

# INTERNATIONAL EXPRESSIONS OF KINDNESS

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This is a submission by

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This year, a new chapter of fear and violence began for many. Millions, in fact. Russia assaults Ukraine, a violent game which benefits no one, except a possible end result which only benefits one party. Victory for Russia, or for Ukraine. All the while, thousands die, soldiers and civilians alike. Thousands of humans. But how do we see this, from our screens where footage of toppled buildings and mutilated corpses are shown? We only offer our hopes to whichever side we choose, be it Ukraine or Russia, while we sit helpless, perhaps praying that this will all end, but then going about our daily lives. This is only too normal, because how does this all affect us? All we can do is watch and what we see strikes us, the depth and strength of which depends on the person.

Yet does this do anything to help any effort in the war? Well, it does garner attention both online and offline, but does this attention help any of those who suffer in this bloody conflict, those who cower in concrete bunkers, or who shiver in the snow, or those who get carried back on stretchers, broken in both body and spirit? No. This response that we give is all that we can do, against something we have no impact on. This basic response, reserved for the injured and

vulnerable, that of kindness, and of sympathy. Something so small, yet so important. What would a world without this simple human trait, this fundamental quality be like? A visualisation of this may seem easy, as there are so many conflicts that occur throughout the world, and still do, whether it be wars, massacres, cleansings, rapes or any other forms of violence. A world of pure violence and chaos. But would this trait ever disappear? Even the most despicable people this world has seen - Hitler, Zedong, Stalin – would still be capable of offering sympathy to some people, or animals. Even Putin, who willingly invaded Ukraine, is surely capable of sympathy. Only an emotionless, vegetative person would be incapable of kindness and sympathy of any degree, but that isn't why we're here. Why are we here?

To discuss the profound significance of empathy and kindness. Surely we have large amounts of these things in our world? Yes and no. Kindness on an individual level is more identifiable than kindness in groups? Perhaps. While humans have always remained, to some degree, empathetic, the world is different. Like many of you, I see a division between groups, split and forced apart by various contributing factors - war, political rivalry, bigotry and class. Even in the wealthiest of countries, bias and hatred are visible, helping drive rifts between people based on political opinion, race, gender and sexuality, regardless of *what* political opinion, race, gender and sexuality these affected people are or have. We can all agree that bigotry of any kind is bad, and equally so. So why does bigotry at all exist? Lack of understanding? Perhaps, but a lack of respect seems more likely. A lack of respect, and of empathy. Ranging from name-calling to genocide, all devoid of empathy or sympathy. A lack of kindness is the path to violence.

What is violence? Simply defined, any intent to hurt someone physically or psychologically, or supposedly harm. But violence and harm aren't always the same thing, because harm isn't always conscious. For instance, take a prison system that's poorly designed and harms the inmates, who live in unbearable conditions. Now imagine that the people who control this system do it because they intend to harm the prisoners. This intent makes the harm that the prisoners receive become violence, as the controllers of this system intend to hurt these prisoners for whatever reason. Now imagine that the controllers know that these prisoners suffer, but don't care, or perhaps they don't know that the prisoners suffer under their system. Is this violence, or merely harm? The system is still very much harmful to these prisoners, and the lack of empathy that these controllers have for the prisoners is terrible, but if no intentions are involved, then the harm done to these prisoners can't be described as violence, but only harm.

But what if the system is still harmful to these prisoners, but the controllers are aware of this, and are trying to fix the system? This concern over the wellbeing of the prisoners is sympathy, which, in other words, is the opposite to violence. But while the controllers may have sympathy, active or passive, the harm continues, illustrating how harm differs from violence in that violence is intent based, whereas harm is direct suffering itself, which may or may not stem directly from intent, based on the situation. For each scenario of the prison system, a stage of kindness or sympathy is displayed, from the sympathy of the controllers towards the suffering prisoners, to the apathy of the controllers towards the suffering prisoners, to the cruelty of the controllers towards the suffering prisoners. While harm may be inevitable, kindness does reduce the potential for violence. What does this all say, then? Kindness will never result in harm?

No. In fact, sometimes, harm can stem directly from kindness, e.g. someone making a decision out of kindness that goes horribly wrong. However, kindness reduces the risk of apathy, which then leads directly to violence, or intended harm. Without kindness on a wide individual level or political level, you get, at best, an apathetic, uncaring, grey society, whereas at worst, you get a violent, cruel society. It could be the case that an apathetic society is a direct precursor to a violent society, all stemming from a lack of kindness and respect. What constitutes violence? Physical violence can range from hitting to murder, all done with some sort of intent. Psychological violence, especially in today's society, takes the form of mentalised aspects of bullying, e.g. name-calling, bigotry, and now, cyberbullying and things like revenge porn, but also forms of psychological torture, such as confinement and humiliation, and deprivation of things such as sleep and food (perhaps this may qualify as physical torture). Violence and harm come in degrees, seeing as a simple slap to the face or a demeaning word aimed at a marginalised person is obviously nowhere near as bad as a stabbing or a conversion therapy session. Yet, any form of harm out of pure intent, whether it be kind or evil, is still violence (violence out of kindness is a grey area, however).

