

The milk of human kindness

by Peter Mill

An unusual post popped up on my *LinkedIn* feed last week. It was from the husband of a National Health Service (NHS) nurse. A thank you note actually to, of all things, his local Aldi store. His wife had popped into the shop on her way to work that morning.

On seeing her uniform and badge, staff took her straight to the front of the queue outside the shop. Then, when she had loaded her trolley, she was shown to the front of the checkout queue. At which point, the store manager came over to speak to her. He told her that next time she wanted anything, even as early as 6am, she should knock on the window and if there wasn't a till open, they would open one up for her and that way she would never be held up buying food.

This post has gone viral, with almost 49,000 likes and 876 comments. In the middle of our Coronavirus crisis, stories like this are the tip of the iceberg. People everywhere are falling over themselves to be kind to our front-line NHS staff: free applause, free fruit and vegetables, even free cars. But these acts of kindness from the public and businesses pale into insignificance compared to the sacrifice shown by the NHS heroes who are literally putting their lives on the line.

Why do they do it? You might say they have to, it's their job. But that doesn't explain why 20,000 NHS medics who are already retired have applied to come back and help our hospitals get ready for the peak of the pandemic. What motive, other than altruism—the selfless concern for the wellbeing of others—could they possibly have to risk their lives in the face of this deadly virus? But if that is the case, where then, does

this sense of going over and above the line of duty come from? Is human kindness a result of homo sapiens being genetically wired to repeat certain behaviours that have proved beneficial to the species? Or is it, as Stephen Jay Gould suggests, an evolutionary by-product, some kind of genetic accident?

The title of this article comes from “the Scottish play”, *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare. On the face of it, the phrase, “the milk of human kindness”, seems to indicate that kindness is a good thing. After all,



milk is good, right? Yet when William Shakespeare makes Lady Macbeth speak those words, it turns out she is actually bemoaning the fact that her husband has too much kindness; so much so that it has made him “too soft” to kill his rivals! William Shakespeare was no geneticist, but he did have a gift for observing human behaviour.

And then there's that line from the famous Randy Newman song: “Human kindness is overflowing, and I think it's gonna rain today”. A very catchy tune; perhaps that's why the song has been covered by so many artists. As I hum that tune and sing that line to myself, I could be mistaken for thinking the writer is saying that kindness is a universal trait. Except when you scratch the surface, you realise this is a rather sarcastic song about a beggar on

the streets experiencing anything but kindness from his fellow human beings.

So from these two examples, we can see that if human kindness springs from our genes, like the gene that makes brussels sprouts taste bitter, not everyone has it. Or if everyone does have this mythical “kindness gene”, they are able to control it, turning it on or off at will. Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Selfish Gene*, puts it another way: our genes “instruct us to be selfish”. If we are “born selfish”, how can we break free from this selfishness?

Christians (like me) have a simpler, yet in many ways more profound, explanation for the origin of human kindness. It doesn't come from within, its source is outside us. We believe kindness comes from God; he is the origin of goodness, of love. In the Bible we can read a radical statement that takes this thought further: “We love because He first loved us”.¹ In other words, we are only able to love because God invented this thing called love. What this means is that, not only is there no love without God, but without God loving us, we would not be able to show kindness to others. Humans have the capacity to love, to show compassion, because we are made in the image of God.

I find this concept exciting. What this tells me is that love, goodness, kindness—whatever you want to call it—isn't a gift that some people have and others don't. It is available to everybody. It is up to us whether we want to use it or not.

Those front-line workers in our NHS and other emergency services are a wonderful example of the magic that happens when love is in action.

NOTE

¹ 1 John 4:19

Peter Mill writes from the UK.