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Address of Senator Strom Thurmond at meeting of Senate Prayer Group, 1958 March 19

Strom Thurmond

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ADDRESS OF SENATOR STROM THURMOND AT MEETING OF SENATE PRAYER GROUP, MARCH 19, 1958.

The Most Under-Rated Quality

According to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me. GENESIS 21:23

The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee. ISAIAH 44:10

Now therefore, I pray you, swear unto me by the Lord, since I have shewed you kindness, that ye will also shew kindness unto my father's house and give me a true token. JOSHUA 2:12

Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another. ROMANS 12:10

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge;

And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness;

And to godliness brotherly kindliness ... II PETER 5-7

See that none of you pays back evil for evil, but always aim at what is kind to one another. I THESSALONIANS 5:15

Be ye kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. EPHESIANS 4:32

The other day I heard of a store that featured a sign which read: "Everyone likes to hear a kind word." It made me think of all the kind people I know, people who make it a habit of being pleasant and thoughtful. They are the sort of folks we like to be around. They help to take the sting out of life and give us a lift when the going gets rough. It was expressed like
this by a distinguished lady of a troubled nation:

"Life is mostly froth and bubble,
Two things stand like stone -
Kindness in another's trouble
Courage in our own."

The quality of kindness is a humble characteristic. After all, we usually think, anybody can be kind. It may require an unusually strong character to be distinguished for bravery, or to be absolutely incorruptible, or to persevere through trying conditions. We rate bravery, honesty, perseverance high on the list of admirable qualities, but kindness is often taken for granted.

Dr. William Lyon Phelps was a joyous person always radiating cheer. He realized that even though a person might feel kindly toward another, some act was required to communicate this feeling. It could not be taken for granted that another would automatically know that you felt kindly. I believe he had this in mind when he said:

"I never go into a hotel or a barbershop or a store without saying something agreeable to everyone I meet. I try to say something that treats them as an individual -- not merely a cog in a machine .... I will ask a barber if he doesn't get tired standing on his feet all day. I'll ask him how he came to take up barbering -- how long he has been at it and how many heads of hair he has cut. I'll help him figure it out. I find that taking an interest in people makes them beam with pleasure ....

"What people want ... is a little attention as human beings. When I meet a man on the street with a beautiful dog, I always comment on the dog's beauty. As I walk on and glance back over my shoulder, I frequently see the man petting and admiring the dog. My appreciation has renewed his appreciation."

In the dictionary the word "kind" means two distinctly different things. In the literal sense, the word "kind" means
merely having the natural feelings that befit our common nature. In this narrow sense, human beings are "kind" to each other because we are all the same "kind" of animal.

All it takes to be "kind", if we accept this definition, is to refrain from being cruel. This is not the true quality of kindness, but even this passive negative sort must do an untold amount of good for this world of ours.

I am sure that there must be times when even the meanest person in the world must bite his tongue and refrain from making some cruel remark that is on his mind. And if each individual practices this restraint just once a day -- well, there are 170,000,000 cruel statements withheld in the United States alone.

And when we come to the active sort of kindness, where the individual goes out of his way, even if only a little bit, to be kind, we find that it is a magic elixir indeed. It takes only a few words to brighten a whole life.

I am reminded of a little poem by Emily Dickinson:

"If I can stop one heart from breaking,  
I shall not live in vain;  
If I can ease one life the aching,  
Or cool one pain,  
Or help one fainting robin unto his nest again,  
I shall not live in vain."

And so it goes. We can hardly conceive of the miracles that can be wrought by a kind word expressed at the proper moment.

The late H. L. Mencken was inclined to scoff at religion, so perhaps it is not altogether appropriate to quote him here. But I think he put the essence of simple kindness down very effectively when he wrote that those who wished to honor his memory would please his ghost if they would "forgive some sinner
and wink at a homely girl." I am not recommending that we leave this meeting and go about winking at homely girls, as some of us might be misunderstood. But you see the point, I am sure. If a wink, a friendly word, or an unexpected compliment will brighten someone's day, then, by all means, it is worth the trouble.

It occurs to me that one such friendly word may well start a chain reaction that will spread good cheer all over a wide area. Your pat on the back may make somebody feel good. If it does, that person will be inclined to practice more simple kindness in his contacts throughout the day. Kindness is contagious. Once you start it rolling, there is no telling where the beneficial epidemic will stop.

Kindness acts not only on the receiver, but the giver also. It can transform the person, and give a sense of serenity and well-being that no selfish accomplishment can give. I am reminded of a story about Thomas Jefferson. One day, as he was horseback riding with a group of younger friends, the party came to a swollen stream. On the bank sat a poor man looking ruefully at the raging flood he was unable to cross. The man watched the others ford the stream on their horses, but said nothing to them. Last came Jefferson. The man, not recognizing him as President, asked if he might mount behind him and cross the stream. Jefferson cheerfully took him across. On the opposite side, someone asked the man why he had not requested the service of one of the other members of the party. He replied, "There are some faces on which is clearly written the answer 'No' to a question you intend to ask. There are other faces on which is
written 'Yes'. On their faces was written 'No'. On his 'Yes'. "This man experienced kindness.

