

Service

One of the surest means to experiencing a sense of personal meaning can be found in the elevated emotions elicited by noble actions. It doesn't have to be grand accomplishments; the action can be very small indeed—and it needn't even be something that you do, it just needs to be something that you value and are inspired by.

In 1982, journalist Anne Herbert scrawled a statement on a napkin that started a worldwide movement. She wrote "**practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty.**" That one small idea lit the imagination of millions of people around the world and it continues to spread.

23 years later, a Google search on the keywords "random kindness" yields 618,000 pages in English. There are 10 books available on amazon.com on the subject. February 12-19 is Random Acts of Kindness Week. Schools, churches, civic groups, and countless individuals are finding creative ways to employ "guerrilla goodness" around the world (see below).

That one short phrase hit a tender, hungry place for millions. It's the hunger for positive actions to counter the barrage of negativity with which we are continually bombarded.

In 2000, Catherine Ryan Hyde published her best selling novel, *Pay It Forward*. Based on the novel's success, she began the Pay it Forward Movement (www.payitforwardmovement.com). The story was then made into a Hollywood movie. It's about a boy who takes a history class assignment to change the world seriously and conceives an ingenious plan. His idea is to help three people, doing something for them that they can't do for themselves without expectation for anything in return. His only request is that they pay it forward to help three more people.

Since watching the movie, people have found themselves many times saying to someone "It's OK, just pay it forward." I have no idea what the results will be, but the knowledge that I'm choosing to place myself in the web of kindness brightens my day. It's a gift to myself.

Jon Haidt, a gifted young University of Virginia professor, after studying the emotion of disgust, became curious about the moral opposite, which he calls "elevation." He collects stories about the reactions people have to observing others do something extraordinarily positive. His inspiration came from a letter by Thomas Jefferson describing the physical and emotional benefits of observing others perform "charitable and grateful acts" that make us want to perform likewise. Jefferson's description of the physical benefits matches Haidt's research: "feelings in the chest (sometimes described as a warm or open feeling) coupled with a motivation to help others and a feeling of being uplifted oneself. These results are consistent cross-culturally in America, India and Japan.

Based on Haidt's research, Martin Seligman, PhD, founder of positive psychology, has been inspired to conduct experiments in his University of Pennsylvania psychology classes. You can try his experiment for yourself. Allot yourself a certain amount of time



for two activities. Make the time and preparation for each activity as equal as you can. One activity is geared to give you personal pleasure. An example might be to create a special uninterrupted time for a hot bath, special food, or other highly pleasurable activity. The second activity is geared toward doing something for another that they cannot do for themselves. An example might be to help an elderly neighbor with a repair or to volunteer to read to the blind.

Immediately after each activity, be sure to write in your journal, taking note of how you feel mentally, emotionally and physically. Then one week later, write in your journal again and pay attention to how you feel about each of the activities. What do you notice?

Examples of Random Kindness and Senseless Acts Of Beauty

“Guerrilla goodness” is a creatively kind act that is designed to be anonymous. You appear and perform the act and disappear before you can be acknowledged. ““Here's the idea,” Herbert says. “Anything you think there should be more of, do it, randomly.” Her own fantasies include: 1) breaking into depressing-looking schools to paint the classrooms; 2) leaving hot meals on kitchen tables in the poor parts of town; 3) slipping money into a proud old woman's purse. Says Herbert, “Kindness can build on itself as much as violence can.”

Some popular examples of guerrilla goodness are paying the toll for the car behind you at a toll booth — or for six cars behind you. Paying for the person behind you at a movie theater and then slipping into the crowd. Cleaning a friend's house, not letting on who did it. Shoveling the neighbor's driveway when he's not looking. Leaving flowers at a neighbor's door.

For inspiring stories and a lot of information, visit www.actsofkindness.org.

The kindness can be anything that is truly considerate of the other person. It can be as small an action as smiling at a tired clerk or as grand as giving a large anonymous donation to a deserving student who wants to go to college. It can be random, guerrilla goodness or regular commitments like volunteering at a local service organization. The uplift described in the research is particularly acute when we give to those who truly need it.

However you do it, look for opportunities to give and you will find a new depth (or should I say “elevation”?) to your reason for being here.

