

GEORGE SAUNDERS ON KINDNESS • THE WAY OF FREERUNNING • GOING FULL SUPERMAN

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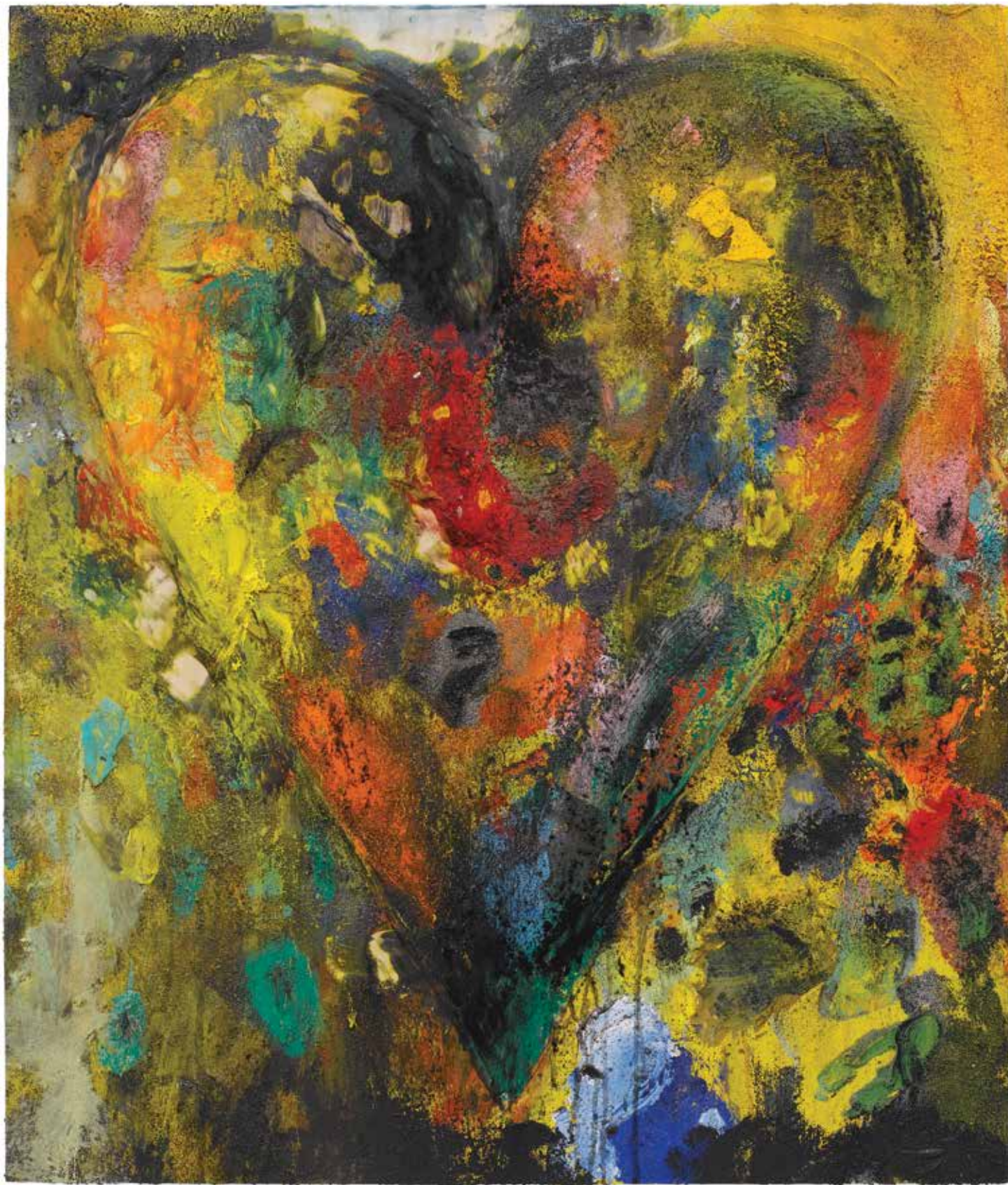
The real problem with

Distraction

It keeps you from enlightenment

JUDY LIEF, THICH NHAT HANH,
SHARON SALZBERG and
JOHN TARRANT offer
Buddhism's deeper take on a
modern obsession





To Sit With Humans Without the Memory, 2010

PHOTO BY KERRY RYAN MCPATE, COURTESY PAGE GALLERY

George Saunders on Kindness

The famed writer talks about a little girl named Ellen, a failure of kindness, and a convocation speech that went viral.

