

Week 35: The Kindness Challenge

We're at the kitchen table—my wife, youngest son, daughter, and I—and we're playing Go Fish. The game is quickly becoming too competitive: my son is hiding cards underneath the table, I'm pretty sure my daughter is sneaking cards from the pile, and heated words are starting to fly. Most of them are not from me. I'm tempted to end the game.

Instead, I announce we're changing the *goal* of the game.

We're going to keep a tally of kindness during the game and, regardless of who has the most cards at the end, the winner will be the one who has shown the most generosity and gentleness. At first, the kids look at me like I'm crazy. Then it changes everything. My son asks me if I have an eight. He has an odd, gleeful glimmer in his eye and, as I start to reach for my eight, he stops me. He pulls a card from his hand. An eight. And *he* gives it to *me*.

Suddenly, I have more cards, but we *all* have smiles on our faces.

It quickly devolves into the weirdest card game I've ever seen. By the end, it's not clear who has the most cards, because we've been trying to give them all away and we've been too busy laughing to keep track. But one thing is clear: joy happened.

A week after the Go Fish game that devolved (or, perhaps, *evolved*) from competition to kindness, it's an unusually warm December day, and I'm sitting along the river walk in the town where I work. On a bench. Still. Face turned toward the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. It's a Saturday and the river walk is busy. Pedestrians walk by me. They're all dressed impeccably. Classy. Hair glimmering. The scent of aftershave and perfume is everywhere. They're almost invariably fit. Strong. Everything is in place. They are clearly winning at this competition called life.

And not a single one of them looks at me.

Admittedly, I must look a little crazy. Blue jeans. Frayed hat. Dirty tennis shoes. Sitting still, staring at the sun. I try to make eye contact but, as they approach, they suddenly become very interested in the ground. There are no exceptions. Until there is. She's young. And she doesn't look like the rest. She looks a little untethered. She's wearing black clothes and black eyeliner. She's flirting with a Goth persona but she's not all the way there. She's a little bit on the fringe of everything, including herself.

And she's not interested in the ground.

Our eyes meet and hers soften and before I can get a word out, she says, "Hi." I hear something in her voice that breaks my heart. It's relief. That someone saw her.

I feel it, too, and there's relief in my voice, as well, as I smile back and say "Hi." Two people competing at kindness and ending up in a tie.

Another week later and I'm in a Target store, cranking out Christmas shopping. Anonymous shoppers push past me, bump into me, and reach past me for the last set of Legos on the shelf. It's like I'm an invisible player in a highly competitive game of consumer Go Fish. I'd like to suggest we change the rules, but no one would be listening. Which is when I sneeze.

And from an aisle over, someone calls, "Bless you!"

Those two words are long and drawn out, not well-articulated. They sound wet and nasally and were clearly said through a speech impediment. When I hear it, I remember the group of young people I'd seen earlier in the store—a collection of physically and intellectually disabled children, brought to the store by several guides to complete their own Christmas shopping. In a store full of people competing for the best presents and the best life, they aren't competing at the game the rest of us are playing, because their DNA has disqualified them from the contest. So, they play a different game altogether. A game called kindness. And, in a Target store, finally, I decide it's the only game I want to play.

I look around the corner and I say thank you.

Let's admit it: we're obsessed with winning. Just look around. Everything has become a competition. Our will-to-win is *everywhere*, and it's not going *anywhere*. But what if we gave it something better to do? What if we all decided to compete at a game called kindness?

Two little kids at a card table, a teenage girl on a river walk, and a disabled kid in a Target store have made me wonder if it's the only game worth playing. What if we all tried to win the kindness game? Until it devolves into a life of love and laughter. Until joy happens. Until we've quit playing games altogether.

Want to take the kindness challenge?

I dare you.