Part I
Healthy kindness

CHAPTER 1

Rescuing kindness

Yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full o' the milk of human kindness.
(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)

Kindness and kinship

The word 'kindness' evokes mixed feelings in the modern world. To begin this exploration of its importance and value in transforming healthcare, it is important to bring into focus what it is we are discussing. This means attempting a definition. Almost more importantly, it means rescuing the concept (and what it indicates) from the grip of a range of social and cultural forces that warp, denigrate and obscure what it is, marginalise kindness in the debate about what matters, and make it more difficult to be kind.

As an adjective, *kind* means being of a sympathetic, helpful or forbearing nature and, importantly for our subject, being inclined to bring pleasure or relief. It is important to keep it rooted in its deeper meanings, though. It can easily become a mere synonym for individual acts of generosity, sentiment and affection, for a general, fuzzy 'kindliness'. The Old English noun *cynd* metamorphosed through Middle English to become *kinde* and into our modern language as *kind*. The word meant 'nature', 'family', 'lineage' – 'kin'. It indicated what we are, who we are and that we are linked together, in the present and across time.

The word *kindness* indicates the quality or state of being kind. It describes a condition in which people recognise their nature, know and feel that this is essentially one with that of their kin, understand and feel their interdependence, feel responsibility for their successors and express all this in attitudes and actions towards each other. Kindness is both an obligation to one's kin born of our understanding of our connectedness, and the natural expression of our attitudes and feelings arising from this connectedness. Real acts of kindness emerge from this state. Kindness challenges us to be self-aware and takes us to the heart of relationships,

where things can be messy, difficult and painful. It is closely linked with the concept of compassion (literally, suffering with), sympathy (fellow feeling) and the biblical word *agape* (neighbourly or 'brotherly' love). People who are 'rooted' in a sense of kinship with each other are inclined to attentiveness to the other, to gentleness, warmth and creativity on their behalf. Kindness is kinship felt and expressed.

Kindness is natural – we see it all around us. It drives people to pay attention to each other, to try to understand what they enjoy, what they need. It emerges from a sense of common humanity, promotes sharing, effort on others' behalf, sacrifice for the good of the other. It drives imagination, resourcefulness and creativity in interpersonal, family, community and international life. When people are kind, they want to do well for others. It is also difficult, involving overcoming narrow self-interest, anxiety, conflict, distaste and limited resources. Kindness involves the risk of getting things wrong, maybe of being hurt somehow in the process. Kindness is most effective when directed by intelligence. It really is no good fixing the boiler for the elderly lady next door if you are not qualified in gas engineering, however good she or you feel about your apparent generosity. Knowing not to feed a hungry newborn with pasta can be a help. Understanding the challenges of adolescence can lead to more productive, and less exhausting, parenting.

Kindness is necessary, too, in general and special forms. Most decorated service personnel directly ascribe their heroism to strong, intimate fellow feeling and kinship with their comrades – as individuals and as groups. They know and feel that they are 'kin', 'of a kind', and act accordingly. Such inspiring connectedness is also required when a parent cleans the faeces and vomit of the infant or when the clinical worker sees through frightening, distasteful evidence of accident or illness to care for the person suffering. The armed services, along with their emphasis on drill, discipline and chain of command, put enormous effort and skill into promoting connectedness, loyalty and kinship. This fellow feeling helps those in the services to overcome fear, focus on their frightening task and work together – even in the face of death.

It cannot be said that the same attention is given to the promotion of fellow feeling and kinship in the NHS, and that is alarming. It is particularly worrying because NHS staff need not only to develop solidarity among themselves against a common enemy. They must work together to meet others (patients and their families), to connect with them, ascertain their needs (which is frequently difficult), treat them and help them stay well. There is something rather distasteful about the current vogue for the metaphor of 'war' in health – the 'war' on cancer was much promoted in late 2009, for example. However, clinicians and patients occupy a field full of dangers, uncertainties and choices that frequently demand teamwork in crisis, courage and intense relationship. Daily life is full of routine, procedures and resources that need to be brought to life and marshalled to

address real needs and dangers for real human beings. Though the risk to the clinician is far less overtly dramatic than that to the soldier, there are frequent high risks of mistakes, of things going wrong, of illness killing the patient. Small errors can have enormous consequences. To fail to attend to promoting kinship, connectedness and kindness between staff and with patients is to fail to address a key dimension of what makes people do well for others in such circumstances.

For centuries, kindness was seen as a primary virtue. Critically, that does not mean it was simply regarded as 'a good thing'. A virtue has to be worked at, because achieving it is, however 'natural', difficult. All major religions, and the cultures they have influenced, promote compassion, hospitality to the stranger, treating other people as one would wish to be treated oneself, indeed 'loving kindness', within a recognition that much of human nature pushes against it (Armstrong, 2009). But kindness as we have defined it is not just asserted as a virtue in religion. It has also had a central place in secular – indeed materialist – movements.

