

Soulful Songs and Stories

With a song and your stories, we co-create a soft place for hard conversations and a brave space for personal and spiritual growth.



Hi *Soulful Song Lovers and Story Tellers*,

This is the ninth of Friday emails that we're sending out or posting on the webpage about songs, stories, storytelling, community, or personal/spiritual growth until we meet again.

KINDNESS/MERCY and JUSTICE are UU hallmarks, and are a practice (or at least a goal) of how we are with each other when we gather to share our stories. Consider this in song: “**Bring Forth the Kingdom**,” “**The Kindness Song**,” “**Kindness is a Muscle**,” two jazz versions of the “**Star Spangled Banner**,” and “**We Shall Overcome**.” Written words and stories are from Naomi Shihab Nye, George Saunders, Mark Matousek, Thich Nhat Hanh, Kathleen & James McGinnis, William Wordsworth, Maria Popova and Adam Phillips & Barbara Taylor, plus quotes from a host of others. Whether you like these selections or not, we hope they will push the envelope of your heart and mind.

If you get through all that, we offer hot, warm, and cool musical suggestions for awakening, reflecting, and relaxing.

If you'd like to get these PDFs emailed to you, register with Jessica Pond, Jpond@uucsr.org.

We sorely miss you and your stories. We miss hugs and laughter and coffee/tea with you. We know these mailings are no substitute for meeting face-to-face, but hope that they, in some small way, may fill the gap until we can meet again. Take the spirit of *Soulful Songs and Stories* with you wherever you go; share it, and we hope to see you all, healthy and happy, sooner rather than later.

Namasté,

Alice and Steve

Mercy, Kindness, Justice

My religion is
very simple.
My religion is
kindness.
—Dalai Lama



We have a nice mix of heady theology and songs for kids. Start with **Marty Haugen's "Bring Forth the Kingdom"**: <https://youtu.be/bwXAcTlp-RY> If you have a problem with "god talk" or the "kingdom of god," think of the kingdom, not as something external, but as something within you to be called forth.

*If you bring forth what is within you,
what you bring forth will save you. If
you do not bring forth what is within
you, what you do not bring forth will
destroy you.*

(#70, the Nag Hammadi Library 126, tr George MacRae),
Elaine Pagels, "The Gospel of Thomas," *Beyond Belief*

Continue with **Paul Ryan's "The Kindness Song"**:

<https://youtu.be/nGzANywbXY> and

NBC Universal **Sprout's "Kindness is a Muscle"**:

<https://youtu.be/tP4g LX8FBDA>

If you think these are too childish, please tell us how
well grown-ups are handling inequality and *COVID-19*.

Learned ignorance makes one able to receive the world from others and the Other with great attention. That is the poverty of the mind. It demands the continuing refusal to identify God with any concept, theory, document or event, thus preventing us from becoming a fanatic sectarian or enthusiast, while allowing for an ongoing growth in gentleness and receptivity. —**Henri Nouwen**, *Reaching Out*

*If you lived in your heart, you'd
be home now.*

On separate pages following: a poem by **Naomi Shihab Nye**, a commencement address by **George Saunders**, a letter to the editor by **Mark Matousek**, a piece by **Thich Nhat Hanh** on lovingkindness, an essay by **Kathleen & James McGinnis** on the connection between mercy and justice, **Wordsworth** on acts of kindness, and **Maria Popova** and **Adam Phillips & Barbara Taylor** on kindness and vulnerability.

Dorothy Day's movement combined the rescue of needy people with strident political advocacy on their behalf. In this, she differed with saintly figures whose devotion to the poor goes hand in hand with a quiet spirit of resignation before the social structures that empower them. Not satisfied with endlessly pulling drowning men from the torrents rushing past, Day went upstream to see who was throwing the poor bastards into the water in the first place. —**James Carroll**, *Christ Actually: The Son of God for the Secular Age*

*Let justice roll down like waters, and
righteousness like an ever-flowing
stream. —Amos 5:24*





Mirko Ilic

Growing up, I was never aware of the fact that only white males who owned property were covered in the Constitution and could vote, and the whole country was built on genocide, the murder of natives. I've often thought that the more I read, the more I realized that our government may never have stood for the things I believe in. But they made a mistake. Somewhere along the line they taught me that's what we stood for, and now I demand it.

