

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - ANDY SMALLMAN (Katie Elliott & **Andy Smallman**)

My guest today is Andy Smallman, an educator who's spent nearly three decades exploring the subject of kindness. He's the creator of 'Secret Agent of Compassion', part of the worldwide 'Compassion Games', and the founder of 'Kind Living', an online compendium of kindness-based content.

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Andy Smallman, thank you for joining me this afternoon.

It's my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

I know that you are someone who's spent a lot of time thinking about kindness. Can you tell me where that interest came from?

Sure. So I think it's been there since I was very, very young. I think it's there in everyone when they're very, very young and I think for a lot of reasons the way we're raised in a kind of Western culture, especially our educational system, causes us to kind of move away from it. But interestingly, what brought me back to it was when I was teaching 11 year olds many, many years ago - coming up on 30 years ago - and there was a little boy who really was having difficulty reading. He would be what you call dyslexic, and reading and writing were a challenge, but he had this really soft heart. And in this classroom it became obvious to me that he was really kind of hurt by negative things. And he had the idea that he wanted to try to focus on the positive. And he came to me one day and asked me, "Why is it that all the news and everything we see is always negative?" And from that conversation he and I conceptualised something that became a bit of a writing and a reading project for him, which he called the 'Good News Newspaper'. And this would be, so 1991/92, somewhere in there. And it really got me thinking about why is it that we seem to focus more on the negative and not focus on the positive. Like, part of this 11 year old boy's idea was, we hear about the car accidents but we don't recognise that there are so many more people who make it home safely. And he wanted to write about the number of people that made it home safely. Anyway, that's where it started. And then things kind of fast forwarded and he actually was one of my founding students in a school that I started and I was really promoting the idea of the use of the Internet back in 1994 and 95, when it was just kind of starting, as a means of community, connecting with more people. And one way I had done that was connecting my students in Seattle to a teacher in Europe who had contact with Holocaust survivors and was actually promoting the idea via email that students anywhere in the world could ask a question, he would ask it of the survivors who

would then give a response and he would then transcribe the response back into the email. And it was done through an email distribution list. And that idea kind of stuck with me that anybody who was part of that Internet list or that email list, if you were in the subscriber file, any message sent to a unique email address would distribute to all these people. And that got me thinking, why not use that for kindness? And so my thought was, I will send out an idea every Sunday night to whoever wants it anywhere in the world with an email address. I'll send it to that unique address and it will distribute to all those folks. And then within the next week they will write back how they fulfil that idea and that would come back. And I envisioned the globe or the earth being covered in these messages of thoughtfulness and kindness and that's where it started. And so that was 1994 and from there I just kept doing that and expanding it and just seeing where the next step took me. And here we are in 2019 having a conversation.

So your passion for all things kindness-related clearly hasn't abated over those years. What has it been about that process of exploring kindness that has kept you excited and curious?

That's a lovely question. I think what it is about it for me, and I found myself describing it earlier this week even as almost like a ministry of some kind, where it's really helping people look inward, reconnecting to who they really are. I talk about, it's really a matter of what I want to do is just promote ordinary, everyday things that I think are happening anyway - point people to those. And the way that I end up describing that is I want to help people align their numerators with their denominators, which is kind of an interesting image because I feel like most of us are busy comparing ourselves to other people all the time: "I'm not good enough", or "This person does this better", or whatever it is. But anything over itself, like in a fraction, five over five, 10 over 10, is equal to one whole. And so a person over a person is a whole person. And I think we spend a lot of time disconnecting from what makes us who we truly are. So that's really what excites me about it is, I just think I'm helping people be who they naturally are. Just point it back. Point back to themselves.

Something that really interests me about kindness, which I'm guessing you've probably thought about, is that I've noticed a recurring phenomenon which is that a lot of people can be kind to other people, but they're not very good at being kind to themselves and in the process it means they can't actually be as kind to other people as they really want to be. But that 'being kind to ourselves' bit seems to be surprisingly difficult for a lot of us. Do you have any thoughts about how we can be a bit kinder to ourselves?