PAINTINGS BY JIM DINE

TRUE STORY: A longtime Western Buddhist was meeting with a famous old lama for the last time. The master beckoned the student to approach. The student came close, figuring he was going to receive the master's pithiest and most secret instruction. The master whispered his final teaching: "Be kind."

Kindness is, with wisdom, the essence of the Buddhist path, and of life itself. Perhaps there is only one thing we long for more than to be treated kindly. It is to be kind people ourselves.

Our deep longing for kindness is reflected in the surprising response to a simple eight-minute convocation speech. It was delivered by the great American writer George Saunders (*Tenth of December*, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, *Pastoralia*) to last year's graduates of Syracuse University, where he teaches. Three months after he gave the speech, a transcript was published on the *New York Times* website, and it went viral.

Saunders told the graduates a simple story: of Ellen, a shy girl in his seventh-grade class, and his failure to be kind to her. His

meditation on such "failures of kindness," and why they're our greatest regret, is now a small, inspiring book entitled *Congratulations, by the way: Some Thoughts on Kindness*.

When I spoke to Saunders, he was shy about his unexpected role as a spokesman for kindness and humble—unnecessarily so—about his Buddhist practice. But in an era when values like kindness and compassion are often put down, he's talking thoughtfully and bravely about what needs to be at the very core of our lives and our society.

—MELVIN MCLEOD



George Saunders giving his convocation speech at Syracuse University.

How did you decide on the theme of kindness for your convocation speech?

I first gave a version of this speech to my daughter's middle-school graduating class. Because I knew and loved those kids, and also didn't want to look like an old fogey, my intention was to be really truthful with them, even at the cost of my own dignity.

First I considered the banalities you would normally use on an occasion like this. But, I thought, these kids are better looking than I am, they're in a better



Advice to Graduates (and all of us)

HERE'S SOMETHING I know to be true, although it's a little corny, and I don't quite know what to do with it:

What I regret most in my life are *failures of kindness*.

Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded... sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly.

Or, to look at it from the other end of the telescope: Who, in your life, do you remember most fondly, with the most undeniable feelings of warmth?

Those who were kindest to you, I bet.

It's a little facile, maybe, and certainly hard to implement, but I'd say, as a goal in life, you could do worse than: *Try to be kinder.* ♦

From Congratulations, by the way: Some Thoughts on Kindness, by George Saunders, published by Random House

school, and they probably won't make the same mistakes I did. So anything I could tell them they'll figure out on their own, and they need to make their own mistakes anyway. The only advantage I had over them was about forty years of living.

When I looked through those forty years, I found I didn't really regret that much. But there was one thing that seemed urgent to say. I wanted to tell them that if I could go back in time, there was one thing I really would change—the times in my life when, because of anxiety or fear, I missed a chance to say a kind word or help somebody out. Scanning the horizon of my life, those were the deeply regretted bumps in the road I wish I could go back and change.

The personal “failure of kindness” you talk about involved Ellen, a girl in your seventh-grade class who was being bullied. You weren't mean to her yourself, but you failed to be kind to her.

Originally, the conceit of the speech was, “What do I remember of being in the seventh grade?” But there really was nothing except this one thing, which stung. When I was a kid, I was a very enthusiastic Catholic, and this was the first time I felt myself fall away from myself. I kind of knew what Jesus would have done in that situation, but in the heat of the moment I thought, “I can't do that. That's too hard.” It's like I was watching myself and was a little disappointed that I had failed in that way.

When the speech went out there, I heard from many people who said, “I knew a girl like that too” or “I had a similar failing in my life.” Maybe we all remember when we first fell away from that pure vision of ourselves, and it sticks in our memory.

If failures of kindness are our greatest regret, is that because being kind is our greatest aspiration, our deepest heart's wish?

