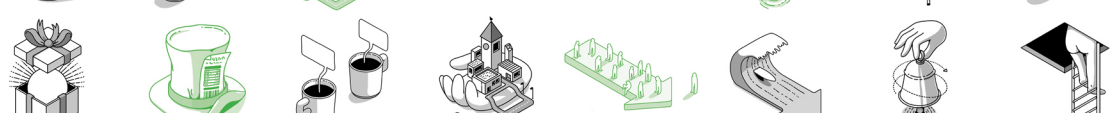
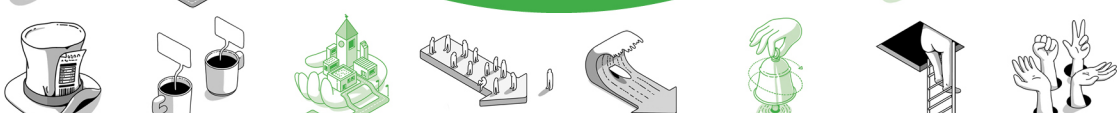


**COONA HORX STRATHERN**



**PEOPLE → PLANET → PROFIT**

# **THE KINDNESS ECONOMY**

**A NEW CURRENCY FOR  
THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS,  
WORK, AND LIFE**

**COONA HORX STRATHERN**

**THE  
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ECONOMY**

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**GABAL**

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*To my wonderful “beings,”  
Tristan and Julian*





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# 1

## DEGREES OF KINDNESS

### The Good, the Bad, and the Random

*If you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature, Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish.*

—RICHARD DAWKINS<sup>1</sup>

Kindness is much more complex and tricky than it sounds. Strangely, kind is not always sweet. It is one of those devilish qualities or acts that at first sounds perfectly harmless, but when looked at more closely can be not only controversial but also complex and surprising. We should all strive toward a kinder society and economy, but we should also beware of the pitfalls and the problems. Leaving biblical definitions aside, even the dictionary hides a multitude of sins. Officially, the Cambridge Dictionary defines kindness as “the quality of being generous, helpful, and caring about other people, or an act showing this quality.” Interestingly, definitions generally exclude any kind of profitable activity, which is where the idea for this book came in.

But first let’s think about the essence, the nuts and bolts, of kindness. If we take a closer look at the evolutionary purpose of kindness, inspect our

own preconceptions and motivations, other facets and questions emerge. Instinctively, we feel more comfortable with the idea of kindness as generous, nice, sweet, innocent, and empathetic. But many stories of kindness are tainted with pathos, considered corny, a bit naff, or—worse still—something reserved for slightly demented old people or women. This might sound a bit harsh, but it does serve to illustrate that there is not just one cuddly approach to kindness. On closer inspection, we find not just the good, but the bad and even the ugly side. It can, as we shall see, be boring, cruel, laughable, and, counterintuitively, selfish. When I first started to think about the meaning of the words *kind* and *kindness*, I noticed not only that the economic element was absent but that there are many different contradictory interpretations and uses that may have something to do with age, personality, upbringing, or (as we shall see) hormones!

## Kind of Ambiguous

There is a word that frequently gets used when people don't like something (usually experimental food) but don't want to offend anyone. They say it is "interesting," hoping to get away with a white lie. Similarly, I remember the ambiguous use of the word *kind* when I was young. It was in that horrible hormonal phase of starting to like boys, and I recall it all being a bit confusing and contradictory as to which characteristics were attractive. In the schoolyard a gaggle of us giggling girls would pick apart potential suitors and their qualities. "He seems really kind" was never considered a great compliment, or if you thought so, you kept it to yourself. There was also a consensual fatal attraction to the bad boys, who just seemed inherently more exciting and enticing. I put it down to hormones. Likewise, the boys were clearly not interested in nice quiet girls like me. They wanted someone and something a little more fun. Again, I put it down to pesky teenage hormones. An admittedly non-scientific survey of my now grown-up friends (both male and female) has revealed this was a thankfully short, rather ugly phase in the evolution of all our desires and relationships, and many, if not all, have subsequently found wonderfully kind and loving partners.



I too have since married a lovely kind man, but raise my eyebrows whenever anyone uses the word *kind* in a slightly ironic, oblique, or cynical fashion.