Political concepts such as the brotherhood of 'man', socialism and other revolutionary movements, and projects such as anti-slavery, women's suffrage and anti-racism are all centred on the idea of overcoming apparent differences, removing conditions of inequality, disadvantage and suffering, restoring kinship. Right-wing movements are also characterised by an idea of kinship – of a folk, a family, a race, a nation. Here, though, we see 'kinship' being defined *against* or *at the expense of* rather than *including* and *in the interests of* others. Such a position is also readily identifiable in the more fundamentalist religious movements, which set themselves and their kin against those of other religions and of none. In left thinking, too, especially revolutionary socialism, a principle that we are all equal and interdependent, a commitment to serving the common interest ('from each according to their ability; to each according to their need') has nevertheless frequently split 'the human family' into insiders and outsiders.

One of the more problematic aspects to kinship, then, is whom we include as kin, and how we understand and manage the difficulties in our relationships and obligations 'within the family' and 'with the other'. How we behave on that boundary determines how much kinship is expressed as kindness beyond narrow self-interest.

That the espousal of the virtue has been used to justify all sorts of means, ranging from the inspired to the barbaric, in both religious and secular life, shows, of course, that a philosophical attachment to kindness is not enough. Kindness implies an attitude of openheartedness and generosity, but also a *practice* that can be challenging and risky and that requires *skill*. The inconsistency in the true application of the virtue has not just been because it is hard to fight unkindness in the world: it is also because it can be very hard to be kind, individually or in groups. That, in turn, is hard to admit.

Kindness disparaged

A consequence of this has been a growing tendency to suspect any person, movement or institution promoting kindness as naïve, hopelessly idealistic and ineffectual, or even sinister, hypocritical and dangerous. We have learned to suspect assertions of values like kindness and kinship, and to put our faith into more selfish, technical, more 'privatised' things. In modern Western society this retreat from kinship has been accelerated by a wide range of powerful influences.

The warping and obscuring of what kindness is about have been extensively discussed by psychoanalyst Adam Phillips and historian Barbara Taylor in their book *On Kindness* (2009). They explore the way in which a philosophy and culture of competitive individualism and the pursuance of self-interest have challenged the value, and negatively influenced the meaning, of kindness. Kindness, they say, is not a temptation to sacrifice ourselves, but to include ourselves with others – kindness is being in solidarity with human need. They describe a process in which what had been a core moral value, with a subversive edge, at centre stage in the political battles of the Enlightenment, became something sentimentalised, marginalised and denigrated through the 19th and into the early 20th century:

> Kindness was steadily downgraded from a universal imperative to the prerogative of specific social constituencies: romantic poets, clergymen, charity-workers and above all, women, whose presumed tender-heartedness survived the egoist onslaught. By the end of the Victorian period, kindness had been largely feminized, ghetto-ized into a womanly sphere of feeling and behaviour where it has remained, with some notable exceptions, ever since. (Phillips & Taylor, 2009, p. 41)

Gradually, the value and pertinence of kindness was edged into this periphery by a spirit of 'manly' rugged individualism and competitive enterprise. This movement was closely associated with the Industrial Revolution, with its valuing of scientific progress, technology and entrepreneurship, reinforced by the attitudes and wars of Empire. A split developed between (empty-headed, unrealistic, amateur, female) kindness and (knowing, clear-sighted, professional, male) competitive enterprise and the pursuit of self-interest. A range of other cultural crowbars reinforced this split. One of the key influences was that of mass production and the associated market. This increasingly shifted the emphasis in people's lives to being consumers rather than sharers, to acquisition and to the competitiveness that used quaintly to be referred to as 'keeping up with the Jones's' and might today be expressed as keeping up with the Americans or Chinese.

Increasingly, this quest for security and well-being through acquisitiveness and material goods has centred on technology and industry – as possession, as that which makes and secures these possessions, and that which

communicates and displays them. Such competitiveness is not reserved for wealth and possessions but extends into all aspects of social life. This is most vivid in celebrity culture and the myriad 'reality television' shows that tout their popularity (and the reverse) with the public, or that offer 'wannabes' the chance to join the celebrity family. To return to Phillips & Taylor:

> A culture of 'hardness' and cynicism grows, fed by envious admiration of those who seem to thrive – the rich and famous: our modern priesthood – in this tooth-and-claw environment. (p. 108)

An individualistic, competitive society, is, then, whatever its achievements, prone to breed unkindness.

