

A CUP OF KINDNESS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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I suppose it's possible to celebrate New Year's Eve without singing "For Auld Lang Syne" at least once or twice. But almost no one does. Written in 1788 by the celebrated Scottish poet Robert Burns, the song's Scots-language idiom is difficult to remember even for people who haven't spent the evening raising their glasses to celebrate the occasion. Besides, almost no one can actually sing the song, and certainly not all verses in the original idiom. Even so, everyone turns to the tune on New Year's Eve.

It's easy to understand why. The song describes the conundrum all of us face at those points of fulcrum when we assess what is past in order to decide what is possible. After many years of each having gone their own way, two friends meet to come to terms with their past. What about those days of long ago? What shall we do for the sake of old times, which is a rough translation of the song's title into an English idiom?

The song indicates that the two were once quite close: We two have waded in the stream from noon till dinner time, one verse says, and we have wandered many a weary foot, another says. There are indications that they have together engaged in what the New Testament calls riotous living: running around hillsides and pulling up daisies. There's a hint of financial falling out: the final verse says, "And surely you will pay for your pint, and surely I will pay for mine!" There's also evidence that the two have spent some years at a great distance from each other, either geographically or emotionally, or both: "Seas between us broad have roared."

The question that remains, given all that is past, is whether — as the song puts it — old acquaintances should be forgotten and never brought to mind. The song's response to this conundrum, which repeats throughout the song as its refrain, is to take a cup of kindness for old times' sake. For the sake of what is past, they take a cup of kindness in the present — not in order to forget the past or ignore it or deny it, but rather to come to terms with their differences and disappointments so they can face the present and the future together.

This is essential work — for all of us. Unless we come to terms with what is past, we cannot fully focus on the challenges of the present and our aspirations for the future. Here on the cusp of a new year, we have individual resolutions to fulfill, whether they have to do with our physical health, our emotional well-being, or our spiritual vitality. As a congregation, we have an operating budget to balance and a capital project to complete. As progressive people of faith, we have sexism, racism, and bigotry to challenge in our culture. As a nation, we have tyrants to confront and global

relationships to rebuild, not to mention the pressing matter of our president, addressing the wrongdoing and rogue-going of our current president and choosing who will occupy the Oval Office in the future.

In order to do this work, we need to come to terms with our own actions and those of others in the past. We need to accept our own shortcomings. We need to work with others who have disappointed us or even opposed us. The approach we should use, which has resounded across the globe for nearly two-and-a-half centuries on New Year's Eve, is to take a cup of kindness.

The type of kindness I have in mind shows up in the title of a novel by the Canadian writer Miriam Toews: *A Complicated Kindness*. Toews grew up Conservative Mennonite, as I did. The novel addresses the quest for individual freedom in a world dominated by orthodoxy — orthodoxy of conviction, orthodoxy of lifestyle, orthodoxy of outlook. The question is how people who are separated by profound differences can live together and work together for the common good.

In the novel, Nomi Nickel is a sixteen-year-old Mennonite girl trapped in a small Mennonite town in western Canada called East Village. For Nomi, who yearns to go to the East Village in New York and hang out with Lou Reed and Marianne Faithfull, the situation is bleak indeed. She quips that “the town office building has a giant filing cabinet full of death certificates that say choked to death on his own anger or suffocated from unexpressed feelings of unhappiness.”

At one point in the novel, Nomi describes a conversation she once had with her typing teacher.

He wanted me to define specifically what it was about the world that I wanted to experience. Smoking, drinking, writhing on the dance floor to the Rolling Stones? Not exactly, I told him, although I did think highly of *Exile On Main Street*. Then what, he kept asking me. Crime, drugs, promiscuity? No, I said, that wasn't it either. I couldn't put my finger on it. I ended up saying stupid stuff like I just want to be myself, I just want to do things without wondering if they're a sin or not. I want to be free. I want to know what it's like to be forgiven by another human being and not have to wait around all my life anxiously wondering if I'm an okay person or not and having to die to find out.

