The Pedagogy of Kindness

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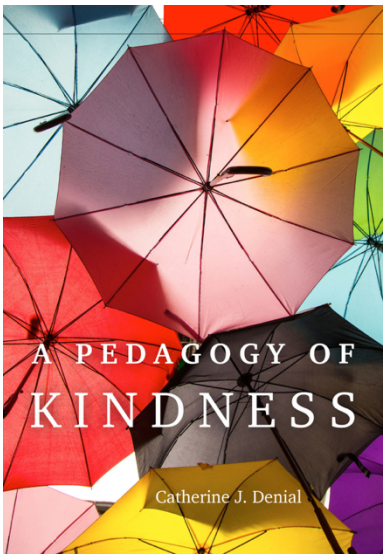

Introduction

In the past few years, whenever I've been asked to sum up my approach to pedagogy, I've said, "Kindness."

Academia is not, by and large, a kind place. The engine of higher ed is fueled by stories of individualism, competition, prestige, and distrust. The solitary genius, working away in their office or their lab, is lauded for single-minded devotion to their craft, a discreet veil drawn over their personal privilege and over the family members, service workers, and administrative staff who make that "solitary" career possible. Systemic problems aren't often recognized as such, much less met with systemic solutions. Rooting out the ableism that has been baked into academia since its inception and changing the cultural norms about knowledge production and communication that define higher ed are tasks passed over in favor of issuing individual accommodation forms to students. The specific racial prejudices that have historically undergirded the development of higher ed in the United States—through the on-campus labor of enslaved men, women, and children; by profits derived from slavery and colonization; by the drive to assimilate Native students and "civilize" them—are rarely woven into present-day curricula. And teaching is too often neglected as an enterprise that requires training as well as financial and career support. Culturally, we insert a generalized suspicion of students—they'll cheat; they won't do the reading; they'll never come to class!—into the space where pedagogical training should reside.

There are people in the world who consider kindness insufficient to meet these challenges and the responsibilities we shoulder in the classroom, much less the wider world. Many think this way because people confuse kindness with the idea of "being nice"—of being agreeable in all circumstances, of masking disagreement, of refusing to ripple the waters in our institutions and professions. But real kindness is not about individual pleasantries or letting injustices pass.

Niceness, in contrast to compassion, is often unkind, a Band-Aid we're urged to plaster over deep fissures in our institutions, wielded as a weapon instead of as a balm. Niceness doesn't ask a lot of questions about precarity in our profession, the financial burden of education, the treatment of historically excluded students, or the uncompensated, additional practical and emotional labor asked of women and genderqueer individuals of all

races and men of color in education. Politicians, "thought leaders," and industry professionals bring pressures to bear on our classrooms from outside them, generating a nationwide clamor for standardization, testing, and rote assessment. Because of this we're more likely to hear from leaders in our fields about standards and rigor than kindness. (My national professional organization says, for example, that "good teaching entails accuracy and rigor" but never mentions compassion.)[1]

In contrast to niceness, kindness is real, it's honest, and it demands integrity. It's unkind to mislead people or lie to them, for example, meaning that kindness necessitates tough conversations. Boundaries, too, are a form of kindness, a way of respecting and honoring our physical and mental energy so that we do not deplete ourselves in the service of others. Shifting our practice toward kindness is not always painless; as bell hooks memorably wrote in Teaching to Transgress, "There can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches."[2]

But here's what a pedagogy of kindness is not: It's not about sacrificing ourselves and our well-being. It's not about taking on more emotional labor (at least, not unless you're someone who is rarely called on to do any emotional labor at all). It's not about complicating teaching even further. It's about reorienting ourselves to a new way of thinking so that it strips away much of the burdensome work we've been imposing on ourselves for so long. And here's what a pedagogy of kindness most definitely is: It's about attending to justice, believing people, and believing in people. It's a discipline.

I didn't always think this way. Like almost everyone, I was socialized into an academia that focused on individual achievement, competition, and distrust rather than kindness. When first stepped into a higher-ed classroom, I was a working-class, first-generation, international graduate student who had earned a BA in American studies exactly one month before. I didn't know the word "pedagogy," much less have any idea that there were choices I could make about how to approach teaching. I knew almost nothing about the American education system, as I was in the United States on an exchange fellowship awarded by my undergraduate institution. (I had applied to the program to see the world a little, not because I knew what was involved in working toward a master's degree.) Although I spent five days being trained to teach, I retain no specific memory of what I was taught—only the general impression that I should not trust my students, as they would try to get away with almost anything. My lasting impression was one of feeling entirely overwhelmed. After bleakly

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[1] "Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct (Updated 2023)," American Historical Association, https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/statement-on-standards-of-professional-conduct . See also Deborah J. Cohan, "Professors Should Uphold Rigor When Assessing Students, Even in a Pandemic," Inside Higher Ed, August 24, 2021, https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/08/25/professors-should-uphold-rigor-when-assessing-students-even-pandemic-opinion.

