

Irresistibility
By
Daniel E. White February 26, 2024

Robert Palmer reached #2 on the Billboard charts including these words in his hit. I had forgotten the song until I read in “The Rotary” magazine that Rotary International President- Elect Stephanie Urchuck had once sung in a rock band that played Palmer’s piece. Urchuck has declared that she wants to make Rotary “simply irresistible” in her year as President and beyond.

If you remember the song, the rhythm and the words combine to make that auditory memory stick; it seems “simply irresistible.” Palmer, of course, was describing a woman. Urchuck broadened the focus.

In the spirit of the President-Elect’s meaning, I hope for the day when kindness, always being kind, is simply irresistible.

Surfing idly online one day, I came across an article by Rachel Fairbank in “Lifehacker,” September 1, 2022, titled “You’re Underestimating Kindness.” She wrote:

“In an overwhelming world, small acts of kindness can seem to have little meaning. In a world where bad things are happening every day, how much can a small action matter, anyway?

As it turns out, the impact of a small act of kindness is much stronger than we realize, both in terms of how it makes the recipient feel, and their willingness to pay that kindness forward.”

I’ve reflected before about how an act of kindness benefits both the actor and the recipient. I hadn’t thought about whether or not the recipient’s subsequent behavior was affected. Turns out research psychologists were curious about what might follow for the recipient after receiving the kindness.

Fairbank describes a “series of experiments to test out first how meaningful...small acts of kindness are to the people receiving them and how likely they are to pay that kindness forward. The answer, as it turns out, is that our acts of kindness have a far bigger impact on others than we realize. Kindness, even when it seems small and unimportant, matters a lot.”

People of a Certain Age, having reached a certain age, I think you and I probably knew this, at least intuitively if not based on research. We might also have assumed another finding: the recipient gets two benefits; whatever the kindness is and the warm glow from someone having been kind to him or her.

We would not be surprised that researchers also concluded that recipients, benefiting from that boost to the psyche, are inclined to spread that good feeling through their own actions, at least for a while. Being kind becomes temporarily simply irresistible.

Some months after reading Fairbank’s article, I was mulling over the current state of affairs in our society, at least those that get the most coverage in the various media, professional and social. I realized how much I process what I see and hear through a kindness filter. If I perceive a person, an action, a law, or a comment to be unkind, I move on. I see no reason for spending any time supporting unkindness.

That’s another benefit of being older and being retired. At my age, I have seen a wide variety of behaviors. Too often in my job, I heard unkindness, from adults and kids alike. I have a sense of what constitutes kindness and generosity of spirit developed over many years. I can choose not to associate with unkind people, need not be an attentive listener to unkind words in the way a school head had to be. I am aware, on a daily basis, that my time on earth, whatever its length, is finite.

There will be those who think that kindness can connote weakness, does not confront wrongdoing, or in some other way, suggests that one cannot be kind and committed to standards at the same time. High standards and kindness are not incompatible. Holding someone accountable for words or actions can be done kindly.

I use my kindness filter in evaluating people who seek my vote, in judging whether a law or an action passes muster, in deciding about the people with whom I choose to spend my time. There is no excuse for not being kind.

President-Elect Urchuck’s desire for Rotary to become simply irresistible is rooted in her belief in the values of Rotary, chiefly Service above Self. Isn’t kindness at the root of service? Rotarians recite The Four-Way Test: Is it the Truth; Is it Fair to All Concerned; Will it Build Good Will and Better Friendships; Will it Be Beneficial to All Concerned? Where is any part of that test incompatible with kindness?

Urchuck is surely aware of the aspirational nature of her declaration. I am equally aware that my hope for the day when kindness is the default position in human behavior can make Pollyanna seem like a sour puss.

But, if enough of us use a kindness filter, maybe we can start a chain reaction, like the psychologists suggests can happen.

The alternative we already see. Isn’t it worth a try to make kindness simply irresistible?

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