



A Quarterly e-Journal of the Open Path / Sufi Way

FALL 2019

IN THIS ISSUE: Essays by Pir Elias, Jeanne Rana, Erica Witt, Carol Barrow, and Viv Quillin; Poetry by Umtul Valeton-Kiekens and Sharif Stannard



Dear Friends,

This issue we consider acts of kindness. Jeanne Rana opens her piece reminding us of a phrase from decades ago: “random acts of kindness and senseless beauty.” I remember a small book by that name that lived by my reading chair for years. I think I had a tee shirt emblazoned with the phrase, too. It led me to drop quarters in parking meters that were turning red, and other little friendly acts. The book changed my life.

The prose contributions on kindness come from Pir Elias, Jeanne Rana, Erica Witt, Carol Barrow, and Viv Quillin. We have poems from Umtul Valeton-Kiekens and Sharif Stannard.

Thanks to all who write for us! Please consider doing so for future issues. We always wonder if we'll have enough material. The theme for the Winter Solstice issue is **Paying Attention**. For Spring, let's consider **Grieving**.

I look forward to reading your writing. It inspires me.

With love for each one of you,
Amrita

editor, *Fresh Rain*: freshrain@sufiway.org



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To Remember

by Pir Elias

To remember I exist in this very moment by the grace of countless acts of kindness, tells me one thing.

To remember how my mother helped me up into her lap so I could watch her write a letter and ask what those squiggles were that she was making with her pen, tells me one thing.

To remember my father handing me the paintbrush he was using and saying, "You try," tells me one thing.

To remember the neighbor woman rushing out of her house to hold a towel to my bleeding head after I fell from my bike, tells me one thing.

To remember the farmer who taught me how to drive a tractor so I wouldn't always have to walk behind lifting hay bales onto the wagon, tells me one thing.

To remember my teacher's steady gaze into my eyes, tells me one thing.

To remember my wife's forgiveness for some selfish act of mine, tells me one thing.

To remember a line of praying Muslim men moving aside so I could pray beside them, tells me one thing.

To remember a friend who put his hand on my shoulder when he saw my eyes were full of tears, tells me one thing.

To remember you, whoever you are, reading these words slowly, trying to understand, tells me one thing.

Be kind.



Random Acts of Kindness

by Jeanne Rana

Practice random acts of kindness and senseless beauty.
That was the phrase.

I was teaching American literature and history to sixteen-year-olds in Rancho Cucamonga, California. It was the '80s. We were reading *Catcher in the Rye*. All the boys in my class believed that they were Holden Caulfield, totally disaffected, disengaged. They agreed with Holden: all adults were phonies. The classroom atmosphere turned darker by the day. I of course was the resident adult, the perfect example of phony.

At the same time, "random acts of kindness" was circulating in my head. I don't know where I had first come upon it; perhaps I had a tee shirt with the phrase. After a particularly grim day with Holden and the boys, I realized I needed an intervention.

Assignment: You are to practice a random act of kindness or senseless beauty this week. It can be spontaneous or planned. Here are some possible acts: paying the movie ticket for the next person in line at the theater; spending an hour patiently listening to a relative tell his stories (again); washing all the dishes in the sink, drying them and putting them away (this doesn't count if it is your chore); helping a child or an old person cross a street; mowing the lawn without being asked; putting the desks in this classroom back in rows after we have finished this circle talk; leaving an apple on your favorite teacher's desk; telling your mother she made a great dinner, and that you appreciate all she does for you. Senseless beauty you will have to figure out for yourselves. Be creative.

You can imagine the response. We separated into pairs, so that everyone could have a chance to explain why this was so... phony. After a while, I told everyone that next Monday in class, they would write a paragraph about what they had done, what was the response of the person receiving this random act, and how they themselves felt about it after the fact. I admitted that I would never know if they faked the whole assignment, wrote something "phony." They would be graded on the completion of the task, not on their writing.

There was sulking; there was hostility; there was incipient rebellion. I gave my saintly smile to it all and waited. By Friday, a few students came to me with the question "Does this (their idea) count as a random act of kindness?" "Yes, if you think it does."