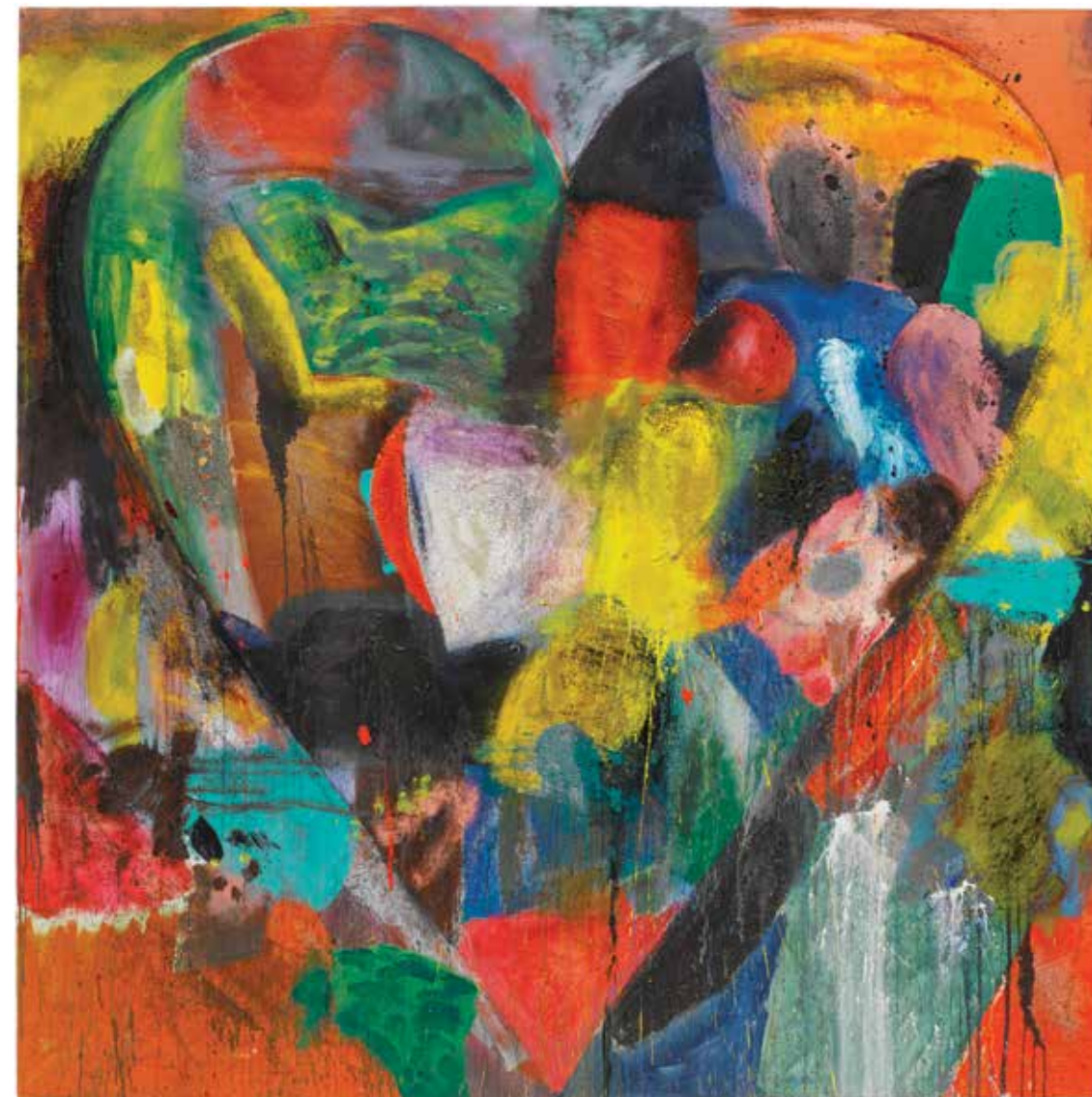
And it's our greatest ecstasy. Those times when the differentiation between yourself and another person vanishes in a kind of spontaneous moment of outreach are deeply, deeply rich.

If you cast your mind toward the people in your life who've been kindest to you, you feel an incredible rush of warmth and gratitude that never goes away. I dedicated this book on kindness to my grandparents, who believed in me no matter what I did. Not for any objective reason, but just because I was me. They knew me inside and out and nevertheless approved of me. I think that creates a kind of gratitude you never forget.

When you're young and have the feeling you're loved, you sort of feel it's the world loving you. The quality of

PHOTO BY DAMON WINTER / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

PHOTO BY KERRY RYAN MCFATE, COURTESY PACE GALLERY



Rosecrucian Interior Scene, with Lemons, 2010

that love gets turned around, and that's how you regard others. So if someone has been kind and generous and selfless to you once, you know the possibility exists. You internalize that, and in your future dealings with the world, you assume that's possible.