[2] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 43.

considering my fate, I decided that the only way I could work up the courage to do my job was to pretend to be Dana Scully from The X-Files, a woman who would take charge, brook no nonsense, and bring a healthy skepticism to the proceedings. (I am living proof of the old adage to fake it till you make it.)

At my next institution, educator training came in the form of workshops run by senior graduate students for their junior colleagues. I was encouraged to think of students as antagonists, always trying to get one over on their instructors. I was urged to be on the lookout for plagiarism, to be vigilant for cheaters, to assume that the students wouldn't do the reading, and to expect to be treated as a cog in the consumerist machine by students who would challenge their grades on a whim. I was once advised by a senior graduate student to "be a bitch" on the first day of class so that my students never wanted that version of myself to show up again. I was a stickler for deadlines and memorably once refused to excuse the absence of a student who was battling a burst pipe in his house when class was in session. I look back on my lack of compassion now and wince.

My early years as a graduate instructor were defined by fear. My cohort and I lacked institutional power and yet were on the front lines of teaching undergraduate students. While the leaders of the pedagogy workshops in which we participated were often white men, many of the rest of us were women and genderqueer individuals from a range of racial backgrounds and men of color. The particular challenges we faced in establishing our credentials in the classroom went undiscussed; no one offered any model for facilitating student learning that didn't depend on establishing total, unbending authority. I was afraid of screwing up, afraid of student evaluations that could, at least theoretically, make or break my funding for the next year, and afraid of not being what my students needed.[3]

Yet I was also dazzled by teaching. There was nothing quite like the moments when it all worked, when things clicked into place and my students and I had conversations that expanded the boundaries of what we knew. I learned I had a knack for spotting confusion among my students and figuring out the steps that would help smooth it out. I worked at discussion questions until they gained enough speed to lift us off the ground, generating

[3] It has been well established that women and genderqueer people of all races, as well as BIPOC men, are rated lower in student evaluations of teaching than their white male colleagues and often face discrimination in contract reviews. See, for example, Lillian MacNell, Adam Driscoll, and Andrea N. Hunt, "What's in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching," *Innovative Higher Education* 40 (2015): 291–303, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-014–9313-4; Anne Boring and Arnaud Philippe, "Reducing Discrimination in the Field: Evidence from an Awareness-Raising Intervention Targeting Gender Biases in Student Evaluations of Teaching," *Journal of Public Economics* 193 (January 2021): 104323, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104323; Jean Swindle and Larissa Malone, "Testimonials of Exodus: Self-Emancipation in Higher Education through the Power of Womanism," in *We're Not OK: Black Faculty Experiences and Higher Education Strategies*, ed. Antija M. Allen and Justin T. Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 147–68; and Armon R. Perry et al., "Understanding Student Evaluations: A Black Faculty Perspective," *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* 20, no. 1 (November 2015): 29–35.

conversations about topics I loved. I learned by trial and error; I made mistakes and survived them. I got better and better at what I did and, in time, enjoyed myself.

But things got complicated when I became a professor. I had PTSD, formally diagnosed in 2006, but in reality a companion for many years before that. I received lackluster treatment from my primary care physician and so I found myself trying to steer a course through the pressures of a new position while also battling flashbacks, dissociation, and physical pain. It never occurred to me to be kind to myself, and academia never modeled such an approach; it therefore did not occur to me to be kind to others. I put my head down and muscled my way through, and that showed up in every decision I made about teaching. I had a draconian attendance policy, and there were very few ways in which a student could earn an excused absence. In one of the two courses I was allotted during my first term at Knox (an institution that has a trimester system), I lectured for every moment of every class. When I asked if students had questions, I got resounding silence punctuated by a few queries that seemed, to me, to be strangely hostile. I thought of myself as someone training people to be historians and interpreted that in the most literal way possible; my students had to write book reviews, for example, in the style of major journals in my field. I white-knuckled it through each class session and resented every piece of grading I had to complete.