Kindness and survival

A strong driver of the imbalance towards competitiveness and self-interest has been a widespread misapplication – and misrepresentation – of social Darwinism, which has had increasing influence in economics, politics and most aspects of social life. Competition, based on self-interest, has been reinforced by ideas derived from simplistic readings of Darwinism itself – the skewed reading of nature as 'red in tooth and claw'. Later work, such as Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins, 1976), has fed such a rhetoric and been used as an 'evidence base' for justifying the promotion of competition and individualism in politics and economics, as well as in social and personal life. Nowhere is this influence more evident than in the way 'free market forces' (the unregulated competitive interaction of enterprises bent on self-interest) have been regarded, until very recently, as benign, creative and even natural – indeed, as the only road to human well-being.

In fact, Dawkins is clear that reciprocity based on a sense of human kinship is an evolutionary reality. Action directed even by the most 'selfish' of genes is expressly characterised by the fact that its interests lie in caring for others who carry that same gene – kinship. Dawkins is also passionate about our unique (evolved) capacity as human beings to transcend the purely determined and to transform civilisation using our intelligence and moral consciousness (Dawkins, 2009). Other students of evolution have recognised that Darwin himself described an important role for cooperation and interdependence in *The Origin of Species* (1859). Many scientists, including, notably Lynn Margulis, have described a remarkably powerful place for cooperation within and between species in evolution itself (Margulis, 1998). Kinship and its expression in kindness can, then, be seen not just as a psychosocial concept, but as the representation in human psychology and social life of a primary evolutionary process.

When apes descended from the trees and began to evolve into us, competitive tool-making helped, but cooperation and kinship transformed and combined the invention and ingenuity of individuals into a social evolutionary force of unimaginable power. Cooperation actually creates

'the fittest' who 'survive'. Reproductive success may have been dependent on having the most impressive tools, but it was through sharing them that the conditions emerged for accelerated development to increased safety and comfort. This sharing, at least at the level of higher animals and primates, is clearly driven in everyday interaction by recognition of the other, and their well-being, as connected, as in specific need and as deserving assistance. This idea, and the kindness involved at a human level, needs to be restored to its rightful place.

Enterprise, self-confidence and self-reliance, individualism and science and technology are all of value. It is the *split* between these qualities and those of kinship and interdependency that is disturbing. Without the recognition, and balancing influence, of common destiny and connectedness inherent in kindness, these things can become toxic. The unregulated financial market, the fetishism of the body as a commodity or building site for 'beauty', and unrestrained polluting industry are various forms of this toxin. Social well-being degenerates as these products of the split multiply. Without applying our knowledge of the power of cooperation, inspired by kinship and expressed through kindness, we will fail to create the thriving society most would look for. We are all, more than ever, interdependent at a planetary level, and our future depends on our being able to cooperate – and better than we have ever done before. Moreover, global issues, such as climate change, challenge us to be imaginative enough to extend our sense of kinship to generations as yet unborn, as well as to other countries, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, where the crisis is already extreme.

The trouble with kindness

Apart from universal human struggles to overcome self-centredness, bad temper and greed (daunting in themselves) there is a deeper problem associated with kindness. As Phillips & Taylor (2009) put it:

> Real kindness changes people in the doing of it, often in unpredictable ways. Real kindness is an exchange with essentially unpredictable consequences. It is a risk precisely because it mingles our needs and desires with the needs and desires of others, in a way that so-called self-interest never can. (p. 12)

Kindness, then, is, deep down, frightening and hazardous.

In the modern world, this problem with kindness is particularly challenging. The risks to health and well-being in genetics, lifestyle, relationships, society, environment and international affairs are more than ever known, by more and more of us. There is clear evidence that anxiety levels (or their twin, attitudes of denial) are consequently higher. Education and the media also bring us all increased exposure to the vulnerability, suffering and dangerousness of humankind, close to home and afar. We are daily confronted with evidence of just how perilous it is to link ourselves with the destiny of others. This all goes to amplify the danger inherent in kindness

and cooperation. It takes courage to link one's fate with others with vast and frightening problems.

Phillips & Taylor, quoted above, speak of kindness being 'ghetto-ized into a … sphere of feeling and behaviour where it has remained, with some notable exceptions, ever since' (p. 41). The foundation of the NHS was one of those notable exceptions – as well as being an optimistic project to eradicate ill health, it was an expression of kinship, a commitment to kindness.

In the Second World War, British men and women had laboured for each other, fought, been wounded, bereaved and died for the sake of the common good. The founding of the NHS after the war saw a peacetime expression of this commitment. At one and the same time it was an act of appreciation and recognition by the people to the people, and a compact and understanding between us that we would continue to share our resources to face our common risks and improve our common destiny. It was an expression of *kinship*. We took our vulnerability, woundedness and loss, our courage, self-sacrifice and fellow feeling, and invested them, along with our resources and our ingenuity, in a peacetime 'family enterprise'. Like war, this common pursuit would bring us, individually and collectively, victories and defeats, costs and advantages, miracles and tragedies.