—Kris Kristofferson, *The Progressive*, Sep 1991

“Star Spangled Banner”:

Interview with Jimi: <https://youtu.be/B-ZYUaRKQkk>

Jon Batiste: <https://youtu.be/vE-2IJD4tE?t=13>

René Marie, “Lift Ev’ry Voice & Sing / Star Spangled Banner”: <https://youtu.be/LIv2yNecYDM>

“We Shall Overcome,” from *Soundtrack for a Revolution*: <https://youtu.be/koKcm2e5YPE>

If I cannot have reform without injustice, I will not have reform. —**Edmund Burke**

We should deal with injustice because it's not just, not because it's expensive. —**Jonathan Kozol**

Justice is for those who deserve it, mercy is for those who don't. —Woodrow Kroll

I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice. —**Abraham Lincoln**

What if we know that forgiveness and mercy are what heal and restore and define us, that they are the fragrance that the rose leaves on the heel that crushes it? —**Anne Lamott**, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, 2017

Mercy, detached from Justice, grows unmerciful. —**C.S. Lewis**

Mercy and forgiveness must be free and unmerited to the wrongdoer. If the wrongdoer has to do something to merit it, then it isn't mercy.

—**Timothy Keller**

Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe. —Frederick Douglass

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart. May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people. May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy. And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

—**Franciscan blessing**

The shape of God is justice.
—**Carter Heyward**

What's extraordinary about the poetry in the Hebrew Bible is that it's so elusive that it refuses to be reduced to a formula. I think that's a great temptation among liberals who care about justice—is to reduce it to a formula. —**Walter Brueggemann**

To its critics, traditional philanthropy lets the wealthy feel as though they're contributing to a more just and equal society without giving up any of their comforts. Anand Giridharadas, author of *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, describes the prevailing rules of philanthropy as follows: "Inspire the rich to do more good, but never, ever tell them to do less harm; inspire them to give back, but never, ever tell them to take less." He suggests that more-ethical philanthropists would fund causes that directly undermine the class-based stratification that put them in their privileged positions to begin with—for example, rooting out tax havens or taking legal action to divorce public-school funding from property taxes, a system that gives wealthy areas better schools. Doing right on these issues, he says, would hurt the wealthy.

—**Anna Altman**, *Washington Post*, Mar 2, 2020

Short-term mission trips are often destructive exercises in vanity that actively harm the local culture long after the church group flies home.

—**Danny M. Lavery**, "Dear Prudence," Oct 20, 2016

Philanthropy at its core is colonialism. Almost without exception, funders reinforce the colonial division of Us vs. Them, Haves vs. Have Nots, and mostly white saviors and white experts vs. poor, needy, urban, disadvantaged, marginalized, at-risk people (take your pick of euphemisms for people of color).

—**Edgar Villanueva**, *Decolonizing Wealth*

A story about mercy, remembrance, and Japanese identity (*Bitter Southerner*) www.j.mp/self-mercy

More **Music** to

Rouse ...when you have the *COVID-19* blues

"**Trumpet Concerto in E**," Johann Hummel, Alison Balsom <https://youtu.be/B1eyZAedhY4?t=22>

"**Nkosi Sikelel Afrika**," Charlie Haden's LMO <https://youtu.be/8Gfp3jh7P74>

Reflect ...think on these things

"**Shake Sugaree**," written by Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten (1895-1987). This delightful, fun, catchy tune is at odds with the lyrics—about people who had to pawn everything just to get by. Ain't no justice in that. Cotten: <https://youtu.be/O1ViAIdO3i4>

