

THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2022

Rethinking the Intergenerational Social Contract: Kindness as a Concrete and Actionable Goal

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The world is on fire. Climate change is ravaging the planet, democracy is under assault on every continent, and social trust is at all-time lows. The intergenerational contract has broken down. Current generations are running up a toll on the planet and social fabric that threatens to leave future generations between a burning forest and an angry mob. In turn, younger generations are failing to care for our elders in humane and dignified ways. We need to rethink our social contract. We need to reintroduce generosity, empathy, and humanity into all our decisions, from how we run our government to how we organize business. In this essay, I argue that we should write kindness into our intergenerational social contract in three concrete, actionable ways: (1) measuring kindness, (2) designing programs that are kind, and (3) regulating for kindness.

Designing for kindness is good for individuals and society alike

Kindness is good for the individual. Studies show that engaging in acts of kindness makes people feel calmer, less depressed, and increases feelings of self-worth. These results have been replicated across time and countries. Importantly, studies show that personal wellbeing increases regardless of whether or not you know the person to whom you are being kind. The positive link between kindness and wellbeing not only shows up in subjective studies, but is also seen in brain scans done by neuroscience researchers and in large-scale public health research. According to Dartmouth University, "People 55 and older who volunteer for two or more organizations have an impressive 44% lower likelihood of dying early," even after controlling for variables such as physical health and marital status. The researchers find that this effect is even stronger than the benefit of exercising four times per week.

Kindness is also good for society. For starters, kindness builds social trust. Over the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population that believes “most people can be trusted” has fallen by 20%. This is problematic for many reasons, including that social trust is foundational to good institutions and economic growth. Trust reduces transaction costs, helps enforce contracts, and facilitates lines of credit. On the policy side, researchers have found that trust strengthens democratic governance and improves the quality of macroeconomic decisions. Kindness, in turn, is a crucial building block of trust. Psychologists have used lab games to show that acting kindly or seeing others act kindly significantly increases the likelihood that you trust other people, even people with whom you have never interacted.

More broadly, the individual and social benefits of kindness are crucial for changing the world as it is into the world as it should be. We are living through trying times. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to skyrocketing mental health challenges. By expanding our capacity for kindness, we could unlock the psycho-social benefits listed above. The global economy is growing unevenly and unfairly, which experts worry will lay the foundation for widespread social unrest. Through kindness, we can build social trust that will improve economic stability, institutional strength, and social cohesion.

Enough kindness to go around: a virtuous cycle, driven by policy

Importantly, kindness is also both contagious and teachable. Researchers have repeatedly found that by being kind, you make other people kinder. There is a chain reaction to kindness, at both the individual and organizational levels. In a study of hundreds of business units comprised of more than 50,000 people, researchers found that acts of kindness were strongly associated with a culture of generosity within the company and that the likelihood of business units achieving their core goals increased significantly with more kindness. Kindness is also teachable. As Dr. Ritchie Davidson of the University of Wisconsin says, “It’s kind of like weight

training, we found that people can actually build up their compassion ‘muscle’ and respond to others’ suffering with care and a desire to help.”

Expanding kindness is not, moreover, an abstract or fanciful idea. The Scottish Government, for example, made kindness one of its core values in 2018. Scotland formally adopted kindness into its National Performance Framework and expanded kindness through three key actions: (1) measuring and auditing for kindness, (2) policy design for kindness, and (3) regulating for kindness. The results have been impressive, with Scotland rising to have measurably higher levels of kindness than any other country in the United Kingdom. Anecdotally, Scotland’s kindness is a beacon of human empathy. In May of last year, two men were detained by the UK Immigration Enforcement during an early morning raid on Eid al-Fitr. By mid-morning, several hundred protestors surrounded the van transporting the men and refused to let them continue, chanting, “these are our neighbors, let them go.” The UK authorities released the men, to cheers from the protestors of “you messed with the wrong”

Our world is too angry, too nationalistic, and too distrustful for us to continue with the status quo. We need to re-think what we prioritize and how we interact with one another. We need to focus on being kind and ensuring that kindness is shown across generations and passed from one to another. I propose a three-step process for accomplishing this, based on the Scottish example:

Step 1: Measure kindness. Government and business leaders should adopt kindness as a value and then actively measure the kindness displayed within their teams, identifying and celebrating examples of kindness and addressing moments that fall short. The simple act of measuring a value can significantly improve the likelihood that you achieve it, as the act of measurement re-orientes your decision-making towards that metric.