That is such an insightful comment because when I created these online kindness classes, the first lesson - which I then adapted, I first called it an assignment and then I called it a theme, now at times I call it a mission, now it's an invitation - would always be, "Do something kind for yourself", and people would have such a challenge trying to complete this. And then as I got this more sophisticated, I adapted it over 10 weeks. And so the first assignment was, "Do something kind for yourself", and then the second one was, "Do something kind for someone that you love", and expanding out like concentric circles. But what I always pointed out as we came through the course to the 10th week, is it every act that you did ultimately was an act of kindness for yourself. That anything that you did for somebody else, actually gave you a positive feeling. And so the tenth assignment, theme, whatever, was, "Do something kind for yourself, recognising that that's all you had been doing for the two and a half months of the class. But I do think that people have a hard time doing things for themselves because we've been told that that's selfish. And this idea that, "I don't deserve that" or that, "I need to go out and take care of somebody else first" - it's now you know, just a cliché anymore, but when you get on an airplane, one of the first things they tell you is you've got to put your own air mask on before helping others. And that's kind of the idea, that you're going to be much more effective if you really want to be a kind person by making sure you're in a good state of mind. That's really everything I do comes back to - "How do you take care of yourself?" Kristin Neff at the University, I think it's University of Texas talks a lot about this with self compassion and how to go about taking care of yourself from a compassionate standpoint. That, you know, we're all having some level of suffering and don't beat yourself up over it. But then what we tend to do is beat ourselves up over beating ourselves up over it, so...

Do you have, have you come across any tricks over the years that enable people to be a bit kinder to themselves? Because sometimes I think we have to fool ourselves into doing it...

Yeah, well, it's interesting that you call it a trick. I haven't thought of it that way before, but let's go with that for a second. So I think one of the tricks that I do is just try to go for a walk - and it can just be five minutes, 10 minutes - and on that walk become just awed by any particular thing that strikes you. The idea that your lungs right now are bringing in fresh air from outside and that there is an atmosphere to breathe, or now coming forward towards me is a person walking their dog and look how happy the dog is and what is it about a dog...? I mean, there's so many things. Or you walk in the springtime when you see the budding flower or the tree that's got the leaves that are about to come out. You know, just pay attention to the little things that are right there before you. And suddenly the world starts looking a little bit more wonderful and new opportunities will start to appear for you.

So for me, if I start feeling like, hey, I need a little focus time, I want to go for a walk, get outside, take a deep breath. And it doesn't need to be a terribly long time.

That's so lovely. So I'm curious to know a bit about the work that you're doing around kindness right now. What is it that excites you at the moment in this field?

Ah, thank you for that question. There are two newer projects that I've got started right now. One of them I actually had been doing for a couple of years, but I've really started doing it in earnest since my wife and I relocated to the San Francisco Bay area and I've got a little bit more time on my hands. And that's adapting each of the 81 verses of the Tao Te Ching into kindness verses, or kindness poems, one each week. And so I'll begin the week really kind of spending some time looking at some different interpretations of the verse and then kind of spend some time thinking about it. And then I'll sit down and I'll just start writing some thoughts and then I will reduce those down further and further until I have something that really, to me, gets at the heart of that verse of the Tao Te Ching and really is interpreted through the idea of kindness. So that's one project that I'm really excited about. And then the other is just this whole idea of simple poetry. What I've found that I'm doing is finding something short and sweet that touches me in some way. And taking the theme of a paragraph or a story or something and trying to take what the themes mean to me and making it into a poem that's maybe, that takes 20 seconds to read, but it has something that's meaningful to me. And so these are other actually answers to your earlier question of how to, how to take care of myself or how to be kind to myself. It's those two projects... I can keep going. I mean, I just finished writing Secret Agent of Compassion missions for World Interfaith Harmony Week and I made silly little videos from the International Kindness Team Heart-quarters that were sent out to Secret Agents of Compassion all over the world. And, you know, two minute videos explaining, "Here's your mission today, should you choose to accept it".

So a 'Secret Agent of Compassion' - can you just elaborate on that? Just a little, so people know exactly what one of these might be.