Phillips & Taylor argue that this commitment to communal well-being was, in fact, short-lived. They suggest that the individualism, independence and 'enterprise culture' that has emerged over the past 30 years or so has been a very poor soil for the growth of kindness. On the other hand, signs of the founding values of the NHS can still be detected and it is central to our argument that the NHS should be valued as a core aspect of our public good, which goes further than improving health and treating sickness. Take a look at the 2009 NHS Constitution for England:

> The NHS belongs to the people. It is there to improve our health and well-being, supporting us to keep mentally and physically well, to get better when we are ill, and, when we cannot fully recover, to stay as we can to the end of our lives. … It touches our lives at times of basic human need, when care and compassion are what matters most. … The NHS is founded on a common set of principles and values that bind together the community and the people it serves – patients and public – and the staff who work for it. (Department of Health, 2009, p. 2)

This document commits the NHS to work in partnership to prevent ill health, to provide care that is personal, effective and safe. The policy also sets down the latest expression of values of the NHS: respect and dignity, commitment to quality of care, compassion, improving lives, working together for patients and 'everyone counting'. It is evident that the NHS is still seen as having a responsibility to deliver on the public compact of communal kindness that is identified as its foundation. There are, though, problems in translating that view into action.

Given the sustained onslaught on the value and power of kindness, the untrammelled growth of the culture of self-interest and the deep

fears kindness evokes, it is unsurprising that all of us – from citizen to government – lose our nerve. At times of stretched resources – like the current effects of recession – this loss of nerve is more likely. Instead of valuing and reinforcing the core kinship and kindness involved in the health service, we become like the Puritans of old, with no sense that pursuing the health and happiness of others is an inherent pleasure for individuals and society. We turn our minds to setting rules for and to policing people we seem not to trust. At best, we appear to prefer to think of this enterprise mainly in terms of technology, industrial systems, processes, survival statistics, financial efficiency and 'rights'. Could it be that we have all lost confidence? Could it be that we have all succumbed to anxiety and embarrassment about focusing on the central vision of kinship, the reciprocity and the values it requires? Could it be that we have lost confidence in the idea that keeping connected to that vision can make a difference?

All of us may have lost our nerve in this way; all of us, that is, except when we or our loved ones are patients. Then the importance of kindness comes to the centre of things. Patients realise how kindness makes them feel. Just as important, they seem to know how closely it is connected to effectiveness.

Kindness and the common good

Kindness, then, is not a soft, sentimental feeling or action that is beside the point in the challenging, clever, technical business of managing and delivering healthcare. It is a binding, creative and problem-solving force that inspires and focuses the imagination and goodwill. It inspires and directs the attention and efforts of people and organisations towards building relationships with patients, recognising their needs and treating them well. Kindness is not a 'nice' side issue in the project of competitive progress. It is the 'glue' of cooperation required for such progress to be of most benefit to most people.

The mistrust that has been evoked in society relating to the motives and behaviours of those professing to be kind was highlighted earlier. The concept of kindness in this book assumes authenticity, where emotional response and behaviour are in tune and spring from generosity, empathy and openheartedness. This rules out those whose seemingly kind bedside manner masks sadistic motives and behaviour – Harold Shipman being the most extreme example – and those who preach kindness as a duty but are unable to connect genuinely with the living humanity of another person. It also rules out those who gush with sentiment; and the self-righteously pious, whose primary motivation is to be saintly.

There is no doubt that kindness, though it makes us all feel better, is difficult. Later chapters will discuss the nature of this difficulty and

consider some of the ways in which it can be overcome. But from the start, we need to make sure we are comfortable with, and properly understand, the concept of kindness itself. The renowned academic historian Tony Judt wrote passionately about collective welfare and the values of community (Judt, 2010*a*). In an interview just before he died, he spoke movingly about the need for a language that binds us all together:

> We need to rediscover a language of dissent. It can't be an economic language since part of the problem is that we have for too long spoken about politics in an economic language where everything has been about growth, efficiency, productivity and wealth, and not enough has been about collective ideals around which we can gather, around which we can get angry together, around which we can be motivated collectively, whether on the issue of justice, inequality, cruelty or unethical behaviour. We have thrown away the language with which to do that. And until we rediscover that language how could we possibly bind ourselves together? (Judt, 2010*b*).

Fundamental to this project are questions about kindness: whether we dare rescue the enlightened concept of kindness, with its depth and political potency, whether we can find a way to use it to edge us towards a society based on the common good, and whether we can unashamedly re-own the language of kinship and the simplicity with which it asserts our common humanity. Nowhere is this more important than in healthcare.

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