

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
Feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Naomi Shihab Nye

A reading of this poem is at once sobering and reassuring.

The triple use of the word “before” in the first part of the poem indicates the poet’s understanding that kindness is a quality long in the learning, only achieved after an ambivalent tutelage characterised by loss, awareness of immortality and of inhabiting the desolation between the marvellously phrased “regions of kindness”. Some might find this poem’s basic premise bleak, but for readers beyond a certain age it will have a persuasive truth. Naomi Shihab Nye, a contemporary poet of American Palestinian background, is writing about kindness as a way of life rather than a series of discrete acts. Kindness is not bland pleasantries but an expression of deeply felt communion. Kindness is born of the toughness of life.

The second stanza brings us to the evocative image of the Indian in a white poncho dead by the side of the road. Implicit is that the Indian is a minority victim, the white of the poncho perhaps recalling the white of the lamb of innocence. The claim of this stanza is that each person is an unreplicated individual with aspirations and purpose. In the very realisation of the Indian’s uniqueness, though, is the claim of kinship and commonality- “you must see how this could be you...” This statement strips the reader of the illusions of security, merit, affluence or control. The truth is that life is precarious and more arbitrary than we would like to admit. The “must” is an insistent call to education in kindness.

That “must” is one of several that sounds through the second part of the poem. Before we achieve the wisdom of kindness, says the poet, there are difficult imperatives to face, all to do with the pervasive presence of sorrow. The stanza ends with the powerful image “you must speak to it (sorrow) till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth.”

Out of the “musts” comes the pivotal “then” of the final stanza. According to Shihab Nye, only after the various encounters with sorrow will one come to know kindness. Ironically, it is not we who find the personified Kindness, but Kindness who finds us, informs and leads us, becoming a constant companion- “a shadow or a friend.” In being found by Kindness we achieve meaning and a kind of liberating hope, despite loss and sorrow.

As people of mercy we are reminded that kindness was a virtue much valued by Catherine McAuley as close to the heart of mercy. There is a saying attributed to her in which she tells her early companions that they

“should be particularly kind - the kindest people on earth, with the tenderest pity and compassion for the poor.” (from the *Familiar Instructions* of Catherine McAuley). Catherine may not have actually said it quite like that, but it is evident she would have endorsed such a sentiment.

Wherever and whoever we are in the world this day, let us pray that we meet and make kindness, and create for others rich regions of kindness.

Some further reflections:

1. In your own life where and how have been the regions of kindness?
2. How do you, the organisations to which you belong and the communities you inhabit, create regions of kindness?
3. What is the relationship between kindness and sorrow in your life?
4. How does Kindness lend meaning to your day and life?
5. Ponder Proverbs 3:3
6. Check out poet Naomi Shihab Nye via your favourite search engine.

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March 2013

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