To measure kindness, government and business leaders should work with Measurement and Evaluation teams to design and conduct regular surveys and interviews of their staff and constituents. Within government, they should gather information across society, taking a broad look at how much kindness people are experiencing or exhibiting, and then look for patterns in the data that could help guide policy and programs. Within business, leaders should look at the ways in which their teams are behaving and consider whether they can take actions to foster further kindness. In any situation, an important first step will be defining outcomes, designing data collection tools, and then gathering information to help guide decisions.

Step 2: Design programs that are kind.

Organizations should define criteria of kindness, as the Scottish Government did, and then review their ongoing and new programming against that criterion, to ensure that programs meet their standards. For example, the government might decide that one standard of kindness is introducing more leeway into how fines get paid. Instead of requiring upfront payment, governments could allow for more flexible re-payment plans and more flexible payment options (e.g., allowing for cash payments, mobile payments, etc.). By doing so, government and businesses will infuse their work with more kindness, thereby teaching and creating a ripple effect of kindness.

At the same time, organizations should consider launching new programs that are designed to actively foster compassion. For example, Positive Psychological Interventions (PPI) have been shown to have a positive impact on levels of kindness and individual wellbeing. The government should consider launching PPIs within their communities, and businesses should do likewise within their teams. Similarly, research shows that “kindness media” – i.e., media intentionally created to show kindness – inspires viewers to be more kind, which in turn increases personal happiness. Organizations should consider adopting elements of kindness media within their work, thereby promoting

kindness within their teams and the general population.

Step 3: Regulate for kindness. Regulation should take kindness into account. Concretely, regulatory bodies should define metrics of kindness for different sectors and then estimate how regulatory changes will impact those metrics. Much like the United States’ Congressional Budget Office (CBO) predicts the impact of new legislation on a wide range of outcomes, governments should estimate how new regulation will change the overall kindness of a policy or legal framework.

For instance, as Artificial Intelligence (AI) expands, experts will need to design regulation to decide how society should interact with AI. Should AI be allowed to decide on criminal punishments? Should AI be used to give medical patients their diagnoses? In deciding these difficult regulatory questions, the government should weigh how predicted levels of kindness within society will change based on their decisions and tailor their actions accordingly. By doing so, we can harness regulation to not only increase our safety and efficiency, but also increase our capacity for human compassion.

Kindness is urgent, and concrete

Our world is on fire. White papers on “Creating Shared Value” and “Triple Bottom Lines” are insufficient to combat the challenges we face. We will not impact invest our way out of the climate crisis. We will not hackathon our way into better institutions. The challenges that we face are deeper, more existential, more human. Yes, we should build systems to internalize the negative costs of greenhouse gas emissions so that future generations do not bear the brunt of current energy expenditure. Yes, we should strengthen democratic institutions and ensure that voting remains accessible, free, and fair so that future generations inherit a system of governance better than our own. And yet, above all, we need to heal our wounds and embrace our shared humanity.

There is no simple solution to that challenge. We are facing a crisis of community. We are facing a crisis of the human spirit, wherein greed and selfishness have eroded trust and empathy. We have devolved into a culture of hate, fear, and anger. Just as kindness is infectious, so too is vitriol. To escape this hatred trap, to set ourselves on a path towards wellbeing and prosperity, we all need to advocate for kindness. We need to eschew

purely technocratic, margin-oriented solutions in favor of a more radical change to our social contract, wherein each generation hands a more humane, more empathetic, and more generous society to the next.

We need to write kindness into the intergenerational social contract. And we need to do it now.

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