

# Passing a cup of kindness, goodness and gratefulness



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

I have to admit, I'm a sucker for stories of human kindness, goodness, generosity. Show me a segment of Steve Hartman's "On the Road" and "Kindness 101" or BBC's "Call the Midwife," and the eyeball waterfall runs forth. To observe people treating each other with goodwill, one person helping another without expectations, elicits a powerful emotional response. Maybe I'm just a sensitive guy who feels more deeply human when I see other humans acting humanely toward one another.

Some of this is due to the daily kindnesses I witnessed serving as a chaplain on streets, in shelters, in jails and schools. It got to the point I wasn't really surprised any longer. It's commonplace to find an uncommon degree of caring and compassion in the most unexpected places. My chaplaincy team and I were privileged to see people who had almost nothing to give and give more. At times we were able to connect a wealthy person in the community – from a congregation or business – with a person they would have never met otherwise.

One Rotary president spent a few hours with us in the office and at the free dining room downtown and was so moved she donated to our "homeless animals fund" (to pay for shots, licenses and food) and joined the chaplaincy board of directors. A lawyer brought some unsheltered musicians to his nightclub for a benefit concert raising monies for the chaplaincy art program. A local restaurant owner hosted a group of our unshoused community for a gourmet meal over the December holidays. I could tell countless stories of people helping people, and often the helping went both ways. Eyes were open as hearts were opened.

In a public park I once stood by as a police officer hugged a man who had just lost his child. Tears flowed all around. My assistants, who lived "on the edge" themselves, were consistently with people – really "with" individuals – to accompany people to appointments, walk with them to reach their campsite safely, make phone calls, hand them a cup of coffee with a bus ticket. Many practical things done with the heart of humanity. As "the chaplain" I often stood back to appreciate the beauty of these moments knowing my role wasn't to bring something "spiritual" into the scene, even if that were possible. Kindness was all the faith, religion and God we needed in those times.

Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry is uncomfortable with the term "religious." His unease grows from the observation that much religion "has promoted and fed upon a destructive schism between body and soul, Heaven and earth." He explains: "It has encouraged people to believe that the world is of no importance, and that their only obligation in it is to submit to certain churchly formulas in order to get to Heaven." I think he plows straight into the rocky ground of the issue: "So the people who might have been expected to care most selflessly for the world have had their minds turned elsewhere – to a pursuit of 'salvation' that was really only another form of ... self-love." This kind of believer is so distracted by another world, concerned for their own soul, he "turns his heart against his neighbor and his hands against the world." ("A Native Hill," "The World-Ending Fire: The Essential Wendell Berry"). Harsh words. Indeed, the truth can sound quite harsh sometimes.

Berry's words plant seeds for some fertile thought. How much kindness and true compassion are lost to another world, to devotion that draws attention up and out, beyond the needs of the present? It seems to me, the more "grounded" we are on the literal ground, the land, the more we are likely to care about that ground, that land, and the in-

habitants of the earth under our feet. Personal salvation loses central importance in the face of what could and should be done here and now, without thought for one's "heavenly reward."

I often relate this to my own nurture in the rocky fields of Christianity. Coming to see that an otherworldly, supernatural mindset diverted attention from the needs of others, and even my own needs at times, I chose to redirect my view to the near at hand, the needs at hand. Acts of kindness were no longer to please a Great Farmer in the Sky who demanded obedient sharecroppers raise a harvest for a faraway farm in the clouds. Choosing to live with special concern for the life around me sprouted something healthier and more sustainable.

Someone shared a cup of kindness with me, then someone else, then many others. Why wouldn't I, why wouldn't you, keep passing cups and pitchers of gratefulness, expecting nothing in return, in this world, or any other?

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" at chighland.com.*