## Ugly Kindness

We would in our hearts like to believe that acts of kindness are always well intentioned. But interestingly this is not always the case. Kindness can be driven by selfishness or non-altruistic behaviour even when we are trying to impress upon our friends, customers, employees, or the recipient that our intentions are pure and good. Take this innocent-looking scenario: An older white-haired lady is sitting quietly at a table in a shopping centre. Clearly tired from shopping and taking time to rest and have a cup of coffee, she is approached by a smooth-faced young man awkwardly clutching a small bunch of rather ordinary-looking flowers. Bending down, he asks her if she wouldn't mind holding them for a moment while he then proceeds to take a jacket out of his rucksack. Once he has very demonstratively put it on, he turns to her, says, "Have a lovely day," and walks off, leaving her awkwardly holding the flowers. He has a smug little smile on his face. This scene was posted on TikTok by the perpetrator, Harrison Pawluk, with the caption "I hope this made her day better."

*How sweet*, you think. But then you look closer at her face. Not only does she look bemused (understandable), but she appears to sigh, looks irritated, and most significantly seems spectacularly devoid of any facial expression that would shout gratefulness or joy. She even tried to give the flowers to Pawluk's team when she spotted them filming the scene. Some might say that was an unkind, ungrateful reaction of a typical grumpy old woman. It turns out that Maree, as she is called, was not happy. And for good reason. When tracked down by reporters for Australian TV ABC, she told them quite resolutely that she felt like clickbait: "He interrupted my quiet time, filmed and uploaded a video without my consent, turning it into something it wasn't . . . I feel he is making quite a lot of money through it."<sup>2</sup> She didn't want pity, she didn't want the flowers, and she certainly didn't appear to need her day to be "made better," as Pawluk had

taken the liberty to assume. Indeed, he might not have made these assumptions or even approached her had she been a bored-looking middle-aged man. But then he might not have got 50 million views for the video.

Such videos are part of the trend of so-called random acts of kindness, thousands of which get promoted, are reposted, and go viral on social media. There is even a foundation and website devoted to random acts of kindness (*RandomActsOfKindness.org*). The “acts” listed, such as giving someone a seat on a crowded bus, are what I would call regular good manners that in an ideal world would be considered normal behaviour. Perhaps the clue is in the word *perform*. One of the oft-quoted and well-intentioned ideas behind these “acts” is that if you receive an act of kindness, then you should in turn do something kind for someone else. And so on. If it was really working, by the law of cumulative mathematics, I would expect the next generation to be inundated with hundreds of random acts of kindness every day.

Many of these actions simply reduce kindness to a meme, a cultural gene that is only really valued when filmed and posted. Quiet acts of kindness get bad press, or rather no press. Leaving aside some cringeworthy, selfish TikTok stars who are giving kindness a bad rap, the intentions of most of the random acts of kindness activists—or RAKtivists as they call themselves—are for the most part good and all very well meaning. Yet I suspect that many of these acts are an unwelcome hindrance or diversion to working toward a real, effective kindness economy for everyone.

### **Cruel to Be Kind**

The phrase “cruel to be kind” is one of those horrible bits of “wisdom” that is used far too casually and often in the strangest situations. Among the more banal examples, it could be used to stop someone from eating another bar of chocolate or a big fat sugary doughnut under the premise that it is for their own good. Or trickier, as some argue, it might be used to justify not giving money to drug-addicted or alcoholic beggars on the street in the misdirected belief that it will help them get over their dependency.

## Degrees of Kindness

Even my own attempts at being cruel to be kind have backfired. I grew up with chain-smoking parents and on my odd trips abroad with friends or school, I was duly asked to return with cheap cartons of duty-free ciggies. As a young teenager I hated them smoking and rather pompously took the moral high ground and refused to smuggle the cigarettes back, citing not that it was illegal (which it clearly was), but that they should smoke less. This arguably ended up harming me more than them. Not only were they very grumpy for a few days, but they also smoked just as much as before—perhaps even more on account of being grumpy—and it curtailed any increase in my pocket money.

