

Not-so-random acts of kindness

by BROCK WEIR

Do you remember the first time you were really conscious of experiencing kindness?

It probably wasn't anything too big or flashy, at least on the surface. It could have been making something hands-on with your mom, having a teachable moment with your dad as he cooked dinner, a sibling's arm around your shoulder when you were upset at school, or a grandparent who did that little special something to make you feel extra welcome and loved.

As commonplace as those experiences might seem, these simple little gestures and expressions of love and kindness have consequences; indeed, they could very well set you up for life and provide some direction on our respective paths.

Outside of the family bubble, what do you remember as those first acts of kindness?

For me, it could very well be my very first school experience.

Reasonably fresh out of school, my pre-school teacher had a warmth and an enthusiasm I remember as being infectious. Although I suspect I was too young to squirrel away memories of specific actions on her part, what remains as potent as ever is how she made me feel and the atmosphere she fostered.

When it was determined my parents living together was, shall we say, less than ideal a few years later, another educator made an impression. Although she wasn't my teacher in the traditional home room sense, she took the time just about every morning to pop her head into my classroom, pull me out for a few minutes, for a nice, quick chat just to make sure everything was okay. I still look back on those morning talks and smile.

But perhaps the biggest impression, however, a couple of years later, came during a more challenging part of my childhood; two camp counsellors (and you know who you are) sort of took me under their wings as unofficial Big Brothers. They kept out a watchful eye, were always on hand to talk, and even took time out of their busy schedules, on their own time no less, to take me to a movie in the evening just to have a laugh. Both they, and Mel Brooks' 'Robin Hood: Men in Tights', helped considerably.

Looking back, I can't say for certain how much of these not-so-random acts of kindness were simply part of their routine, but to my eyes ? both young and seasoned ? they went the extra mile whether they realized it or not, with the kindness in their hearts sewn onto their sleeves as well.

I count myself fortunate to be at the receiving end of many examples of random and deliberate acts of kindness, and I can only hope that I've been able to pay them forward in some way, but sometimes I feel that such kindness, and even concepts of kindness, might be in shorter and shorter supply each year.

At this point, I hasten to add that our communities are brimming over with kindness. We see kindness in action all the time through small gestures like holding the door for the person behind you, adding to the tip jar of the person that's filling your coffee order, or even shovelling just a little bit more of your sidewalk than you need to do.

We also see larger, more grandiose, but no less genuine examples from the countless volunteers all around us, quite rightly identified as the backbone of this and every other community, who keep so many of our vital services going, to the men and women who put their lives on hold to advocate for causes close to their hearts, and so many others.

But other areas haven't fared so well.

Earlier this month, I read with dismay a statement from the Town of Caledon reminding residents to, essentially, not harass or threaten municipal staff. This, in light of road clearing following the March 3 storm, issues frontline workers have absolutely no control over.

‘Beyond rude gestures and verbal abuse, staff are now being physically threatened, in some cases objects are being hurled at trucks, sidewalk plows and at staff directly. The OPP have been called to protect Town safety,’ said the Town of Caledon in a statement, with the OPP noting, ‘Violence towards individuals trying to do their job to the best of their ability is unacceptable. Threats to public safety will not be tolerated and charges will be laid when necessary.’

Added Mayor Annette Groves: ‘These employees work long hours, during nights and weekends, working around obstacles including street-parked vehicles, to clear roads and sidewalks in a priority sequence, they shouldn’t have to endure threats and abuse.’

Indeed, they shouldn’t, nor should anybody for that matter.

Just a few days later I was standing in line at a post office in Aurora where just to the left of the cash register was a sign. It was a sign we’ve all, sadly, become more used to seeing in the last three years with words varying slightly according to the circumstance. This one, however, had a little something extra going for it.

This sign, which read, ‘Aggressive behaviour will not be tolerated,’ looked like it had seen better days, and when the postal clerk caught me eyeing it ‘maybe I was the first person in a while to even notice it’ explained that this was just a piece of paper they had to print off because the standard-issue similarly-worded sign had been grabbed by a customer earlier in the month, crumpled up, and hurled in the general direction of the cash register.

If that’s not a sad state of affairs, I don’t know what is.

Actually, the fact somebody, anybody, feels that these signs are necessary simply to get through their day job safely and securely might be the saddest state of all.

The last three years have been rough on all of us, affecting us all in different ways, whether it is on our employment situation, bank balance, or our own mental health. Our outlooks may have been clouded by isolation, information, disinformation, and so much more.

But whatever your experience, there are excuses to harass, threaten, or simply be inconsiderate to people who are on the frontlines, and all definitions of the frontlines, doing their jobs, and more than likely have absolutely nothing to do with whatever has gotten your dander up.

As we look forward to spring’s arrival on Tuesday and sunnier, warmer days ahead, let’s take a moment of this time of rebirth to remember those early foundations of kindness we all have, exercise patience, and, as pat as it might sound, simply remember the core of the Golden Rule.