Psychology is a relatively new science. The psychologists are just now establishing some of the fundamental facts about the working of the human brain. And one of the things they are learning is that kindness can have a genuine, measurable therapeutic value in the treatment of mental disorders.

One of the most damaging things that can happen to a person's mind is loss of confidence. The man who is convinced that he will never succeed is almost invariably a true prophet. He is doomed to failure before he begins.

In extreme cases, the defeatist requires the services of a psychologist or a psychoanalyst to find his way out of the gloom. But one does not need to have a degree in psychology to help in restoring confidence. In some cases, it takes only a little push to get the wheel of confidence off dead center.

Jesus was one who went about restoring confidence and self-respect in people who had lost all zest for living. Jesus saw beneath the rough exteriors of crude fishermen to their finer selves and helped to bring them out. He looked with tenderness and compassion, not condemnation, upon fallen women and caused them to want to be better. A grafting tax collector, Zacchaeus, caught from Him a glimpse of what he might become and restored what he had taken unjustly. Wherever Jesus went, His faith in men inspired them to have faith in themselves.

General Gordon one day noticed a lizard climbing up the side of his house in the sunshine. Without thinking, he flicked it with his cane and so cut short its life. Then the thought struck
him that he had carelessly cut short a life of more meager capacity than his own and much shorter in its span. The idea haunted him. He saw, with true insight, that the strong have obligations toward the weak. God thinks kindly of us because in comparison with the richness of His life our lives are poor and stunted. In the same way we should have infinite pity for everything and every one less richly endowed than ourselves.

"Great persons are able to do great kindesses," Don Quixote remarked -- meaning that they are in a position to render great service. Kindness done for the sake of a reputation is false kindness. The proper reward for kindness comes from within the heart of the giver.

I said earlier that the world would be a much better place if every individual performed one passive act of kindness a day -- if he simply refrained, in one instance, from being cruel or mean when he had that impulse.

If you will accept that statement, think what would happen if every individual resolved to do one completely unselfish act every day, or, as the Boy Scouts put it, to do a "good turn" every day.

Such a program, for most of us, would have to begin on a small scale. We might find no bigger opportunity for unselfish kindness than to offer directions to a confused tourist in the Capitol building. The exercise of unselfish kindness is like every other kind of exercise. It is necessary to begin in a small way and work up gradually to the point where proficiency begins. The novice at weight-lifting does not begin with the hundred-pound weights, and the person who is not in the habit
of being kind does not fall into the habit overnight.

How many of us show a real interest in others' lives aside from our natural curiosity? Our failing is clearly pointed up in a story I once heard about a good woman named Elizabeth Fry. One day Elizabeth visited Newgate prison in London where the women were packed in one room like cattle, without the slightest attention to sanitation. She became much interested in a girl who had committed a terrible crime. One of the London ladies engaged in philanthropic work asked her what crime the girl had committed. "I do not know," Elizabeth replied, "I never asked her." How different was she from most people? The thing most people are chiefly interested in, in others, is their shortcoming or sin; the thing that interests them least is their opportunity to love them. All that Elizabeth Fry wanted to know, was that this poor unfortunate had made a mistake, and that she needed love and help — kindness.

I could say something here about how good it makes a man feel to perform a kindness, or a service, to humanity, which it does; however, I prefer not to, because I have been stressing unselfish kindness. It is a contradiction in terms to perform an unselfish act in order to feel good about it, although such a good feeling is bound to result. Kindness should be directed at making somebody else feel good.

So let us not think about the rewards, even if a certain inner reward is inevitable and inescapable. Let us think about the good we can render to our fellow man.

Truly, there is no limit to the amount of good which can be accomplished by this simple yet noble and inspiring quality of
kindness. It is kindness, as much as any other characteristic, that distinguishes man from the lower animals, and the gentleman from the ordinary person. It is kindness that lifts a man up when he is weary and discouraged; it is kindness that provides the medium for fellowship; it is kindness that draws neighbors together.

Kindness, in time of trouble, makes trouble more tolerable. Kindness imparts grace to the most routine business transaction. As a poet has said, kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound together.

Because it is such a simple and humble quality, one that can be expressed so easily by anyone who takes the pains to do so, kindness has a rare power and is the most under-rated of all human traits.

I wish that we could all be "great persons", in Don Quixote's phrase, and perform "great kindnesses."

But it will suffice if we will follow James M. Barrie's admonition: "Always try to be a little kinder than necessary."

It would also be well to remember what a great man once said: "I shall pass through this world but once. If, therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do, let me do it now; let me not defer it nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

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