Sure. So the Secret Agent of Compassion was an idea that I had in response to a colleague of mine in Seattle who founded something called the Compassion Games in 2012. And the Compassion Games grew out of the idea that we can have friendly competitions, what he called a cooperative competition or a 'coopetition' between cities, cities that had signed the Charter for Compassion and had said, "We're going to dedicate ourselves to be compassionate cities". Well, his name is Jon Ramer. He had the idea that, well now we need cities to compete with each other to increase the number of acts of compassion happening in the city. So he got this grand idea of it being like the Olympic Games, except it's the Compassion Games. And then he

recruited me to see if I could create a game for people to play. And I conceptualised the Secret Agent of Compassion game and it was built off of an old American 1960s television show called Mission Impossible in which the Head of the Impossible Missions task force would get a mission from the government and then recruit people to then fulfil that particular mission. And it always started with, "Good morning, Mr. Phelps". So that's how I started putting this together. So I've been doing that since 2012 and there's a secretagentofcompassion.org website and the whole thing is archived with, you know, dozens of these missions. But a mission - to answer that part of your question - might be something as, if you will, complex or simple as today, your job is to do something kind for yourself or to recognise some suffering that you are having and to take one step to alleviate that suffering. So that would be a mission. And then Jon's created what he calls the Compassion Map and then people can come and report how they fulfilled the mission, and many other, I mean the map is used for multiple purposes, but then you get to read how other people have interpreted and completed their acts of compassion.

And how far does this extend?

Oh, it's global, you'll see on the Compassion Map that it's a map of the world and people can click on the different spots. But yeah, the Compassion Games is an international event.

So one of the things that I love to ask each guest that I talk with is if they can think of a Little Challenge that they could suggest. I'm just wondering what your Little Challenge might be?

I've got one, I was thinking about that. And so here's one that I actually gave to one of my kindness classes once and it really went very well. And it's so simple. I call it 'Three Simple Steps To Find Meaning From A Personal Object'. And here's what you do. So you find something in your place wherever you live that's kind of small. It doesn't have to be, but I think it makes it easier if you find something small. And you pick that object, and you've had it in some place for so long that you've really stopped noticing it, but it's important to you. It might be something you picked up on a vacation or a gift that you were given at some point, but you put it initially in a spot and it had meaning for you, but now it's been there so long that you've kind of lost track of that meaning. So take it and put it somewhere else. A conspicuous spot where you're going to see it each day and do this at least for a week, and then each day, when you come across it, just pause for a split second and see what comes up in your mind. Pay attention to what happens and just take note of that. It could be, now you're thinking of this person who gave this to you. Or you're thinking of the time or the vacation that you got it or whatever the case may be. If you really want to extend that, that could be enough right there, but if you really want to extend it,

take a minute to jot that down. Write down what feelings, emotions, people that this is evoking and then act on one thing if you want to go a little bit further. You could, like if you are now thinking of someone that you haven't thought about for awhile, jot them a little note and say, "Hey, I've been thinking about you". If it's a memory that that triggers, maybe you've got a photo or two that you want to share or maybe you were on that trip with somebody and you want to talk to them about it. But that's the kind of thing that I think about. It could be a knick-knack, just something that you move. It's similar that, I know when I was a kid I'd get a kick out of like rearranging the furniture in my room and then it felt fresh and new, and this is like the micro version of that. Finding something. And to make it really simple - that's a critical piece of it is make it simple.

I really love that. It's as if it's sort of gone to sleep and you stop noticing it and it's sort of dormant and then you're just kind of waking it up and then seeing what comes from that experience, isn't it? There's something very beautiful...

I love that.

And I'm noticing that you talk a lot about writing. Obviously writing is important to you. It sounds as if intertwined with your interest in kindness and compassion, there's a strong thread of creativity. What's that relationship about for you?

I've never really been asked that before. I think in my heart I'm a creator. Like the school that I helped start or that I was the visionary of, when people said, "Well how did this come about?" - and I said, "I think I channelled that". But I think a lot of creativity is, it comes through you. And I think that if we don't allow that stuff that comes through you, there's like a block that happens in people. And I think that block kind of stymies a lot of other things. And so for me, being a creator of that sort, and for me, I think it tends to be very much in words, and part of my challenge in life is learning how not to be verbose but to try to reduce it down. And so a lot of what writing does for me is the editing process where I start to get kind of creative. There's a creation in editing. But I think that's what that is - it's this need to bring something new into existence. And for me, a lot of that is done with words and at this point in my life I'm finding reducing it and making it simple is where I'm really drawn. Yeah.