Rhiannon Giddens: <https://youtu.be/eLIEIbuh710>
"**Rivers of Babylon**," first recorded in 1970 by The Melodians, takes its text from Psalm 137, which inspired numerous political leaders and social movements, and immigrants, as varied as Irish, Korean, and Cuban, have identified with the story. Its verses capture succinctly the ways people come to grips with trauma and the desire for justice. —David W. Stowe, *Professor of English and Religious Studies, Michigan State University*
Boney M: <https://youtu.be/vz6LRBLPKSM>

Sing a new song in a strange land.
—*Brent Dowe & Trevor McNaughton*

Relax ...to wash away the day's trouble in mind

"**Spiritual**," Charlie Haden & Pat Metheny

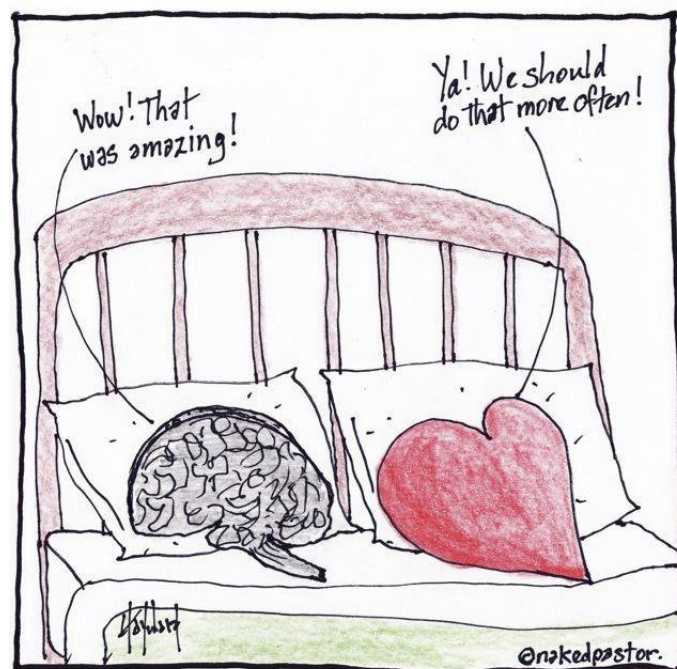
https://youtu.be/1k_DF_RohcM

"**Blade Runner Blues**," Vangelis, 1982

<https://youtu.be/RScZrvTebeA>

"**Angelus**," Sara Wennerberg-Reuter, Bengt Forsberg

<https://youtu.be/HIDBpR2ZK4>



Kindness

Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day
to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

You cannot
do a
kindness
too soon,
for you
never know
how soon
it will be
too late.

Emerson

Err In The Direction Of Kindness

George Saunders, Commencement Address, Syracuse University, May 11, 2013

Down through the ages, a traditional form has evolved for this type of speech, which is: Some old fart, his best years behind him, who, over the course of his life, has made a series of dreadful mistakes (that would be me), gives heartfelt advice to a group of shining, energetic young people, with all of their best years ahead of them (that would be you).

And I intend to respect that tradition.

Now, one useful thing you can do with an old person, in addition to borrowing money from them, or asking them to do one of their old-time “dances,” so you can watch, while laughing, is ask: “Looking back, what do you regret?” And they’ll tell you. Sometimes, as you know, they’ll tell you even if you haven’t asked. Sometimes, even when you’ve specifically requested they not tell you, they’ll tell you.

So: What do I regret? Being poor from time to time? Not really. Working terrible jobs, like “knuckle-puller in a slaughterhouse?” (And don’t even ASK what that entails.) No. I don’t regret that. Skinny-dipping in a river in Sumatra, a little buzzed, and looking up and seeing like 300 monkeys sitting on a pipeline, pooping down into the river, the river in which I was swimming, with my mouth open, naked? And getting deathly ill afterwards, and staying sick for the next seven months? Not so much. Do I regret the occasional humiliation? Like once, playing hockey in front of a big crowd, including this girl I really liked, I somehow managed, while falling and emitting this weird whooping noise, to score on my own goalie, while also sending my stick flying into the crowd, nearly hitting that girl? No. I don’t even regret that.