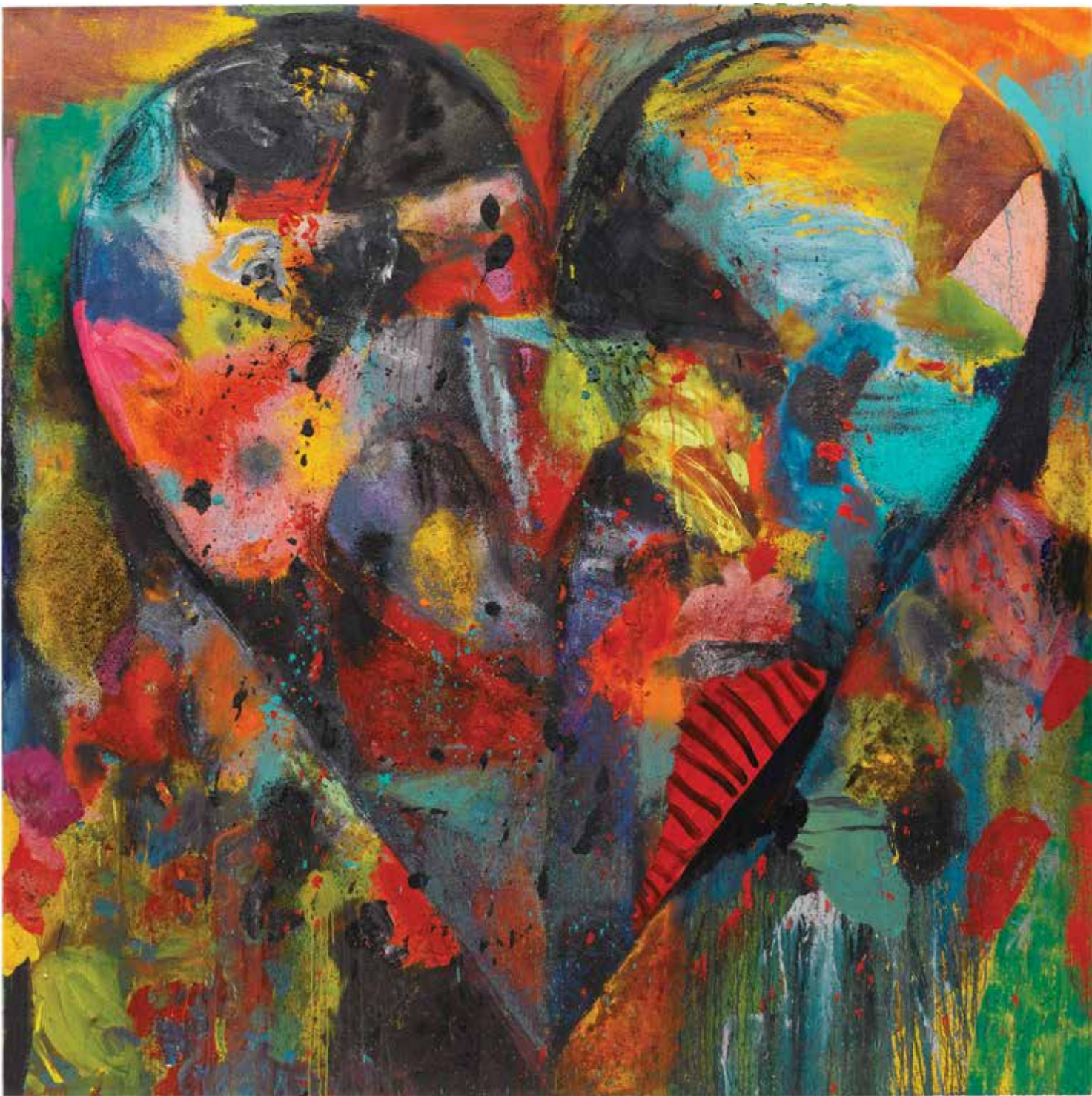
A couple of months after you gave this speech, it went viral on the Internet. What was your reaction?

Surprise, because on the day of the speech it was no big deal. I think about a third of the kids were asleep. It wasn't a sensation. So I was gratified but mystified. I didn't quite understand why it had that effect.

Actually, I was happy the talk was only eight minutes long, because I could tell a story about a failure of kindness and give a little idea of why it happened. If it had been a twenty-minute speech, I'd have been in trouble. At

eight minutes, I could sort of say, *Hey everybody, be kind!* But the next step is real tricky. Let's say we all resolve to be kind—what do we do? That's where the real heavy spiritual lifting starts. How do we know in a given situation what would benefit somebody? How do we know that we're not just being big egotists and intruding when we aren't needed? The more I think about it, the more complicated it is. It's like a trap door opens and you get led to the really deep spiritual questions.