On Monday we wrote. And then we talked. Some students had done more than one act. Some students realized this had been a worthwhile assignment. The mood in the classroom became one of sympathy and caring. Perhaps some students had lied and done nothing. Everyone was satisfied.

It was a sweet day for us all.



Acts of Kindness

The Fresh Rain “chilla” that I took on holiday with me to Cornwall

by Erica Witt

I watched many acts of kindness as Amin and I wandered from place to place in fair wind and foul on our recent holiday in Cornwall—my own, Amin’s, the general populace. Moments of generosity, openness, spontaneity, kindness, help when needed, offered with a smile. Stomps and rants and mini-barbarisms when we forgot: steep terrain, crowded pathways, long queues, sudden downpours, aging bodies, fading minds.

One place we visited was Tintagel, mecca for Arthurian kitsch, but also a place of strange and magical beauty. English Heritage has just opened an elegant new cantilevered footbridge over a rocky chasm forty feet above the sea to an island fortress, long gone but not forgotten, itself a marvel of engineering. People have been flocking here by the hundreds daily in the past weeks since the bridge opened, navigating perilous pathways and terrifying cliffs to explore the ruins, reach out in their imaginations. School term had started so it was the old, the young parents, and the very young, the agile, the middling and the stubbornly still-adventurous-but-shouldn’t be doing-this, like me! We smiled, we commiserated, we helped one another along, we tried not to be patronizing, we looked out for one another’s belongings, mobile phones, and children as we went, joking, swapping life stories, borrowing body parts as we climbed up and down, trying to remember the needs, also, of a fragile terrain. Kindness and curiosity in abundance. How do we manage as a civilization to survive, expand, travel, communicate, touch minds and hearts? Kindness is certainly one of our strategies, either innate or evolved or just at our threshold in the moment: heart connections.

Of course it is relatively easy to act kindly when the sun is shining and we are all out together on an adventure. No one, thankfully, mentioned the war, the Blitz or Brexit. What acts of kindness must be needed to operate in a subterranean hospital in worn-torn Idlib in despot-ruled Syria while foreign powers destroy? Or to maintain some perspective as an MP in a faction ridden parliament while media glare and vultures circle and “democracy” takes a beating?

And then there are Acts of Kindness on a domestic scale, between friends, family, lovers, partners to be noticed, appreciated and loved, or missed and ignored and taken for granted, depending on the weather!

And Acts of Kindness to oneself. That, I found, is where I came unstuck, time and again. Not noticing myself, my needs, my moods, my seemingly inbuilt belief systems of selfishness. Or my heart openings of warmth, gratitude and longing when I allowed myself in to my inner world of kindness, and soothed my age-old bruises. The heart is a strange and magical place, I decided. It opens and closes rhythmically and reliably, or so we hope. It holds our inner world and it responds also to our outer world. Acts of Kindness travel the footbridge, over the tides and between the worlds and the weather, giving and taking in a language of their own.

So, thank you Amrita and the Fresh Rain team, for many moments of insight and reflection and conversation on our holiday. Thank you Amin and thank you, me, and thank you to the many acts of kindness, observed, experienced, the many half-formulated thoughts about life, religion, politics, community and the planet. Please add your own heart connections.



Acts of Kindness

by Carol Barrow

A friend and I recently created a chilla for ourselves. In case you aren't familiar with chillas, they are, as the Living Sufism website describes, "unusual tasks or out-of-the-ordinary challenges that have the power to disrupt routines and reveal unexpected insight and transformation."

This self-chilla instructed each of us to ask someone for something once a week for four weeks. Some options would be to request time with another person, to ask to be listened to, or to solicit help. It's been fun to have a friend with whom I can debrief my chilla. That support is an act of kindness that I receive.

As I write this, we are in week four of the chilla. Here is a short list of what I have noticed so far:

- I ask for help from others much more often than I had realized—and that creates a lot of opportunities for receiving acts of kindness! Requesting seemingly small things such as, "On your way home, would you please stop and pick up the photos I had printed?" or "Could we have a table near the window?" usually happens without much thought. This chilla has shined a light on the generous and seamless acts of asking/giving/receiving that happen almost every day.
- People like to offer kindness beyond my expectations. When I asked a friend if she would go shopping with me, she took on the role of my personal

shopper, bringing me, a person who generally wears black or blue, a rainbow of colored shirts and pants. Afterward, I told her that what she did was such a wonderful act of kindness. She told me that she had fun and loved doing it. It appears that I may have offered her an act of kindness through my request!

