The Art and Science of Kindness

Jul 11, 2025

Hey everyone,

My sister and I will routinely get into a good giggle about how easy it is to be nice to people and how much that pays off. This week, I am talking about The Good Place, a hotdog stand in Baltimore, horseback riding, and the art of being nice to people.

This may contain: a lot of people just need someone to be kind to them today hand drawn quote

Before I go any further — lets do the housekeeping.

First, if you are not already a subscriber and you resonate with any of the following descriptors, consider joining the cooperative: (1) Early-career professional; (2) Feminist; (3) Do-gooder; (4) Former Gifted Kid; (5) Overachiever; or (6) Capitalism-hater.

Second, if you like what I am saying and it makes you think of someone in your family/office/friend group, send it their way.

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Third, I say some personal and vulnerable shit every week. Say some vulnerable shit back. It’s called a community.

Leave a comment

Okay — back to it.

I started watching The Good Place for the first time last week and there is a scene where Michael, the interdimensional demon/angel/spirit must go down to earth and intervene in the lives of the Humans. (If you haven’t seen The Good Place, this is going to get confusing for a second. Just bear with me.) In order for Michael to go to earth, he must get his travel papers stamped by The Doorman, a gruff bureaucrat. To open the door to the portal, he needs to use a key that The Doorman has put on a frog keychain, which Michael asks about. Through this, we learn that The Doorman just thinks that frogs are pretty neat. Michael take the key, causes chaos in the human world and then returns to The Doorman. With him, he has a Thermos printed with a frog that he gifts to the other man. The Doorman is clearly incredibly excited about this gift and moved by Michael’s actions, and later, when Michael needs help out of a sticky situation, The Doorman helps him out, despite it meaning that he is going against his superiors.

I think that many people don’t realize how simple it is to remember things about people and how much that matters. In fact, I think that Michael went above and beyond in this example. Just smiling at a service worker might open doors for you.

Of course, morally, you should be doing things out of the good of your heart—not because you think it will give you something in return. However, it seems silly to dismiss this part of the equation entirely.

Humans are a species that has long functioned under the influence of reciprocity. Famous Anthropologist, Bronisław Malinowski, documented the Kula Ring in the Triobrand Islands of the South Pacific. In his work, he witnessed complex ritualized giving that featured long term reciprocity and the social networking that would keep several communities safe for hundreds of years. His work is captured in the larger work of Marcel Mauss focused on ancient giving societies.

Hell, even capitalism is built off of this notion.

Being nice is the first gift exchanged in a relationship. Whether it is a smile or holding a door open, you are acknowledging someone else’s humanity. From there, a relationship is born—the results of which, the version of you that smiled could not have guessed at.

Let me share an example that my sister and I often talk about from our own experience: On a family road trip up—or maybe down—the east coast we stopped in Baltimore, Maryland for lunch. For whatever reason, we were all very excited by the idea of hotdogs, so we found a hotdog window next to a bar somewhere in Baltimore. It was incredibly hot that day, and there were only a handful of people at the hotdog place. We preceded to act in a way that was very normal for us when we are on a long road trip and getting progressively more tired of being in each other’s company. We ordered and thanked the woman behind the counter. We probably looked her in the eye when we spoke to her as well. She was flabbergasted by our kindness. She sent us off with free funnel cake and bottles of water to ensure that we were safe on the hot day.

This story actually makes me sad—we did the bare minimum of acknowledging another person’s existence and it was that remarkable to her.

My boyfriend and I had a similar thing happen to us when we were traveling recently. Before we left for Montana, I came across the knowledge that there were horseback rides available just outside of Glacier National Park. I got more excited about this than either of us expected that I would get, and so we booked a trail ride. While we were out on the horses, we made polite conversation with the guide, cracked a few jokes, and navigated one minor mishap. As we were leaving, she told us that we had been the best group she’d had in the last month.

I would say that being this base-level of kind to the people you interact with is common sense, but I think it goes deeper than that. As social creatures, it is literally a survival instinct to forge alliances. How have we societally moved so far away from that?

Dale Carnegie published How to Win Friends and Influence People in 1936. 90 years later, many of his insights remain salient. This social crisis is not caused by social media, though likely it is exacerbated by it. It is something that has had to be said aloud for 100 years — yet it is grounded in our basic animal instincts. By remembering people’s names and looking people in the eye, we are able to build strong allegiances—be them in the ancient village or the modern city. A person with an army of friends and a wealth of influence is going to go places.

All my best,

Zoe