All of this came to a head during an exchange I had with a student in my lecture-only class. This student communicated, through sighs and body language, just how much he was not enjoying his experience in my course, and so I asked him to visit me during office hours so that we could talk about how we could work to change things. I posed the question, and he looked at me witheringly before saying, “You’re just not Knox material.”

I was stunned at the time and took his reply as evidence of his entitlement; surely he was exactly who I had been warned about in graduate school. Yet his stereotypes about academic expertise and who should be a professor notwithstanding, he was inadvertently telling something important, although it took me some time to accept it. It wasn’t that I didn’t belong at Knox; it was that I wasn’t a professor who, at that moment, could make learning accessible, rewarding, or kind. I was scraping together lectures at the last minute, refusing to give my students a little grace or breathing room or even a little time to figure out what history was about. I was unflinching in holding the line against what I perceived to be rampant absenteeism. I denied that my students or I needed anything but unshakable deadlines and an expectation that everyone would do the reading solely because I had written it on the syllabus. I didn’t trust my students, which made all our lives harder than they needed to be. I stood in need of creative thought about disability, as so many of my students did too. And yet all I knew to do in the midst of this maelstrom was to plow on.

I wasn't completely ignorant of the fact that my classes weren't working as I wanted them to—that students weren't discussing ideas with me or each other, that they were struggling with the reading load, and that I loathed everything about lectures. After that first term I began to change things little by little. I picked different readings that were more accessible than the books I'd read in graduate school, and I made sure to prep for class earlier than I had before so that I felt confident giving up the control necessary to allow space for a discussion to take place. I experimented with reading journals, tried to give students more choice in how they fulfilled assignments, and got rid of the book reviews, which were as tedious to grade as I'm sure they were to write. This was often an isolating experience for me, as it is for so many of us who are launched, untrained, into academic careers.

But three things radically changed my pedagogy. The first was working with Elise Fillpot and an incredible group of K–12 schoolteachers in Iowa through Bringing History Home, a program funded by three Teaching American History grants from the U.S. Department of Education. From 2001 to 2011 we worked to change the way history was taught in schools—to have teachers help students focus on historical skills in the classroom by analyzing primary and secondary sources, using maps for geographic and other forms of knowledge, building timelines, and producing syntheses of everything they had learned. We knew that students as young as kindergarten could be historians, not just hear from them.[4]

Every one of the master teachers who helped lead the program was surpassingly kind—to me, to each other, to the teachers who attended our workshops, and to their students. They patiently walked me through the particular challenges of teaching history in K–5, where the state required very little in the way of social studies, and demonstrated how, with a little creativity, it could show up in math lessons (create a 3D map of downtown, for example) or in read-alouds of books with historical themes. They treated each other with enormous compassion and respect, forming a real community around teaching others the skills they already knew. I learned from them and tore apart my terrible lecture-only class. While I kept a textbook as backup for students who might need extra reinforcement of what we were doing in the course, I built every class period around primary sources. My students and I borrowed the process of SOCC (Source, Observe, Contextualize, and Corroborate) from Bringing History Home and used it to analyze the documents and images with which we worked.[5]

We worked in pairs and small groups; we made posters and timelines; we drew elaborate historical family trees; we wrote letters to the editors of newspapers from the 1820s. In short,

[4] The University of Iowa School of Education conducted continuous evaluations of the Bringing History Home project, all of which are available at http://www.bringinghistoryhome.org/evaluations.
[5] SOCC sheets adapted from the BHH model are available on my website: https://catherinedenial.org/blog/uncategorized/socc-it-primary-source-analysis-with-my-students/.

I stopped talking, and my students filled that space with questions and comments—and thrived.

My second schooling in kindness came in June 2013 when I went to a four-day workshop in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to learn about the practice of Intergroup Dialogue with five Knox colleagues: Gabrielle Raley-Karlin, faculty from Anthropology-Sociology; Tianna Cervantez, the head of Multicultural Student Advisement; and three students: Maricruz Osario, Devin Hanley, and ChanTareya Paredes. Led by the staff and faculty of the Program on Intergroup Relations at the University of Michigan, the workshop focused on Dialogue as a long-standing, deeply researched approach to talking about oppression. Dialogue focuses on small-group interactions where members of different social groups engage in structured conversations to reach an understanding of oppression and privilege. An experiential form of learning, Dialogue asks participants think critically about their own and others' socialization into systems of power by talking frankly about personal experience.[6] It was an intense workshop, not simply because we were learning about the process, but because we were engaging in the process. Everyone had to participate in Dialogue every morning and every afternoon, and it was unlike anything I had experienced before.