For a more classic example of the use of the phrase, look no further than Sparta, where malformed babies were supposedly left to die “out of kindness.” In his biography *Life of Lycurgus*, Greek philosopher Plutarch recounted how the ancient Spartans submitted newborns to a council of elders for inspection. The babies that were deemed “fit and strong” survived, but those deemed to be “lowborn or deformed” were left outside to die. Plutarch claimed that this was “on the grounds that it is neither better for themselves nor for the city to live [their] natural life poorly equipped.”<sup>3</sup> Not only did the supposed events take place around 600 BCE, an estimated seven hundred years before the author was born, but recent evidence shows that they never actually happened. Archaeologists have found much evidence showing that in fact many newborn babies with health problems were well cared for. The remains of infants with disabilities show that they appear to have been nurtured, and “an anonymous Greek doctor writing around 400 B.C.E. advised contemporary physicians on how to help adults ‘who are weasel-armed from birth.’”<sup>4</sup>

This “cruel to be kind” mentality has been demonstrated in a strange form with the current generation of climate activists gluing themselves to roads and blocking traffic for hours to make a point about fossil fuel consumption. They get little sympathy from people trying to get to work or their kids to school. Another effort from climate activists that backfired in terms of public sympathy was the dousing with tomato soup of the Vincent van Gogh painting *Sunflowers* in London’s National Gallery on

October 14, 2022. As Irish artist Charlie Scott reminded me, van Gogh was a proverbial starving artist who barely earned enough to be able to eat soup during his short lifetime. Not so much cruel to be kind, but cruelty without thought.

## Naturally Evolving Kindness

It would be nice to think that we need not question if it is in our DNA to be kind or if we can throw soup around in a kinder manner. As the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins wrote, “Human society based simply on the gene’s law of universal ruthless selfishness would be a very nasty society in which to live.”<sup>5</sup> So are we all just driven by our “selfish gene,” as Dawkins calls it? Or is there a natural evolutionary drive or purpose to being kind? Do we need kindness to survive? As Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods point out in their book *Survival of the Friendliest*, “What allowed us to thrive while other humans went extinct was a kind of cognitive superpower: a particular type of friendliness called cooperative communication.”<sup>6</sup> We still debate if it is down to nurture or nature or if we should look more closely at epigenetics, the science that says environmental or experiential factors and things like traumatic experiences may lead to modified activity of the genes. Either way, it comes down in part to your belief in free will. As Adam Omary writes in *Psychology Today*, “Our character is not entirely based on our genes, nor are we powerless to the influence of genes on our behavior, nor are we entirely free and uninfluenced by our genetic makeup. The answer is somewhere in the middle.”<sup>7</sup>

## Older and Kinder?

I began to wonder whether we get kinder as we get older, as part of the process of “maturing.” Can we learn as a society or as individuals to become kinder as time moves on? My dear grandmother Kathleen used to say that around fifty years of age, people go one of two ways: they either become grumpy old farts (hence the popularity of bizarre BBC shows such as

*Grumpy Old Women* and *Grumpy Old Men*) or they become much nicer and kinder. She definitely belonged to the latter group—so much so that when builders stole some silver from her hallway on their way out she remarked that they probably needed the money.

Try this experiment yourself (whether you are over fifty or not). Do you believe you were once kinder or unkind? It is a thankless and problematic task, as we tend to remember extremes—when we were really horrible or really kind, or when people were really horrible or really kind to us. I still owe several ex-boyfriends and one ex-husband an apology or three (though on second thought, some of them owe me an apology as well). One person I do not owe an apology is a particular British sculptor. Back in the 1980s when I was working for an influential art magazine in London, I advised the editor not to review a particular show as I knew the artist had beaten his wife (his stepdaughter was a close friend of mine). He was an up-and-coming artist, and admittedly not a bad one at that. He was showing in an esteemed gallery, and he wouldn't have had any idea why he was not reviewed. And since thankfully his wife had left him by then, I knew that this particular unkindness would not be taken out on her.

There are other interesting stories of people who try to do what they see as the right and “kind” thing years later out of guilt. Italian museum curators and archaeological officers noticed a trend whereby tourists return by post the artefacts they'd stolen from cultural sites when they were young and daring, along with heartfelt letters of confession. You could argue that this is not about kindness, but about being racked with guilt. But in a small symbolic way it shows that we are capable of change or can get kinder as we age. One of the best stories is of an American woman who posted a package to the National Roman Museum containing a fragment of ancient marble. In her brutally honest letter, she wrote, “Please forgive me for being such an American asshole and taking something that was not mine to take. I feel terrible for not only stealing this item from its rightful place but placing writing on it as well.” She apparently had tried to scrub the evidence clean to no avail, so it was still inscribed with the message “To Sam, love Jess, Rome 2017.” Another American, Bob Martin, who is in his sixties,

went a step further than a contrite letter, travelling in 2018 all the way to Paestum, a vast archaeological park of ancient Greek ruins in the southern Italian region of Campania, to give back a small figurine he took from the site over fifty years earlier. “I was really surprised,” said Gabriel Zuchtriegel, the park’s director. “It wasn’t the first time this had happened but what was special is that the person wanted to come all this way.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, so many stolen relics have apparently been returned to Pompeii that the museum established a special display for them.