Kindness and respect are the polar opposites of violence; love is the pure reflection of the dark, twisted mirror image of violence. Kindness itself may be seen in two different forms; active kindness and passive kindness. Active kindness, as the term suggests, is actively trying to help people in need, the act of dynamic compassion, and trying to push for respect, although this can sometimes overstep boundaries (in the case of internet activists, the push for kindness and respect in the form of civil rights can go to the point of these same activists bullying people for not joining their fight, which is essentially violence, even if done out of kindness). Passive

kindness, on the other hand, is casual, everyday kindness and respectfulness. Greeting someone on the street, for instance, is a small gesture of respect, but has the capacity to make someone's day a lot better. Now, passive and active kindness are both important, but for an "ideal" society (a society free from most violence, as a society free from all violence essentially requires brainwashing and other means of suppressing human free will), a balance of both passive and active kindness is required, the right amount of active kindness to avoid complete apathy to social issues resulting in the direct harm of humans and the right amount of passive kindness to improve the lives of others on a smaller scale. Now, is violence something that can be wiped out forever? No, as there will always be some capacity for violence within humans that may be suppressed, but never fully eradicated. Things like insulting, name-calling, etc, will always be there, but these aren't the worst types of violence. Crimes such as rape, murder, etc are the types of violence that *must* be eradicated, as these directly lead to the destruction of people's lives, both figuratively and literally. Additionally, violence such as violent and non-violent bigotry and hatred is harmful to any person or group of which the bigotry is aimed at is also something that must go, as hatred can lead to outcomes ranging from suicide to even genocide.

Now, is violence ever justified? Self-defensive violence may be justifiable, given the severity of the situation and the degree of violence employed by the defending party, but is violence against criminals justifiable too? Should rapists and murderers be brutally punished for their crimes? Punished, yes, but the degree of violence used should not be overdone. A prison system itself is violence, but unlike murder or rape, it's violence with a purpose; to punish criminals for their unlawful deeds, and serves as a threat to any people who may be tempted to rape or murder. So while the existence of a prison system is lawful violence, to what degree should these criminals be punished within the system itself? The answer to this is that they shouldn't be punished beyond being confined to a draining, monotonous room locked away from the rest of a society they harmed. Violence to the degree of torture, e.g. beating, electrocuting, is not only harmful to the tortured criminal, but also to the torturer, as the act of torture begins to dehumanise them, little by little, as violence in many ways acts inversely to the ideal nature of humans as kind beings, and given that the act of torture in this scenario is done to pointlessly punish the criminal. When it comes to a violent criminal in a prison system, the prison system is violence enough, and there is no need to inflict further violence upon them. So an apathetic approach should be taken to dealing with these criminals, as further violence is unnecessary, but would execution be considered necessary? Execution is indeed a form of violence, to a very

high degree, as it exists to lawfully take the lives of criminals; but it does have its purposes, as a death sentence for high level crimes such as manslaughter would act as a warning to any potential mass murderers, while being seen as suitable punishment for criminals. However, a life sentence perversely offers both more and less punishment than a death sentence, as:

1. A lifetime in jail, depending on the jail, can be worse for criminals than execution, with many seeing the death sentence as an easy way out of a lifetime of monotony and suffering.
2. A lifetime in jail may be seen as better than death, and, alongside therapy and rehabilitation programs, can help redeem and heal criminals to some degree.

Keeping in mind that execution may have dehumanising effects on the executioner, a life sentence would be a better alternative to execution, given the dual nature of it in terms of harm and retribution. Now, returning to the war in Ukraine, the situation goes a little further than just normal violence. Putin's intentions were to take Ukraine without too much struggle and to make it a part of Russia, ignoring the fact that many Ukrainians are proud of their heritage, culture and country and rightfully willing to defend these things against Putin. While Putin's intentions were at best apathetic, as his intentions were done more so to benefit his own country rather than to harm Ukraine, his assault on various Ukrainian cities and towns were far less grey, as he had many buildings, including a children's hospital, bombed and civilians killed by his soldiers, all of which was intended to weaken Ukraine's resistance. In other words, all acts of deliberate violence, without any kindness. The war began over a lack of respect for Ukraine and out of a need for conquest, to assimilate Ukraine with Russia and prevent it from joining NATO and moving closer to the West. This lack of respect and consideration is how many wars start, and while some wars may start out of self-defence and a concern for country, all wars are violent in one way or another, and lead to harm and suffering. In other words, war is one of the most pointless exercises and, in the end, one of the greatest betrayals of kindness possible by humans.

Because kindness is quite possibly the single greatest trait of humanity. It allows us to form communities and build countries and alliances, and to create loving, peaceful sanctums. Kindness and violence are both advanced and primitive traits of human beings, in that they can allow us to create or undo incredible creations, but have always remained with us, and will forever be a part of us. But for a good society to function, one must always prevail over the

other. Violence in all its forms, murder, torture, rape, genocide, bigotry, hatred, or any activity that intentionally harms anyone, is wrong and while stopping violence as a whole is impossible, kindness is the best way to counteract it. Of course, the methods for stopping violence may go beyond kindness, even to being harmful – but kindness, respect and love are the most readily available antidotes to violence.

*by Isaac Edwards*