

*Kindness is an inner desire that makes us want to do good things even if we do not get anything in return. It is the joy of our life to do them. When we do good things from this inner desire, there is kindness in everything we think, say, want and do.* ~ Emmanuel Swedenborg

Several years ago, my best friend died of Aids. She had discovered her diagnosis days before her husband died of Aids. At that time back in the late 80's, no-one suspected that he had Aids and it was only when he was inexplicably unconscious and near death that they finally tested him, and then Linda.

For many years Linda was too afraid of people's judgments to tell anyone that she had Aids - even her own family. Her husband, a successful foreign journalist, never knew he had passed on the dreaded virus to his young bride. Linda believed he had contracted the disease while on assignment in another country where he had needed a blood transfusion, but she could never be sure.

Linda had plenty of reason for bitterness, to die at 32 after years of illness and loss, all her dreams of family, children and a career shattered in her 20's. However, she used her suffering to bring awareness to the world of the plight of women and Aids, by talking at national and international conferences about her experience, testifying to the senate, and starting the first groups for Women with Aids in the country. She grew in awareness and love as each year passed. The last words she managed to utter before she died were, "Be kind, be very kind." For many of us who loved her, it became a mantra - one we have returned to many times at various stages in our own life journey. It has been a mantra that has grown in meaning, taking on greater depth of insight as the years have passed.

The first time I remember knowing that, what I thought of as the quality of kindness in myself was not kindness at all, was when I was thirteen and working as a volunteer in the Salisbury General Hospital in Rhodesia. A patient was grumbling that the milk she got with her lunch was warm. I went down to the kitchen through the labyrinth of passages and corridors of the vast hospital to fetch her a glass of ice-cold milk. I believed I was being very kind and had that self-satisfied feeling that I was a good person.

I returned to the ward and took it to her expecting her to be grateful. She looked at me and said irritably "I don't feel like milk, now," and turned her head from me. I was most put out! I grumbled to the Sister-in-charge about how "bad tempered," she was. The sister looked at me and said, "Young lady, I want you to assist me with changing dressings at 2.00 pm." At 2.00 I dutifully went with her to the bedside of this particular patient and she started uncovering the woman's dressing. She had a twelve inch incision down the center of her stomach that had gone gangrenous and was nothing other than an open suppurating and foul smelling wound. The smell of decay and cancer rose up to my nostrils. The woman was groaning in agony. I felt myself getting light-headed and wanting to vomit. I asked to be excused.

The sister snapped at me, "You stay right here and pull yourself together - this is not about you, this is about helping someone else." I pulled myself together as tears of shame and tears of

compassion rolled down my cheeks. When we were done the woman was crying and saying there was a crease in the sheets under her back that was burning - could we try to straighten it? Every movement resulted in agonizing pain for her. We managed it and she thanked us and fell into an unconscious sleep, exhausted by pain and helped by a shot of morphine.

My heart filled with compassion. I understood where her irritability came from. I knew it was because of her pain and had nothing to do with me. I knew she was a good woman dying in terrible pain. I fetched her cold milk every day until she died, not long after this experience. She never drank it. But she thanked me.

I no longer needed her thanks. I did it because I cared for her and needed nothing for me. I learned that real kindness comes from seeing beneath the surface into the pain of peoples' lives, and when we can do this, compassion is born and kindness results. I am grateful for the fierce compassion of the sister-in-charge who confronted my arrogance. I am grateful to a dying woman who unknowingly taught me not to judge. I am grateful to Linda, for her kindness to the world and to me. My prayer is that of Linda's - may we all learn to be kind - very kind.