But here’s something I do regret:

In seventh grade, this new kid joined our class. In the interest of confidentiality, her Convocation Speech name will be “ELLEN.” ELLEN was small, shy. She wore these blue cat’s-eye glasses that, at the time, only old ladies wore. When nervous, which was pretty much always, she had a habit of taking a strand of hair into her mouth and chewing on it.

So she came to our school and our neighborhood, and was mostly ignored, occasionally teased (“Your hair taste good?”—that sort of thing). I could see this hurt her. I still remember the way she’d look after such an insult:

eyes cast down, a little gut-kicked, as if, having just been reminded of her place in things, she was trying, as much as possible, to disappear. After awhile she’d drift away, hair-strand still in her mouth. At home, I imagined, after school, her mother would say, you know: “How was your day, sweetie?” and she’d say, “Oh, fine.” And her mother would say, “Making any friends?” and she’d go, “Sure, lots.”

Sometimes I’d see her hanging around alone in her front yard, as if afraid to leave it.

And then—they moved. That was it. No tragedy, no big final hazing.

One day she was there, next day she wasn’t.

End of story.

Now, why do I regret that? Why, forty-two years later, am I still thinking about it? Relative to most of the other kids, I was actually pretty nice to her. I never said an unkind word to her. In fact, I sometimes even (mildly) defended her.

But still. It bothers me.

So here’s something I know to be true, although it’s a little corny, and I don’t quite know what to do with it:

What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness.

Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly.

Or, to look at it from the other end of the telescope: Who, in your life, do you remember most fondly, with the most undeniable feelings of warmth?

Those who were kindest to you, I bet.

It’s a little facile, maybe, and certainly hard to implement, but I’d say, as a goal in life, you could do worse than: Try to be kinder.

Now, the million-dollar question: What’s our problem? Why aren’t we kinder?

Here’s what I think:

Each of us is born with a series of built-in confusions that are probably somehow Darwinian. These are: (1) we’re central to the universe (that is, our personal story is the main and most interesting story, the only story, really); (2) we’re separate from the universe (there’s US and then, out there, all that other junk—dogs and swing-sets, and the State of Nebraska and low-hanging clouds and, you know, other people), and (3) we’re permanent

(death is real, OK, sure—for you, but not for me).

Now, we don't really believe these things - intellectually we know better—but we believe them viscerally, and live by them, and they cause us to prioritize our own needs over the needs of others, even though what we really want, in our hearts, is to be less selfish, more aware of what's actually happening in the present moment, more open, and more loving.

So, the second million-dollar question: How might we DO this? How might we become more loving, more open, less selfish, more present, less delusional, etc., etc?

Well, yes, good question.

Unfortunately, I only have three minutes left.

So let me just say this. There are ways. You already know that because, in your life, there have been High Kindness periods and Low Kindness periods, and you know what inclined you toward the former and away from the latter. Education is good; immersing ourselves in a work of art: good; prayer is good; meditation's good; a frank talk with a dear friend; establishing ourselves in some kind of spiritual tradition—recognizing that there have been countless really smart people before us who have asked these same questions and left behind answers for us.

Because kindness, it turns out, is hard—it starts out all rainbows and puppy dogs, and expands to include, well, everything.

One thing in our favor: some of this “becoming kinder” happens naturally, with age. It might be a simple matter of attrition: as we get older, we come to see how useless it is to be selfish—how illogical, really. We come to love other people and are thereby counter-instructed in our own centrality. We get our butts kicked by real life, and people come to our defense, and help us, and we learn that we're not separate, and don't want to be. We see people near and dear to us dropping away, and are gradually convinced that maybe we too will drop away (someday, a long time from now). Most people, as they age, become less selfish and more loving. I think this is true. The great Syracuse poet, Hayden Carruth, said, in a poem written near the end of his life, that he was “mostly Love, now.”