## Learning Empathy

Many people like to believe that kindness is primarily driven by empathy, the ability to understand and share in another person’s feelings and experiences. However, empathy isn’t kind in and of itself. (Just to confuse things even more, empathy also isn’t synonymous with sympathy.) Kindness comes into it when you take the time to be empathetic and to think about others’ points of view—be it your friends, employees, customers, suppliers, and so on—or when you do something about how they’re feeling. Empathy is an important tool to make us more attuned to the need for kindness. Kindness is a fringe benefit.

Consider the story of Tom Chapman. Chapman, a barber, realised early on in his career that he was in a unique position to help his clients beyond just giving them a great haircut. At his salon in Torquay in the UK, he noticed that people shared confidences or worries about their lives that they wouldn’t tell anyone else. A woman I know told her hairdresser she was worried her husband was having an affair because no one else in her circle would listen. Another told her hairdresser she was having an affair, driven by the need to tell someone. Where some hairdressers discreetly roll their eyes—“too much information!”—others see an opportunity. Chapman told the *Guardian*, “There’s something about the relationship between a barber and their client where there’s complete trust.”<sup>9</sup>

While it’s common for women to share, Chapman noticed how many men were opening up to him. They were sharing aspects of their lives with

him in the knowledge that their secrets were safe. But what he heard often worried him, and he became increasingly attuned to the signs of depression. It was after a friend died by suicide that Tom set up the Lions Barber Collective to train all barbers to aid suicide prevention by spotting clients who are struggling with their mental health and guiding them to where they can get help. National Health Service figures in the UK shockingly show that suicide is the single biggest killer of men under the age of fifty. In the United States, males represented 78.7 percent of all suicides between 2000 and 2020, and worldwide three out of four suicides are male.<sup>10</sup>

The idea that you can teach and train empathy is behind an interesting new initiative in Irish schools. The aim is to address problems such as bullying and racism, and the program has been found to improve not just behaviour, but academic performance as well. Scientists have found that children are born with an innate capacity for empathy, and shown how infants can not only recognise distress in another person but also demonstrate concern. The danger is that we get less able to do this as we get older, hence the compelling case to introduce empathy education into schools. Pat Dolan, who has been researching this area for many years, told the *Irish Times*, “It’s as important as learning maths and English . . . I’d actually even go further and say that the way civic society is going—not just in this country but globally—we’re going to be dependent on empathy.”<sup>11</sup> Dolan has a team based at the University of Galway who have rolled out a twelve-week Activating Social Empathy programme into over one hundred post-primary schools in Ireland. The idea is first to teach the students what empathy is and why it is important, and then they get to practice those skills in a project of their own choosing. Dolan explained that the programme improved not only pro-social behaviour (the willingness to do good) but cognitive empathy (understanding other people’s perspectives) and affective empathy (sharing others’ emotions or feelings) as well. He is, however, a realist, and while he would like to see an “empathy revolution” that provides a “blood supply” for communities, he does not flatter himself that he is creating a whole new generation of Mother Teresas or saints. “We all have failings,” he said. “So, it shouldn’t be seen that if you fail that

in some ways that you don't have empathy." And, very empathetically, he points out, "You may have more empathy on a Friday evening than you do on a Monday morning."<sup>12</sup>

## The Don Quixote Syndrome

You might, of course, wake up on a wet Monday morning and decide to do something altruistic. *Altruism* is generally defined in psychology as "acting to help someone else at some cost to oneself." The word derives from the French *autrui*, meaning "other people," but interestingly studies have shown that altruism benefits not just the receiver but also the giver. According to an article by Michael Vlerick from the Department of Philosophy at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, "The evolution of altruistic cooperative behavior—in which an organism's action reduces its fitness and increases the fitness of another organism—only makes sense when it is directed at genetically related organisms (kin selection) or when one can expect the favor to be returned (reciprocal altruism)."<sup>13</sup>

