

Humility, kindness lead to strength

Barry Gittins | 17 August 2021

In his 83 years, social psychologist, researcher and author Hugh Mackay has seen the sun rise and set on regimes, ideologies, cults, fads, movements and manias. He has also seen language used to clarify and build common ground, or to confuse and demoralise. One constant throughout these years has been his fascination with how human beings treat each other and their planet, and why.



When *Eureka Street* called scants weeks ago, Hugh was back in his Canberra home after observing a 14-day isolation following a Sydney trip. Lockdowns can be and often are destabilising experiences, but Mackay said he's found that they can also be a time of de-stressing; a time for creativity and thought. His latest book, *The Kindness Revolution*, attests to that.

'Loneliness is an extreme outcome of lockdowns and a grave problem,' Mackay notes, 'but some people have also spoken of the benefits of forced relaxation and re-acquiring concerns for others. It is a silver lining of lockdowns.'

As to his theme of kindness, I ask, what is its opposite? Active malice?

'I don't think it is active malice; that is an extreme opposite of kindness,' he responds thoughtfully. 'It is indifference, yes; indifference to our common humanity. But perhaps the real opposite of kindness is self-absorption. If we lose sight of other people's needs and allow ourselves to be totally absorbed by our own concerns and ambitions, then we have lost our way to kindness.'

Is selflessness, then, in short supply in Canberra?

'Kindness is not part of the ethos of our federal government, or the modus operandi of our prime minister. Our national parliament is based on winners and losers. Kindness is also a problem for many people in institutional religions, which get caught up in dogma, doctrine and creeds.

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'In the case of Christian denominations,' he adds, 'they can easily lose sight of the essential teachings of Jesus, of kindness and compassion for others, as spelled out in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. The good life is not just about which dogmatic boxes to tick – it is about inclusion and empathy and kindness, not who's in and who's out.'

To that end, Mackay contends, we can 'have a contest of ideas and policies without becoming gladiators. We can disagree with each other, but we can do it kindly, not as an ego contest. Compassionate engagement with other people's views is quite consistent with robust differences of opinion.'

Pandemic responses from state governments have seen homeless people placed into safe emergency accommodation in hotel rooms, and government kitchen staff have cooked millions of meals for impoverished people and those made newly redundant by COVID-19; these kinds of acts can either be seen as acts of kindness or rational, sensible acts taken to prevent higher

infection rates, and civil unrest. How does kindness translate into or contribute to self-interest?

‘While the motive is probably mixed,’ Mackay concedes, ‘it is wonderful that homeless people were and are being housed, so that they can address the problems that led them to be in that situation. So even though the motivations may have been to address and limit infection rates, or avoid civic disturbances, or lower the crime rate, the effect is still good. If the motive were pure that would be a bonus. But good work is still good work...

‘As with so many things in a pandemic — this may be naïve of me — I truly hope we learn from this.’

Mackay believes Australians are seeing a re-birth of community, something that ‘usually happens in crises, such as wars, natural disasters and economic depressions’. However, Mackay doubts if ‘the disruptive impact has been great enough to be a circuit breaker — that may sound strange to some of you in Melbourne’ after innumerable months spent in lockdown.

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‘In our streets, in our communities, we know we need to exercise compassion and to care for each other. No-one is going to get out of this by themselves. We have been tested, we have had a taste of social isolation and, as a result, perhaps we have rediscovered the power of community.’

One of the book’s delights is Mackay’s stressing of the importance of humility; an old-fashioned and rarely sighted virtue these days. He sees it as the key to greatness, and a force that can drive out the arrogance that can lead to poor policy and the perpetuating of bigotry and harm; but does he see it demonstrated in any of our leaders in Australia, or any world leaders?

‘Humility is in pretty short supply,’ he says with masterful understatement. ‘Perhaps we glimpse it in New Zealand in Jacinta Ardern, who does demonstrate humility and kindness. We see flashes of it nationally and internationally when a leader apologises or shows remorse for some error of judgement or other misbehaviour.

‘But so many leaders are driven by ego and ruthless ambition; they are reluctant to acknowledge their frailty and our shared frailty,’ he adds. ‘Some people who have climbed the

greasy pole have been driven by a desire to compensate for their personal failings or deficits – it's like a denial of their inner frailty.

'We have had infrequent individuals such as Nelson Mandela, or Jimmy Carter, who have demonstrated great humility and self-knowledge. Yet, in too many cases, leadership is assumed to be about power rather than service, and power is antithetical to humility.

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Mackay writes about selective perception. That the 'more comfortable I feel with what I know and believe, the more likely it is that I will see or hear what I'm hoping or expecting to see or hear'... how, I ask, can we find common ground and practise kindness in the face of our preconceptions and prejudices?

'Kindness is, once again, the key,' Mackay says. 'To be brave enough, selfless enough, to connect and engage and respond with other people, we need to be prepared to see the world as they see it; to entertain their ideas. After all, we're not qualified to disagree with someone until we're sure we know what their position is.

'That's why it takes courage to listen: attentive and empathic listening means we are running the risk of being changed by what we hear. Most of us don't want to go through the pain of having to change our mind. But let's remember our folklore has always taught us that we grow through pain, through dealing with challenges, disappointments, loss and hardship.'

Noting that 'no one chooses to be in pain and discomfort,' Mackay asserts that 'we learn nothing about ourselves through comfort and self-indulgence. Adversity is where we grow.'

Cometh the adversity, cometh faith to foster mental and spiritual health. Mackay writes eloquently of 'faith in something greater than ourselves; hope for a better future; kindness towards others'. Mid-pandemic, he believes we are embracing these qualities.

'The signs of growth are in plain view. Faith in the future, faith in each other, that's where we find hope. You might not think so when you watch the news on TV, or pay too much attention

to social media. Aberrations and acts of bad behaviour and insensitivity are always making the news, because they are newsworthy. But kindness? That's just humans being true to their nature, so that's not "news".

'As a crisis usually does, the pandemic has brought out the best in most of us. if we're prepared to learn the lessons it has taught us, that would be a cause for great optimism.'

'Kindness is the purest form of love because it has nothing to do with our emotions or affections. It's not transactional, either. When people reach out to care for those at risk of loneliness and social isolation, that is an act of kindness that has nothing whatever to do with self-interest, and it also has nothing to do with whether we like, or approve of, or agree with the political, religious or other beliefs of the person in need.

'Since the pandemic arrived here in 2020, there have been thousands of stories of neighbours connecting and supporting each other; of people being ready with offers of assistance for friends and strangers alike; of people being prepared to make sacrifices for the common good. As a crisis usually does, the pandemic has brought out the best in most of us. if we're prepared to learn the lessons it has taught us, that would be a cause for great optimism.

'In fact, believe we can allow ourselves a brief moment of pride about the way we've responded to the demands of the pandemic on our way of life — especially in our local neighbourhoods and communities. We have not handled the vaccine rollout well at all, and quarantine has had its failures, but we can do this: we can reach out and help each other; we can acknowledge our interdependence; we can recognise that our common humanity is far more significant than our personal obsessions with identity and difference.'

As to whether the crisis can be transformed into a kindness revolution, Mackay puts that back in our court. 'It's up to us as individuals — household by household, street by street, community by community.

'After all, revolutions never start at the top: this one will start with quiet moments of grace.'

Barry Gittins is a Melbourne writer.



Main image: Illustration Chris Johnston