Since the Reagan era, there's been a concerted campaign to denigrate emotions such as kindness and compassion—things Margaret Thatcher called “wet”—and promote more “realistic” values such as strength, competition, and tough-mindedness. Perhaps the response to your speech means people are hungry now for more kindness in their lives and in our society.



I Pray at Sunset for Your Constant Wellness, 2010

PHOTO BY KERRY RYAN MCFATE, COURTESY PACE GALLERY

I think the American psyche right now is a bit like someone who has left their house and left something valuable behind. And even when we do talk about kindness, we do it with a bit of an apologetic wince. Certainly politicians do. But a human being without some kind of striving for kindness is really hobbled. It is hard to know how to live if kindness and sympathy and generosity are considered second-rate virtues. We're kind of not human beings in that case.

It's really invigorating to just say it, you know. I'm a guy from the South Side of Chicago. I've been in a lot of fights in my life and I've done a lot of rough jobs, and I'm not afraid of being considered untough. It's kind of nice to say that these are indispensable virtues and we can't go ahead without them. There's no point.

Maybe it's some kind of blowback from the Reagan era, but when someone talks about kindness, we think of a bearded guy in a turtleneck sweater playing an acoustic guitar and kind of whining. But Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela and all these great people weren't afraid to be quote-unquote weak. Lincoln was willing to be mocked, to take the lower place, to be patient with his enemies. But really he was the strongest person in the room. He could endure a lot of abuse if he knew that in the long run, his acceptance of that abuse would bring about a positive result. His gentleness and compassion and patience were all symptoms of his great strength.

Many people feel that we live in a dangerous world, and we can't afford to let our guard down.

Sometimes people say to me, in general I agree with you about kindness, but what about Hitler, what about terrorists? I think we've been misled—and I see this all the time on the news—by this idea that we always have to be girding our loins for the next big showdown with somebody or other. We act as if the wolf is always at the door, so we've got a gun pointing out the window. But actually the wolf is not that often at the door, so we can afford to go a little easy.

Ninety-nine percent of the time if you just do your best to be kind, you're better off. It's the basic things, like trying to have good manners, keeping your assumptions about the other person a little open, being willing to revise your opinion. And even these are pretty tricky. The times when you're asked to do something about Hitler are pretty few and far between.

I'm fifty-five years old and I've lived in a lot of circumstances, high and low, and I've never gotten into a really extreme situation. When I've come close and had the presence of mind to err on the side of negotiation and humanizing the situation, it's always gone better than when I've tried to steer toward confrontation.

I keep in mind that quote from *The Philadelphia Story*: "The time to make up your mind about other people is

May All Beings Be at Ease!

METTA—KINDNESS OR GOODWILL—is one of Buddhism's most valued virtues. With compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, it is one of the four "divine abodes" (*brahmaviharas*) of the enlightened ones. In the *Metta Sutta*, the Buddha teaches his monks how to live a moral and upright life, with metta at its center. In these stanzas, he tells us how to live with complete kindness.

Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,

The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born,
May all beings be at ease!
Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings:

Radiating kindness over the entire world
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this mindfulness.
This is said to be the sublime abiding. ♦

Translation: Amaravati Sangha

never.” So I try to almost mechanically remind myself of that—to see when my resistance or temper flares up or when I find myself pigeonholing somebody. That would take up most of our life, just to try to do that much.

Perhaps it’s all a self-fulfilled prophecy. We live in an unkind world because we believe it’s an unkind world.

The thing I’ve noticed is that if you go out into the world ready for confrontation, then confrontations find you. But if you go out with a sort of diffusing energy, the world reads that and feels more friendly toward you. So I think there’s a circular effect.

In the media and in our political rhetoric, we’re told don’t be a sucker, be firm, be strong, push back, they’re trying to get you. If you buy into that—even on a molecular level—the world smells it on you. Whereas—and here’s where it sounds corny—the world responds to you differently if you go out thinking, alright, I’m going to pretend that everybody out there is my brother or my sister, and if they are temporarily behaving like they’re not, I’m going to pretend that they’re just confused. I’m going to insist, through my mannerisms and my tone of voice, that I see them at their highest.