I have my own personal version of exactly what you're talking about. And it's funny, the word that always used to come to my mind when I first started thinking about this was 'conduit', and it's not a word that I've ever really used ever in my life, but it was that sense of making stuff, making things happen, or creating things that weren't there before, but it really not being about you personally. You're just, you're just the way that it happens to come into the world. Does that make sense?

Oh it makes perfect sense to me. I love that description too. One of the things that I've realised and really spend more and more of my time talking about is this idea that, while individually we're important, it's really, we're part of something bigger than ourselves. It's the interconnection. And that each individual, in a way, is a micro version of the bigger thing. If I want to get, I guess somewhat metaphysical about it, I think it's like - here, I'll put it this way for you: so the Big Bang may have been when all of the sparks of light kind of were made into individuals and our individual role is, how do we shine that and then how do we reconnect it and recognise that we're part of something bigger than ourselves? So to me a kind of cultivating this sense of awe and wonder as well, like that walk that I mentioned earlier, when you do that and you really look at the tree with the budding flower or the budding leaf, you might start to realise that, "Hey, I'm part of that. That's an extension of everything".

How wonderful. We've only just met, Andy, and I feel, I feel really honoured to have this conversation with you. So if there's anybody out there listening who's having trouble finding that kindness and finding that willingness to allow themselves to be themselves, have you any words that you would like to offer that might be encouraging?

Well I think it's similar to some of the things that I have said. So if somebody's feeling like it's just overwhelming or that things are really challenging, the simplest thing to do is to just kind of take a step back and be marvelled by the idea that you're breathing. And what I would suggest to somebody in that moment is take that breath in and see, just hold it for a second, and then breathe it out again and become a little bit mindful about your breath, and as you take that breath, become awed by the idea that you have these lungs that can fill or that there's air that can enter them. And then you could extend that, if you want, to the idea that your heart is beating and how are these things happening? And that they do it without us really paying attention to it. And if those are acts of wonder, the fact that our lungs fill with air and our heart beats, what else is out there that we take for granted and might not see? And if you just find something really close and small - another way to do it is a child's laughter sometimes can trigger that for us as well. So listening, not stalking (!), but listening to children play can also evoke that same kind of just sense of wonder of, "Wow, this is kind of an interesting, fabulous thing going on around".

Yeah. And in your experience, that ability to tap into a sense of wonder, an awareness of how amazing this world is, how amazing our ability to even exist is, does that get easier over time? Is that something you can cultivate?

Oh, absolutely. I think it's easy when we're young, I mean honestly, either I choose to believe this or there's some truth to it, but I think children are naturals at this. They may not be, have the brain capacity yet, their brain isn't wired to really reflect on it. But I think they're really, again using my ongoing metaphor here, their numerators and denominators are pretty much in alignment...and then they fall apart. So I think part of what our job is really, all of our job is, to kind of come back, to reconnect. But that does take some mindful practice on the part of an adult and especially an adult that may be wounded for some reason or really trying to overcome some kind of a trauma. And if that trauma has involved in any way that they have decided that it was their fault - and so they find ways to continually punish themselves, thinking that they don't deserve to have happiness or don't deserve to have kindness in their lives - that could involve therapy, but also is this a matter of really starting to reconnect to the gift of life.

But it's something that we can practice and it can get easier?

I've described it at times as that kindness is like a muscle. If you don't exercise it, it atrophies or it gets weaker and the more that you exercise it, the more that you recognise it, it builds on itself. You end up having more.

I've so enjoyed our conversation. Thank you for your kindness in being willing to talk with me today, Andy. You knew nothing really about what I'm up to and you chose to give me some of your time. So thank you for that. It's really brought a lot of happiness into my afternoon.

Oh, well it's been absolutely my pleasure. Katie, you've been a lovely person to talk to, so it's been my gift to receive.

Thank you. And if people would like to find you online, is there one place in particular they should look?

I think the best spot to start is the Kind Living website - and that's just kindliving.net and they can reach out to me there. And I'd love to hear from anybody who happens to have been touched in any way by this broadcast. So it'd be great to hear from folks.

Fantastic. Thank you so much.

Thank you Katie.