And so, a prediction, and my heartfelt wish for you: as you get older, your self will diminish and you will grow in love. YOU will gradually be replaced by LOVE. If you have kids, that will be a huge moment in your process of self-diminishment. You really won't care what happens to YOU, as long as they benefit. That's one reason your parents are so proud and happy today. One of their fondest dreams has come true: you have accomplished something difficult and tangible that has en-

larged you as a person and will make your life better, from here on in, forever.

Congratulations, by the way.

When young, we're anxious—understandably—to find out if we've got what it takes. Can we succeed? Can we build a viable life for ourselves? But you—in particular you, of this generation—may have noticed a certain cyclical quality to ambition. You do well in high-school, in hopes of getting into a good college, so you can do well in the good college, in the hopes of getting a good job, so you can do well in the good job so you can..

And this is actually OK. If we're going to become kinder, that process has to include taking ourselves seriously—as doers, as accomplishers, as dreamers. We have to do that, to be our best selves.

Still, accomplishment is unreliable. “Succeeding,” whatever that might mean to you, is hard, and the need to do so constantly renews itself (success is like a mountain that keeps growing ahead of you as you hike it), and there's the very real danger that “succeeding” will take up your whole life, while the big questions go untended.

So, quick, end-of-speech advice: Since, according to me, your life is going to be a gradual process of becoming kinder and more loving: Hurry up. Speed it along. Start right now. There's a confusion in each of us, a sickness, really: selfishness. But there's also a cure. So be a good and proactive and even somewhat desperate patient on your own behalf—seek out the most efficacious anti-selfishness medicines, energetically, for the rest of your life.

Do all the other things, the ambitious things—travel, get rich, get famous, innovate, lead, fall in love, make and lose fortunes, swim naked in wild jungle rivers (after first having it tested for monkey poop)—but as you do, to the extent that you can, err in the direction of kindness. Do those things that incline you toward the big questions, and avoid the things that would reduce you and make you trivial. That luminous part of you that exists beyond personality—your soul, if you will—is as bright and shining as any that has ever been. Bright as Shakespeare's, bright as Gandhi's, bright as Mother Theresa's. Clear away everything that keeps you separate from this secret luminous place. Believe it exists, come to know it better, nurture it, share its fruits tirelessly.

And someday, in 80 years, when you're 100, and I'm 134, and we're both so kind and loving we're nearly unbearable, drop me a line, let me know how your life has been. I hope you will say: It has been so wonderful.

Congratulations, Class of 2013.

I wish you great happiness, all the luck in the world, and a beautiful summer.

•

Louis asked me to explain what I meant by enlightenment. I did my best, referring to the loftiest notions of no-self, and liberation, and citing examples of saints who inspired me. For a long time he said nothing.

Finally, he smiled and asked “Do you mean kindness?” I was dumbstruck, angry that he could reduce my glorious philosophy to one word.

*—Mark Matousek,
in Common Boundary, March/April 1997*

Chesed

(Lovingkindness)

The essence of lovingkindness is being able to offer happiness. You can be the sunshine for another person. You can't offer happiness until you have it for yourself. So build a home inside by accepting yourself and learning to love and heal yourself. Learn how to practice mindfulness in such a way that you can create moments of happiness and joy for your own nourishment. Then you have something to offer the other person.

חסד

When you love someone, you have to have trust and confidence. Love without trust is not yet love. Of course, first you have to have trust, respect, and confidence in yourself. True love cannot be without trust and respect for oneself and for the other person.

חסד

To love without knowing how to love wounds the person we love. To know how to love someone, we have to understand them. To understand, we need to listen.

חסד

The more you understand, the more you love; the more you love, the more you understand. They are two sides of one reality. The mind of love and the mind of understanding are the same.

