

Kindness Scholarship Speech

When I was a freshman in high school my brother was a junior. When we'd get home from school my dad would always inquire about our school days. Amidst his questioning he'd ask us a peculiar thing: "Did you see a fight at school today?" My brother and I were both honors students and with our closest friends falling into the same, responsible category, our answer would always be the same: "No, dad."

And it was true, as a freshman the closest thing I came to witnessing a physical altercation was when I heard about it in the locker room, after the fact. Yet, my dad kept asking us. "Is there any bullying at your school?" he would ask with--what at the time seemed like-- no grounds to base it off of. "No," we would both reply.

As I got older my dad slowly stopped asking the question... sick of always being met with the same response, I suppose. However, his persistent inquiries made me, slowly, look up. I began to see things I didn't before. I saw a student being shoved around or teased every now and then, but the main thing I picked up on were not fights, instead what I noticed was a lack of kindness.

Many people may view a school without constant hallway name-calling or cafeteria brawls as a positive, yet as I started to observe students during the passing periods all I saw were kids on their phones, or with their eyes glued to their feet as they rushed off to their next class. They were ignoring one another, with no kind words or smiles offered in passing. I know that those random moments, of a kind smile or wave, are rare occurrences because every time I myself am acknowledged or a mere acquaintance says "hello" to me in the hall, I am taken aback and walk away pleasantly surprised.

But is the sparsity of the occurrence the very thing that makes it special? After all, the phrase is "*random* acts of kindness." Perhaps the rarity of those acts are what make them so special, and I shouldn't critique the lack of kindness that I began to notice. Yet, when I really reflect, and I realize that I walk by strangers and friends alike without even expecting a smile, a bigger issue seems to lie afoot.

Another location in which I have observed this same relationship between passersby is when I run. In the off seasons of my sports, I run along paths roamed by community members, and at first, I too had to actively stop myself from looking at the ground or focusing on my own breathing. Instead I now look up, I look at the people around me, and I intentionally make an effort to smile or wave to each one of them—or at the very least give a small, friendly head nod. The responses vary greatly. Depending on the day, maybe 30% of the people I acknowledge, acknowledge me back. Maybe 60% another day and I get a derogatory remark called out a car window.

The point being, the bullying is out there, in schools and on the streets, yet it is the rare occurrence of kindness, rather, that clearly indicates a need for change. The true shortcoming lies in what we regularly omit.

The “random acts” can be as small as a simple compliment, or holding a door open for someone. And you never know if that stranger you offered a helping hand to was struggling, and you were the small force that made a significant difference in their day. Without much effort at all, these things can be done on a daily basis. But the issue is, we’ve gotten too wrapped up in the routine to swiftly get from class to class or we have become too self-absorbed to step outside of ourselves and think of others, and those simple acts are lost.

We are now amidst a global pandemic, and we are noticing a similar trend worldwide. We are now seeing support for the elderly, the frightened, and those in need more than ever before, as our monotonous routines—normally too busy to be bothered with acts of kindness—have been disrupted. We are now stepping outside of ourselves and opening up, even in these times of isolation, and it reveals our societal shortcomings. For why else would we be so moved by the kindness community members offer one another if it were not absent in the world without an ongoing crisis?

What it takes to make a change is stepping back to get this perspective, and consistent practice to retrain your normal routine to no longer be focused solely around you. And while the “random” aspect of the phrase “random acts of kindness” may be taken away by making the acts more commonplace, nothing negative would come about from a lasting increase of kindness in the world.

Just like my dad did for me early on in high school, with persistence and repetition, your own perspective can change. You can integrate kindness into your everyday life and touch countless lives of those you encounter.

Thinking back to when my dad used to ask me those questions everyday, even how parents approach talking to their kids about school can help to increase kindness. We should work to change the question being asked by parents and guardians from the repetitive, “How was your day today?” or the pessimistic, “Did you see any fights today?” to something that could make a difference. Let’s start asking what needs to be answered: “How were you kind *today*?”