- Acts of kindness don't have to come from others. One week, I decided to ask myself for help. I had tasks I had been putting off, so I wrote a note asking myself to please do the tasks the next day. Then I answered, writing back that I would be happy to meet that request. I signed and dated the note. The following day, I had a great time cleaning my laundry room and cutting branches as a gift for the wonderful person who asked for that!
- When giving and receiving with an open heart, kindness and generosity flow, and the identity of giver or receiver disappears.

I now see that chilla is an act of kindness. It is a loving voice saying, "Try this, dear one. Try shifting your gaze just a little. You may be able to see that you are freer than you think."



Kindness and Me

by Viv Quillan

I'm offering this account of my changing relationship with kindness in the hope that it might affirm or expand your own explorations.

As a small child I was told by my father that, "Giving is not worth anything unless it hurts a little." This, possibly well-intentioned instruction, set me firmly on a path of depleting self-sacrifice, helped by cultural messages such as, "It is better to give than to receive."

There was a powerful element of self-interest for me. In return for my giving to others was the unspoken hope that I too would receive kindness and love. I also wanted to earn merit points with the particular form of god that I had created. This god was surely going to give me lots of happiness in this life, or the next, when "He" judged that I'd dished out a sufficient amount of kindness.

As I grew into adulthood, volunteering to help my mother with the chores or lending my sister a favourite cardigan, became always putting my husband's and children's wants before mine. All this was done in the hope of getting something back from people or a higher power. Most of the deeds were carried out with very little joy. Rarely did I get the amount of appreciation that I wanted, if at all.

Although genuinely wishing my children to have the experience of a kind and loving mother, I didn't know that I was trying to nourish them from a pretty empty larder.

During several years of psychotherapy, I gradually learned how to be kind to *myself*. It was a painful and enriching journey, facing shame and guilt when I was kind to myself, and then grief about how little kindness had been available from humans in my early life. Ironically, like many others who had been starved in this way, in later life I often pushed away kindness if it came my way. Unfamiliarity, fear, and suspicion made me doubt why anyone would want to be kind to me.

It seems to me that as I've gradually allowed myself to receive acts of kindness from myself and others, in equal measure, I've overflowed with this abundance and cannot help but share it around. Here's a small example: On holiday for a week with some of my family, my nine-year-old grandson says, "Grandma, will you play Hero Quest with me?" Hero Quest is like Monopoly only with more fighting and more complicated.



I feel angry and want to complain that I've played it with him earlier and his grandad had a game with him too so he shouldn't want more. When I decide to be kind to *me*, I'm able to say, "Sweetie, I'm tired so I'm going to take a rest from Hero Quest and have a nap on the sofa." I've managed not to make him into a bad person for wanting to play H.Q. for hours. Amazingly, he cheerfully says that he's going to make up a version that he can play on his own. It's so nice being kind to us both!

After a very short rest, I want to play with him because he's a lovely little boy and I don't see him very often. In fact, the thing that I most want to do is to enjoy his passion as he patiently explains this incomprehensible game to me. Plus, he laughs at my jokes. So we play again and this is an act of kindness to myself as well as to him.

At the moment, acts of self-kindness seem most frequently to include reminding myself *kindly* (oh, that's such fun!) to take physical rests—which can be from two to five minutes—having a sit down and letting my muscles take a breather. Sometimes it's a half-hour nap or reading my book. These rests also remind me that life is not just an endless stream of stuff to be got through.

Emotional self-kindness is most often in the form of forgiving myself and allowing me feelings of anger, disappointment, fear or humiliation. Being kind to myself because these feelings jolly well hurt, without having to build a story about *who did what*.

Most commonly, I feel hurt by what someone else "did to me" and, after being kind to myself by allowing the feelings that arise, I can often let it go and move on, with goodwill restored. If not, I get more forgiveness and kindness from me!