Thich Nhat Hanh

How to Love, 2014

ISBN 1937006883

Chesed in Hebrew stands for a cluster of ideas—love, mercy, grace, and kindness. It is many times translated as lovingkindness, or loyal love, or love without the expectation of getting something in return.

Beware! If you only do acts of mercy and do not deal with the root causes of injustice, you may be complicit in providing “maintenance ministry,” preventing the “prophetic ministry” that brings about restoration, healing, and community under God. If you only do acts of justice, you end up disconnected from the real lives of people and their hopes and needs.

adapted from *Parenting for Peace and Justice*, Kathleen & James McGinnis



The best portion of good people's lives is their little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.

William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey"

Be Vulnerable, Be Kind

Although kindness is the foundation of all spiritual traditions and was even Adam Smith's central credo, at some point in recent history, kindness became little more than an abstract aspiration, its concrete practical applications a hazardous and vulnerable-making behavior to be avoided—we need only look to the internet's "outrage culture" for evidence, or to the rise of cynicism as our flawed self-defense mechanism against the perceived perils of kindness. We've come to see the emotional porousness that kindness requires as a dangerous crack in the armor of the independent self, an exploitable outward vulnerability—too high a cost to pay for the warm inward balm of the benevolence for which we long in the deepest parts of ourselves.

For most of our civilizational history, we've seen ourselves as fundamentally kind and held kindness as a high ideal of personhood. Only in recent times—in large part thanks to Emerson—did the ideal of independence and self-reliance become the benchmark of spiritual success. The need for belonging has become an intolerable manifestation of vulnerability—we've stopped believing in our own kindness and the merits of mutual belonging, producing what poet and philosopher David Whyte has elegantly termed "our sense of slight woundedness."

Perhaps because open-heartedness is impossible without vulnerability—an open heart is an aperture through which the world can enter us, but also one through which exploitive and cruel forces can penetrate the softest core of who we are without obstruction—the original meaning of and longing for kindness has been calcified by our impulse for armoring and self-protection.

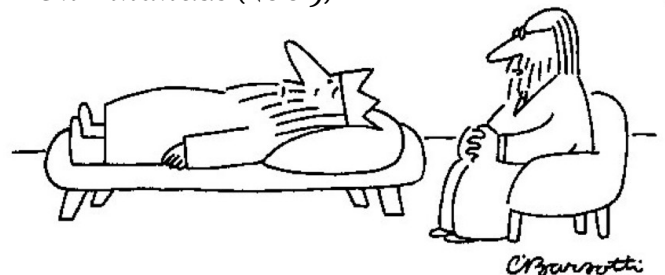
—Maria Popova, Brain Pickings,
Jul 19, 2015

In one sense kindness is always hazardous because it is based on a susceptibility to others, a capacity to identify with their pleasures and sufferings. Putting oneself in someone else's shoes can be very uncomfortable. But if the pleasures of kindness—like all the greatest human pleasures—are inherently perilous, they are nonetheless some of the most satisfying we possess. In giving up on kindness—and especially our own acts of kindness—we deprive ourselves of a pleasure that is fundamental to our sense of well-being.

The pleasure of kindness is that it connects us with others; but the terror of kindness is that it makes us too immediately aware of our own and other people's vulnerabilities. Vulnerability—particularly the vulnerability we call desire—is our shared biological inheritance. Kindness, in other words, opens us up to the world (and worlds) of other people in ways that we both long for and dread.

It is not that real kindness requires people to be selfless, it is rather that real kindness changes people in the doing of it, often in unpredictable ways. Real kindness is an exchange with essentially unpredictable consequences. It is a risk precisely because it mingles our needs and desires with the needs and desires of others, in a way that so-called self-interest never can. Kindness is a way of knowing people beyond our understanding of them.

—Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor,
On Kindness (2009)



"Enemies, yes, but doesn't your moat also keep out love?"