Dialogue demands vulnerability. It wants to know how you feel, not just what you think, and for you to actively pull down the walls that we all build, day by day, between us and a full understanding of the consequences of our actions. A Dialogue circle is a place where you risk trust very quickly, and where hard truths are told. It's also a place where you do not try and fix things for people, comfort them, or offer them advice but simply hold space for them to encounter the totality of their thoughts and feelings. Dialogue is hard, hard work, but it can be transformational.

My colleagues and I agreed that our campus would benefit from a Dialogue program, and over the next several years we set about building one. But Dialogue has a habit of spilling out of Dialogue classes and into everything else you do. I realized that I had, for years, been asking my students to be vulnerable in class in everything from first-day introductions to end-of-term presentations, and yet I did not reciprocate. It felt important that I allow students to see something other than (a desperate approximation of) perfection and authority in my presence. I needed to ease up. I needed to think deeply about the social identities of my students and myself and design my teaching to meet us in the complex, messy places we inhabited. I needed to completely let go of the educator I had been taught to be in grad school and start over.

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[6] Intergroup Dialogue is, in the words of Ximena Zúñiga, "a face-to-face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups that strives to create new levels of understanding, relating, and action. The term social identity group refers to group affiliation based on a common status or history in society resulting from socially constructed group distinctions." "Bridging Differences through Dialogue," *About Campus* 7, no. 6 (January–February 2003): 9, https://doi.org/10.1177/108648220300700603.

I would be remiss if I did not pause here to credit my colleague, Gabrielle Raley-Karlin, with facilitating so much of my growth in those wobbly years. We directed the Dialogue program on campus together and co-taught the facilitator training course every year. I was, at the beginning, still wedded to the idea that treating students equally was the way to be fair to everyone—that everyone should produce the same kind of work (usually written), and that everyone should turn things in on the same day and incur a penalty if they didn't. Gabe insisted I embrace equity instead and take into consideration the widely divergent experiences of our students in and out of the classroom, all of which shaped the work they produced. Gabe also pushed me to expand my understanding of disability, to learn more about what it meant to be neurodivergent and what it meant to teach with a ready abundance of grace. She also helped me see my own disabilities not as a badly dealt hand, or a nuisance, or an incumbrance, but as a part of me that I should embrace without apology.[7]

Third, while all of these largely professional developments were unfolding, I was doggedly working to recover from more than one experience of sexual violence. My first therapist in my new hometown left the state for a new position only six months after we started working together, but those six months were deeply meaningful. I showed up in Dr. Deborah Zera's office depressed, closed off, brittle, scared, and without a glimmer of understanding that I had PTSD. The diagnosis changed everything: once I had an explanatory framework for the dizzying range of symptoms I was experiencing, I felt incredible relief. Relief did not mean immediate recovery, but understanding what was happening to me helped me regain a sense of control over my life. I vividly remember one evening session when I felt an overwhelming "thing." It was an emotion, although I don't remember which emotion it was and may not have known: distinguishing one feeling from another was a skill I had to learn. But I do remember shaking with fear just contemplating this amorphous "thing" I felt, and I couldn't believe Dr. Zera when she asked me to sit with it for two minutes. She told me she would keep time and that she would ensure nothing terrible would happen while I sat on the couch in her office and paid attention to the maelstrom inside me. Those two minutes were both excruciating and liberating. I learned to occupy my trembling body with patience, to catalog the aches and pains of my brain rejecting any challenge to its now-faulty defenses. I learned that my feelings would not actually demolish me and that I could tolerate two minutes of discomfort at a time. This was, Dr. Zera explained, the beginning of mindfulness, a compassionate path toward change. Over the next several years I made a practice out of sitting (uneasily) with discomfort. I turned to the wisdom of different Buddhist traditions to

[7] For more on these issues, see Staci K. Haines, *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2019); Devon Price, *Umasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity* (New York: Harmony, 2022); Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018); and Thomas J. Tobin and Kirsten T. Behling, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2018).

teach me how to exist with my own pain and to greet the tumultuous outpouring of my stored-up emotions with kindness.[8]

