



UK Health Alliance on Climate Change

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Never ever underestimate the impact of small acts of kindness

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A hospital patient feels terrified in a sleepless night, when a nurse—or perhaps a porter—comes and holds her hand. That’s the moment that defines her experience of the hospital. The confusion over appointments, the difficulty of understanding what the doctors are saying, and the postoperative wound infection are all forgotten. Another patient’s experience of a traumatic time in hospital centres on a ward assistant bringing him a glass of cold water and sitting with him as he drank it.

I’m reminded by the importance of kindness in two books I’ve just been reading.

Sebastian Barry’s novel *The Secret Scripture* tells the story—or rather stories as there are competing versions—of a highly intelligent woman who is a hundred years old and has for some 60 years been incarcerated in an Irish mental hospital that is now set for demolition. The psychiatrist, an uncertain but kind man, is trying to find how the woman came to be committed. Was it for some social reason that would mean she should be released? The woman enjoys his visits to her room but doesn’t want to tell him anything. She’s secretly written her own story.

The psychiatrist has problems. He drunkenly, stupidly, and briefly betrayed the wife he loved, and she was never able to forgive him, sleeping on a different floor. She dies suddenly, and the psychiatrist is almost overwhelmed by grief. He finds comfort in visiting the older woman, and sometime after it happened he remembers this episode:

“I must never forget that in my moment of deepest travail she crossed the room and put her hand on my shoulder, an utterly simple gesture perhaps, but more graceful and helpful to me than the gift of a kingdom.”

Remember: a simple act of kindness can be more than “the gift of a kingdom.”

The other book that deals with kindness is Richard Flanagan’s memoir *Question 7*. It is the best book that I’ve read in the last year, although I will certainly give five stars to Barry’s book.

Flanagan’s memoir ranges over much territory, but at the heart of the book is an expression of his love for his father. Flanagan’s father was a prisoner of the Japanese during the war and worked on the Death Railway. His appalling experiences provided much of the material for Flanagan’s novel that won the Booker Prize, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.

The dropping of the atomic bombs saved Flanagan’s father, who was inches from death when the war in the Pacific finally ended. Much of *Question 7* tells the story of the origins of the bomb and how it changed the world. Flanagan’s father—rather like my father who spent three years as a prisoner of the Germans—when he got home to Tasmania had had

enough of brutality and, indeed, of travel and going abroad.

Flanagan writes: “His primary emphasis in all things was on gentleness, kindness and a certain restraint.” This was true of my father as well.

Flanagan’s father valued “The human goodness of others, to be astonished by the small everyday acts of kindness too easily dismissed as everyday.”

Great writers have a gift of seeing and describing beautifully what we may know but often forget, but they have their regrets: “so much of my thought had gone into my writing a novel about loving people around you and so little into loving the people around me.”

But Flanagan does connect finally with the huge value of everyday contact with his huge family:

“For the first time I heard their stories of love that existed beyond their asides and anecdotes and opinions, that resided in their food and drink and worn chairs and scratched tables and in their touches, their stolen looks, their averted eyes. It’s a comfort it’s a blessing, as my mother would say. No comma. The indescribable warmth of laughter the incandescent human comfort of being alive with others. The blessing of everything that lives everything that lives is holy.”

Modern industrial healthcare too often, I fear, fails to recognise the supreme importance of kindness and “the indescribable warmth of laughter the incandescent human comfort of being alive with others.”

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Barry S. *The Secret Scripture*: A BBC2 'Between the Covers' Booker Gem 2021 (p. 281). Faber & Faber. Kindle Edition.