature vs nurture conundrum). I suppose the disclaimer here is underlying and limiting mental illnesses, personality disorders, or some suggest, inherited trauma.

In an article for Smithsonian Magazine, the author Abigail Tucker, lays out a case that "tiny children are some of psychology's most powerful muses. Because they have barely been exposed to the world, with its convoluted cultures and social norms, they represent the raw materials of humanity: who we were when we were born, rather than who we become."

The Yale Infant Cognition Center is particularly interested in one of the most exalted social functions: ethical judgements, and whether babies are hard-wired to make them. It turns out that in a series of simple morality plays, 6-12-month-olds overwhelmingly preferred the good guys to the villains. The conclusion is that this capacity may serve as a foundation for moral thought and action – knowing right from wrong, choosing kindness over cruelty.

Harvard's "Big Mother" study found that small children helped others whether a parent commanded them to help or was even present. In an experiment with two-year-olds, a hapless adult attempted to perform various skills, to no avail, as the toddler looked on. The toddlers gallantly rescued the researcher's dropped spoons and clothespins, stacked his books, and pried open a stubborn cabinet door.

Alas, what happens to us as we age? Life happens, and it isn't always pretty or edifying. How does the kindness impulse get buried under the morass of our ever-coarsening culture? Is the existential reality so often burdensome these days that our moral compass or our grounding in goodness are on the fritz?

The possum experiment says otherwise. It is a microcosm, of course. It could be, though, that 70% of people are kind, in general. That would be hard to assess. But we can go by our own experiences and our own behavior, as a starting point.

It's been fascinating to me to come upon so many articles extolling the power of kindness. Do we need painstaking research to confirm this? Isn't the positive effect of kindness obvious? That kindness, like kale and vitamin D, are healthy aspects of a personality and that callousness is the processed cheese and HoHos on the behavioral buffet? Maybe not to everyone, especially if you tend to lean into cynicism.

A few weeks ago, the New York Times published a piece called "The Unexpected Power of Random Acts of Kindness." The writer Catherine Pearson tells us something surprising from findings in a recent journal - People who perform a random act of kindness tend to underestimate how much the recipient will appreciate it. And the researchers believe that this miscalculation could hold many back from doing nice things for others more often.

Just yesterday, I encountered this poem called "Small Kindnesses" by Danusha Lemèris and it is so lovely I wanted to share it with you. She writes:

"I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead — you first," "I like your hat."

Small kindnesses. They matter, and the notion that kindness can boost well-being is hardly new or even, mysterious. Pro-social behavior — choosing to be good and kind can lower stress levels and improve health. And yet, according to the author of the book, The Kindness Cure, "people desire kindness, yet often feel inconvenienced by the thought

of being kind.” She writes, “Sometimes when the kindness impulse arises, we overthink it.” Do you relate to that? Or perhaps, the opposite – feeling like you are empathic so often, that you have compassion fatigue.

Tomorrow is Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and the gateway into the Days of Awe, 10 days culminating in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement on October 5th. Each year, this Jewish Unitarian minister welcomes the opportunity to join in spirit with the Jewish community to contemplate our transgressions and to restore our right relationship to ourselves, to the Sacred as we understand it, and to one another. It is an ideal pocket of time to reflect on the theme of my service today.

These ten holy days offer an interval when we are meant to wrestle with remorse in a healthy way, lifting oppressive guilt from our hearts through confession and forgiveness. This, ultimately, is an act of self-love, rather than self-loathing.

The Jewish wisdom text, the Talmud, explains that on the eve of Rosh Hashanah (tonight), Yahweh opens three books: one for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous, and one for those in-between. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed in the Book of Life. The completely wicked are immediately inscribed in the Book of Death.

The average, or "in-between person," (a description that likely fits most of us here at Beacon) are kept in suspension until Yom Kippur. We have ten days, known as the Days of Awe, to make amends, to experience *teshuvah*, or turning.

A key passage from "The Gates of Repentance," the Yom Kippur liturgy book explains that “Nature turns instinctively with the seasons, birds migrate and store food for the winter, crops are harvested, buds emerge, leaves fall.”

But, for us humans, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will and a developed character to make us turn. It means breaking old habits. It means taking responsibility for when we have been wrong or have wronged another, when we have chosen coarseness over kindness.

It takes an open heart to make peace, to forgive and be forgiven. It might mean losing face or being humbled and starting all over again. And this is often painful or, minimally, uncomfortable. But it is a gift. Because it means we recognize what is called for and that we have the capacity to change.

My colleague, the Rev. Victoria Safford, tells us: “Imagine that during the Days of Awe, your task was not to patch things up or smooth them over, reach a compromise or even to feel better. The task is ownership. Abandon the pleasant piety that claims knee-jerk forgiveness as the unquestioned moral course. You get to choose the course; you get to choose what will make the world more whole.”

Today and every day, you get to decide whether to choose to be good or to play possum with your heart. Whenever we are confronted with a moment to choose kindness

over indifference or outright cruelty, we discover in our responses whether our better angels showed up for duty that day.

And when they do, in the words of the poet Naomi Shahib Nye,
“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.”

So may it be. Blessed be. Blessed we.
Shana Tova (Happy New Year), and Amen.

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