

Commentary :: Don't Be Nice—Be Kind

by Akaya Windwood
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I recently facilitated a community meeting organized to address a spate of violence in a neighborhood here in Oakland, California. Roughly 200 people showed up—young people from the streets, grandmothers, school teachers, community activists, neighbors, and politicians. The gathering crossed lines of class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and race. There were many emotions in the room: grief, fear, hope, hopelessness, skepticism, sadness, and even some optimism.

As we began the meeting, I asked people to agree to be kind rather than nice. Truthfully, I was a bit hesitant to ask for this agreement, thinking that people would interpret it to mean that they couldn't say what they needed to say or express "negative" feelings such as anger, outrage, or distress. I took the risk of asking for the agreement anyway, and was met with a big "yes" from the group. Everyone was tired of the old pattern of blaming and shaming, of finding fault with one another, and we needed a way to say difficult things without feeling hobbled by politeness.

Niceness is often filled with falseness—it is a way to not tell the truth, or to obscure it. "Be nice!" is something many of us heard as children as a way of avoiding upsetting someone. While niceness might be a strategy that gets us through an immediate situation, it is not effective in the long run as a way to come together to solve the myriad difficulties facing our communities, both local and global.

It is crucial that we hold ourselves and each other accountable, and we can do this with hearts of kindness. This often takes a lot of courage. Kindness allows us to say the hardest of things while preserving the dignity of those around us. It allows us to take the big risk of letting people know what is on our minds in a way that is unclouded and respectful. It is an action of the heart.

The folks at the meeting were engaged, vibrant, upset, and had a lot to say, but kindness ran through it all, like a river of balm and steadiness. I was particularly touched by the father who, having recently lost a son to police violence, spoke of the need to come together as one community, to acknowledge each other, remembering our commonness, our collective humanity. He was angry and so very kind, even as he held each of us accountable for the overt and subtle ways in which we all participate in violence.

Grandmothers spoke of feeling afraid in their homes and of needing to reach out to the young folks. Young people, even those stereotyped as dangerous, spoke about being afraid to walk the streets. This was a kind meeting, but it was not nice.

At the end of the evening, a woman drummed and sang as we walked out to the park where a young man had been shot the week before. We carried candles, and most folks swayed and hummed along. I was very proud of the way everyone cared for the whole.

Kindness is one of our strongest tools as we collectively lead ourselves, our families, and communities through a time of great violence, both here at home and across the seas. We need to work toward deeper kindness. Let's take that risk. And stop being nice.



Akaya Windwood. Photo by Susan Freundlich

Akaya Windwood wrote this article as part of A Just Foreign Policy, the Summer 2008 issue of YES! Magazine. Akaya is president of the Rockwood Leadership Program in Oakland, California. She is known nationally for her commitment to social and economic justice, and to building a new and compelling vision for effectiveness and collaboration in the non-profit sector. A long-time resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, she loves the richness of living and working with diversity, and is committed to joy, laughter, and healthy communities.



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