For myself, I found Nomi's story both hilarious and painful. I know the feeling of almost suffocating in the narrow confines of a theological cloister, which is why 35 years ago I left the Mennonite church and headed out on my own. I too wanted freedom. I wanted to be myself. But I discovered that freedom, while necessary, is not sufficient. Freedom is the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint. It doesn't necessarily bring the good things for which we long.

Positive things come to us, ironically, at the largesse of the world and the people around us. But others constrain on our behavior and require us to do certain things. Hence the conundrum: free people need to have a world in which to express their freedom, but the world, with its human population, inevitably constrains freedom.

Toews uses the phrase “a complicated kindness” to describe the challenge of treating people as individuals in a community where individuality is seen as destructive, even demonic. The phrase also has a larger meaning.

The word “kind” has to do with the nature or essence of things. In the creation story in the book of Genesis, we read that God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seeds according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth. And it was so.” The same thing happened with the great fishes, the beasts, and even human beings. Each was created to reproduce after its own kind.

In a world where everything is known by its kind-ness, two forces compete. The first is a centripetal force that tends toward unity. Each member of a kind has at least one trait or quality in common with all the others. This is true not only of trees and bugs, but of other groups as well, like Unitarian Universalists or Americans. We have something in common that makes us a kind. But the second force is a centrifugal force that drives toward diversity. Each member of a kind is a unique instance; its identity is based on its difference from others. This is why kind-ness is complicated.

The presence of these competing forces calls for a complicated kindness as Miriam Toews uses the term: an approach to others that honors what we share and accepts what we do not. What we have in common with others of our kind — whether as mammals, humans, people of faith, Unitarian Universalists, New Yorkers, Americans, or earth dwellers, for example — defines who we are as a community; what we do not share with others of our kind gives us our identity as individuals. This situation requires a complicated kindness: a kindness attuned to complexity.

Instead of grappling with this challenge, most people opt for one of two easier approaches. Some retreat to the shelter of the cloister and insist that everyone think and act the same. Only what we have in common matters; differences should be annihilated. They maintain that there is but one god, one bible, one set of commandments, one nation of destiny, one way to interpret the Constitution, one approach to freedom, one way to live, one way to die, and one way to set the table for dinner. Others insist that kind doesn't matter at all. Everyone is different; when it comes to making decisions about our lives, we might as well have nothing in common.

Neither of these approaches will stop the natural progression of unity into diversity, any more than the sun will stop rising or water will stop flowing downhill. The multiplying of distinctive individuals according to their kind is part of the nature of things. Even so, some kind-challenged souls today are trying. They are feverishly working to stop scientific research, stamp out religious diversity, and deny rights to women and minorities.

We need to ensure that they fail. Our task is to defend the principle of honoring what we as individuals share with our various kinds and taking seriously what we do not. In some cases, we need to accept our differences. In others, we need to challenge our differences, even confront them. This is Unitarian Universalist territory, because it calls for a complicated kindness — a kindness undaunted by complexity. It requires the ability to look at another person and see how deeply we are alike, yet how significantly we are different.

How do we begin this challenging task? By being kind. It's as straightforward as that. The primary meaning of kindness when used as an adjective is sympathy, which means to feel as one. Sympathy is a shared sense between two people, a feeling that whatever affects you affects me.

Near the end of “For Auld Lang Syne,” the two former friends are able to find common ground. “And there is a hand, my trusty friend, and give us a hand of yours.” We will take a cup of kindness yet for old times’ sake.

The key is to look for what you have in common with the people you meet. Treat them with appropriate esteem as one of your kind. What you have in common with them will give you somewhere to begin. Your differences will provide the basis for developing a relationship that may become enlightening, even transformative. This process begins when we treat other people with courtesy, friendliness, and respect. To adapt the line from Genesis, our lives will be fruitful and our rewards will multiply — to each of us, according to our kindness.