So effectively altruism is not always selfless. In extreme cases, as Dr Sanxing Sun explains, altruism can become pathological. He has argued that people "mistake their underlying self-serving motivation for true altruistic intention." As a result, they are "less likely to restrain themselves from being carried away by their self-serving motivation."<sup>14</sup> To illustrate, Dr Sun points to Don Quixote, the main character in Miguel de Cervantes's famous novel of the same name, who has read one too many stories about knights and becomes obsessed with knighthood, chivalry, and jousting. Don Quixote decides to embrace the duties of knighthood and live according to the chivalric code to save the world. Sadly, his adventure quickly devolves into a hilarious satire of purely imaginative knight-errantry. He is mocked for his attempts and eventually gives up on his mission. Pointedly, even those Don Quixote has helped do not seem to appreciate it. As Dr Sun points out in his paper, "By acting like a knightly man, he actually wants to satisfy a much larger desire, which is to see a glorious image of him and have a feeling of significance or superiority over



others.” This is what’s known as case of ego-defensive altruism or, as I like to call it, altruism gone rogue.

This tricky relationship between ego and altruism is neatly summed up in a real-life story in the *Guardian* in which Martin Love recounts his inadvertent attempt at being a modern-day Don Quixote.<sup>15</sup> It is a tale that in one form or another will resonate with many of us who have “performed” an altruistic act, wondered if it was really wanted or expected, and then considered who actually benefited the most: the receiver or the giver. In Love’s case he gave a lift to a hitchhiker called Brendan. So far, so kind. They got talking and Brendan told Love he had not had it easy in life. Family tragedy, followed by a mugging, had left him desperate, hungry, without an ID or money, and by the side of the road hitching. As the story unfolded over the course of the drive to London, Love incrementally and generously increased his commitment to helping Brendan. By the end of the journey at Victoria Station, he had offered to buy Brendan a plane ticket back to Ireland and to cover the cost of the new ID he would need to get there. As Love tells it, “To my astonishment I heard myself say: ‘Well, I’ll get you £200, Brendan.’” “Grand,” replied Brendan, apparently without so much as a blink. Then, Love reports, after a short pause Brendan added, “And please don’t worry. I’ll definitely wire you the money when I get home.” He then took Love’s phone number and said he’d call as soon as he could to arrange the transfer. And so Love dutifully and altruistically stopped at a cashpoint and handed over the cash. When Brendan got out of the car, he gave Love a huge, warm, thankful hug. As Love drove the final miles home, he thought about what he’d done and then what he’d have to tell his wife. After all, it was her money too. His wife, he explained, was surprised at her husband’s credulousness, but Love really wanted to think the best of Brendan and genuinely thought he would get in touch. Eight weeks later, having heard nothing from Brendan, Love was left with the nagging feeling that “after Brendan was mugged in Birmingham, he then mugged me in Victoria.”

After a few more weeks of jibes from his friends about his gullibility, Love looked up Dr Sun’s work. He subsequently reported, “I now feel

happier thinking about Brendan. If I were more cynical, I would not have stopped in the first place . . . but I did. He asked for help, for a lift, for money to get home, and in good faith I gave them to him. That's got to be a good thing. If he conned me, then that's a matter for him and not me . . . It wasn't a loan; I gave the money to Brendan. The cost to myself was £200. That evening, and at that point in his life, Brendan needed it more than I did. Maybe the real question should be: did I give him enough?" And what's more, Love is still picking up hitchhikers.

## The Currency of Kindness

I like to think of kindness as a type of currency, with different coins and notes that can be exchanged for different purposes and aims. Accordingly, there are many types of kindness that can be used for profit in business. However, when we perceive ourselves to be under threat or when we're fearful for whatever reason, there's often a dog-eat-dog kind of mentality that says kindness is a luxury that few businesses can afford. It is, one hears, the privilege of the elite and well-off, or maybe even only genuinely possible for do-gooders, nuns, saints, and charitable organisations.

In a way, it doesn't matter if you prefer to call it altruism or empathy. What matters is that we recognise the need for more kindness and find a fitting workable frame for it. In times of economic struggle and recession, threat of war, and insecurity, kindness—far from being sidelined—will come back into focus as the fabric of what keeps us going individually, as a community, and as a society. And the next stage or logical extension is, I believe, buying into it as a legally binding economic principle.