It seems to me that as I gradually drop "acts of kindness" which are done in order to gain something, I'm finding a delicious form of kindness that pours out from my own natural store. As I grow more open to receiving the kindness of Life Itself, sunlight, breath, a dandelion squeezing out of a crack in the pavement, this too can flow through me and spread out in the world.

On the grim days when everything seems joyless, my poor old self needs all the kindness that I can muster. It comforts me that, although I may feel isolated and depressed, I'm not alone because many others are in this place at this time with me.

I wish you all tons of kindness to yourselves and may it overflow into the rest of our dear, crumbly, flawed and beautiful world.

Living Kindness

Be kind
Here and now
Where my Friend greets me.

Be kind
To myself
Not to me? Then who?

Be kind
To strangers
Life's great tapestry.

Be kind
Welcoming
No need to exclude.

Be kind
To nature
My one given home.

Be kind
To creatures
Companions in life.

Be kind
Let it flow
And see it return.

Be kind
Walk gently
Have a peaceful heart.



Note: This style of poem is called Dekaz and is similar to haiku. It is three lines: the first is two syllables, the second is three and the third is five. It is meant to be read aloud, not silently. It was taught to some of us by Jeanne Rana, for which we are all grateful.

Sharif Stannard
August 2019

An act of ultimate kindness

All of a sudden,
We knew not
That this was how it had to be
You were alive and kicking
Walking our walks together
Kicking pinecones along the way.

All of a sudden,
You did show some weariness
Ahhh are you getting on now
Not that old are you?
Yet walking our walks together
Alive and kicking,
Pinecones along the way.

All of a sudden,
However, there was this weariness
No food, no drinks
Hardly any coming along for walks
Next day however
Kicking pinecones as ever.

All of a sudden,
there was this bad tiding,
Only a few days more...
How brave you must have been,
Coming along and along and
along!

All of a sudden,
We did everything you enjoyed so much
Inclusive of extensive hugs and cuddles

A last time of that forest lane
A last kick at a pinecone
A last visit to the beach
Kicking a ball for only a bit.

All of a sudden,
A last supper of your favorite food,
A last visit and hugs of dear ones
And then ahhh the vet came to our house,
—You greeted her with your welcoming tail—
After a little while you gave your last breath.

We offered this sad deed to you
as an act of ultimate kindness...
Our dearest, beloved Sophie
Ya Qayum, ya Qayum, ya Qayum

—Umtul Valeton-Kiekens



Upcoming Programs 2019-20



THE OPEN PATH: Recognizing Nondual Awareness
 Six-Month Training in Nondual Realization with Pir Elias
 Still Meadow Retreat Center
 Damascus, Oregon, USA
Seminar II: October 4 – 7, 2019



ENTERING into SILENCE
 A Sufi Walking Retreat in the Moroccan Desert
 with Karim Noverraz and Elmer Koole
February 23 – March 3, 2020



Sufism and the Art of Loving
 A Series of Ten Saturday Evening Gatherings
 with Kiran Rana and Jeanne Rana
 Berkeley, California
March 30 – December 8, 2019



BEING MORTAL
 The Grace of Living, Aging, and Dying
 A Four-Day Retreat with Pir Elias Amidon
 Aldermarsh Retreat Center,
 Whidbey Island, Washington
April 23 – 26, 2020



Love and Nonduality
 Practices of the Awakened Heart
 Advanced Open Path Retreat with Pir Elias
 Buckland Hall, Brecon, Wales, UK
October 13 – 18, 2019



BEING MORTAL
 The Grace of Living, Aging, and Dying
 A Five-Day Retreat with Pir Elias Amidon
 Poulstone Court Retreat Center, Herefordshire, UK
May 23 – 27, 2020



The Nondual Heart of Sufism
 An experiential weekend workshop
 with Pir Elias
 Soefi-Huis, Haarlem, Netherlands
October 19 – 20, 2019



BEING MORTAL
 The Grace of Living, Aging, and Dying
 A Four-Day Retreat with Pir Elias Amidon
 Himmelreich Retreat Center, Lindau, Germany
September 16 – 20, 2020