I learned to name my feelings, and then to greet them, and after many years to thank them for showing up. I discovered that meditation was not about the presence of an empty mind but about bringing compassion to bear on my twirling thoughts, observing them as a curiosity, and returning to the steadying rhythm of my breath. I am still very far from an expert at any of this; I'm a practitioner in that meditation takes a heck of a lot of practice. But engaging in that practice showed me that all sorts of kindness could act as a key to open the doors I'd kept stubbornly locked. I discovered that, after everything I had been through, it was, in the words of Naomi Shihab Nye, "only kindness that makes sense anymore."[9]

All of these threads of self-discovery, experimentation, and instruction came to a head in 2017 when, a full twenty-three years into a teaching career I was by then pretty proud of, I went to the Digital Pedagogy Lab at the University of Mary Washington. The entire institute was predicated upon the concept of kindness. From the pronoun buttons available at the registration desk, to the probing questions of the session leaders, to the time people took, one-on-one, to talk about syllabi and assignments, there was an ethos of care running through the whole four days of my residency. I had signed up for the Intro track and had expected to spend my time evaluating digital tools to bring into my classroom (a process in which I felt I was running sorely behind). I certainly had the opportunity to do that, but first I was asked to think about why I needed those tools at all and whom they would serve. My fellow attendees and I were constantly asked to consider why we were doing things the way we were and what subtextual messages we were sending to our students about who they were. These questions were a revelation to me. I took a good long look at my syllabus and realized that, despite all the work I had done over the years to be flexible, creative, and inventive, and even to generate fun in the classroom, that document communicated nothing about those values. I wrote everything from a position of unassailable authority. The language I used to describe the Knox College honor code clearly conveyed the suspicion that everyone was going to commit some awful academic offense, while my attendance policy made no room for the idea that my students were adults with complicated lives who would need to miss a class now and again.[10] I had phrased everything in terms of things I would

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[8] One of the central texts I read in this period that I still come back to again and again is Pema Chödrön's *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambala, 2000). The Dalai Lama of Tibet's books *My Land and My People: The Original Autobiography of His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet* (New York: Warner Books, 1997) and *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2005) are also dog-eared and well thumbed. Other books that have been key to my shifting understanding of myself and kindness include Damien Keown's *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Roger Kamenetz's *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (New York: HarperOne, 2007); Mary Rose O'Reilley's *The Barn at the End of the World: The Apprenticeship of a Quaker, Buddhist Shepherd* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2001); and Tara Brach's *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha* (New York: Random House, 2004).

[9] Naomi Shihab Nye, "Kindness," 1995, Poets.org, https://poets.org/poem/kindness.

[10] I explore this in more detail in chapter 2.

impart to my students from some mystical pedestal rather than—as I truly believed we should—discovering things together.

Why? Why did I posit my students as passive novices who couldn't contribute to their own learning? Why did I require students to jump through hoops to prove that they deserved an extension on a paper? Why did I dock points if my students missed three classes in a term? I couldn't articulate it at the time: I was still too ignorant of so much of my privilege and I lacked the language I needed. But I was beginning to see the reach of kyriarchy, the interlocking systems of oppression that shape who does and does not have power in the United States, and what forms of personal, communal, institutional, or systemic power are coded by a small number of powerful, rich, able-bodied, usually white men to be acceptable or even laudable in that society.[11] I was also seeing with new eyes the extent of my complicity in harmful, even lethal systems of hegemony. It was not just that I was, individually, choosing to cling to a form of authoritarianism in the classroom; it was that my actions represented a small cog in the enormous machine of colonialism, racism, queerphobia, misogyny, and ableism that harmed so many people.[12] That particular session at the Digital Pedagogy Lab was the first time I had been asked so bluntly to defend my pedagogical choices, and once I reflected, I found much of my pedagogy indefensible. At the time I felt regret and no small amount of embarrassment. My teaching was undone by the presence of a question that was never articulated quite this directly but was everywhere around me:

Why not be kind?

A pedagogy of kindness begins with justice. It's not possible to teach with compassion unless we first give critical thought to who is in our classroom, why, and what obstacles they might be facing. Many of us assume things about our students that don't hold up to scrutiny. Take the students featured in the (bad) advice handed down to me in graduate school: they were a vast monolith. They were all eighteen to twenty-two years old, white, living close to (if not on) campus, and neurotypical. They had food, cars, parents who paid for their education, terrible drinking habits, and a fascination with football. Some were athletes, and athletes were the worst offenders when it came to cheating. They were straight, Christian, and likely a member of a campus sorority or fraternity. They were also a myth.