I don’t mean to be naïve—there are obviously times when a person has to stand their ground—but I would argue that the best form of standing your ground is to be gentle. It often takes a lot more guts to be gentle than it does to be confrontational.

Is there any connection for you between kindness and writing?

I do a lot of revising—hundreds of iterations—and I will work for years and years on a story. A really wonderful thing happens in that process. In the early drafts, you may create a caricature or a character that you’re looking down on, getting some jokes out of. But the story’s form doesn’t like that. The story’s form doesn’t like condescension or puppeteering, so it responds by being boring. The reader feels it’s a static story, that the writer is holding all the cards and dominating his characters.

As you try to address that in revision, the characters mysteriously become fuller, because as you reconsider them you’re actually loving them more. You’re paying closer attention to them. You’re listening a little more closely, and so the sum total of the story gets funnier, smarter, faster, and the characters come to be more equal to the author.

When you go through this process, you’re making the prose tighter and smarter, but also kinder. You’re looking with a little more genuine curiosity at the character, and you do it through the prose.

For example, you might start off a story with “Jack was a jerk.” But the story says, “That’s a kind of a boring sentence. Can you give me a detail?” Okay, let me revise: “Jack snapped at the waitress.” That’s a little better. But it’s still a bit foggy, so your subconscious might say, “Jack snapped at the waitress because



The Dahlias, The Cherries, The Swiss Chard, 2010

she reminded him of his dead wife.” And suddenly you’ve come a long way in terms of sympathy, from “Jack was a jerk” to “Jack was out of sorts because he was thinking about his dead wife.”

I think that process can sort of train the writer to enact the same procedure with real people. Maybe somebody bumps into you at the airport. Your first impulse is to say, “Asshole.” But because you’ve trained yourself in revision, you say, hmm, let me think about this a second. I wonder why he did that. Then your mind gives you all kinds of reasons because you’ve done it yourself so many times. It’s a good way of training oneself in the flexibility of judgment that we talked about earlier.

To what extent was your speech inspired by your Buddhist practice, or was it simply a reflection of who you are as a human being?

Hard to distinguish between the two, I guess. I’m really a beginner, but I do try to keep my ears open, and that was a place where my actual experience and the tenets of Buddhism suddenly came together.

In my writing work, I’ve noticed that if you do anything with real intensity, and with a real interest in the truth of the matter, then it ends up being dharmic somehow. Whether it’s basketball or photography or whatever, if you’re really, really interested in



the truth, then you’ll end up with something that looks and feels very much like dharma, it seems to me.

Yet you do offer some specific Buddhist analysis. You told the students that we fail to be kind because of three fundamental misunderstandings about who we are: we believe that we’re the center of the universe, that we’re separate from the universe, and that we’re permanent. These are classic Buddhist definitions of ego.

When I thought about me and this little girl in the seventh grade, I turned my mind to what was wrong with me, to what was my problem. I think the answer is that, at that age, I believed so strongly in my own separateness from her, my own primacy, and in protecting my own status that I wasn’t able to make the right move. And those are dharma principles.

Originally I had laden this section with some Buddhist terms, but my wife said I should take them out. She said I shouldn’t make it seem overthought or dogmatic. And of course, the dharmic ideas are so beautiful and pure that anyone who had lived and experienced these things would see the basic truth of them. Because for me, that’s what dharma is—really, really trying to get to the bottom of this with no deflection and no confusion and no agenda.



This points to one of Buddhism’s great strengths. It doesn’t simply tell us to be kind. It shows us in concrete terms why we’re not, which gives us a path forward.

That to me is the most wonderful thing about any vital spiritual practice. It doesn’t necessarily say, stop doing that. Or if it does, it says, here’s how to stop doing that. Because you can only get so good with sheer willpower. You have to look into the way things actually work to empower yourself to do better.

Here is a wonderful metaphor I sometimes use with my students. Imagine you’re on a cruise ship in heavy seas. You’re the only person who’s stable, and everybody else is moving around in a crazy way. You decide to have mercy on them, and that’s pretty good, right?

But I think a better model is to imagine you’re on a cruise ship, and the surface is made of ice, and you’re carrying six trays, and you’re wearing roller skates, and you’re drunk. And so is everybody else.

So nobody’s the boss and the situation is unstable. There’s no fixed point. When I think of life that way, it sums up the proper level of mercy and tolerance. We really don’t know what’s going on, so our feeling of sympathy or empathy is related to our mutual lostness. Everybody’s lost at once. ♦

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