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[11] "Kyriarchy," as used in this way, was coined by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. For more on this definition, see, for example, Natalie Osborne, "Intersectionality and Kyriarchy: A Framework for Approaching Power and Social Justice in Planning and Climate Change Adaptation," *Planning Theory* 14, no. 2 (2015): 130–51, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095213516443.

[12] Some of the books that have been most instructional to me on this score include Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*; Waziyatawin, *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland* (St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2008); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Dur-ham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (1988; reprinted, New York: Ixia Press, 2017); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012); Margaret Price, Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); and Bettina L. Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).

Today's college students do not fit the monolithic description of that eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-old, if they ever did. While there are institutions where some or all of these experiences might ring true, there are far more where the student body defies these categorizations. As many as 71 percent of undergraduate students in the United States are nontraditional, defined by higher education administrator Kris MacDonald as students who are "at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, work full-time . . . a veteran, have children, wait at least one year after high school before entering college, have a GED instead of a high school diploma . . . [are] a first-generation student (FGS), are enrolled in nondegree programs, or have reentered a college program."[13] As of the 2015–16 academic year, approximately 45 percent of undergraduate students were students of color (up from 30 percent ten years earlier), of which 0.4 percent were Native students.[14] According to the American College Health Association, 20 percent of college students in 2019 identified as LGBTQIA,[15] and—taking into account the number of students who may feel unsafe reporting on their sexuality or gender identity to people in positions of power—the actual proportion of LGBTQIA students is likely higher. The National Center for Education Statistics records that in the 2015–16 academic year, 19 percent of undergraduates in the United States reported having a disability.[16] In its #Real College Survey in 2021, the Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice found that 52 percent of responding students at two-year colleges and 43 percent of students at four-year colleges had experienced housing insecurity. Thirty-nine percent of responding students at two-year colleges and 29 percent of students at four-year colleges had faced insecurity related to food.[17]

This is just a sampling of how diverse our student bodies are overall. Many institutions, such as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), tribal colleges, women's colleges, and community colleges serve student bodies that have different social demographics based on axes of class, race, gender, sexuality, and more. It's worth asking about the specific makeup of the student body at your institution and where information is lacking and your position is secure enough to press for change, asking for answers to questions like "How many of our students are hungry?" At heart, we shouldn't

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[13] Kris MacDonald, "A Review of the Literature: The Needs of Non-Traditional Students in Post-Secondary Education," *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (January 2018): 159, 160, https:// doi.org/10.1002/sem3.20115; and "Nontraditional Undergraduates: Trends in Enrollment from 1986 to 1992 and Persistence and Attainment among 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Students," National Center for Education Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, November 1996, https://nces.ed.gov/ pubs/97578.pdf.
[14] Lorelle L. Espinosa et al., "Enrollment in Undergraduate Education," in *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report*, American Council on Education (2019): 37, 43, https://www.equityin-highered.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Race-and-Ethnicity-in-Higher-Education.pdf.
[15] *National College Health Assessment II: Undergraduate Student Reference Group, Executive Summary, Spring 2019*, American College Health Association, 2019, 17, https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_SPRING_2019_UNDER-GRADUATE_REFERENCE%20_GROUP _EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf.
[16] "Students with Disabilities [2015-16]," National Center for Educational Statistics, accessed April 29, 2023, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60.
[17] *The Hope Center Survey 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity in the Ongoing Pandemic*, Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, March 31, 2021, 26, https://hope.temple.edu/sites/hope/files/media/ document/HopeSurveyReport2021.pdf.

make assumptions about who our students are but rather make it a point to get to know them—demographically and otherwise. All our other efforts will flounder if we cannot attend to the basic issues of economic, racial, social, and cultural injustice that permeate our campuses. Compassion asks who is in the room, who is not, and why they are or are not there. Niceness does not.[18]

A pedagogy of kindness is also a practice of believing students. When a student comes to me to say that their grandparent died, I believe them. When they email me to say they have the flu, I believe them. When they tell me they didn't have time to read, I believe them. When they tell me their printer failed, I believe them. There's an obvious chance that I could be taken advantage of in this scenario, that someone could straight-up lie and get away with it. But I've learned that I would rather take that risk, and deal with exceptions as they arise, than make life more difficult for my students struggling with grief and illness or even an overpacked schedule or faulty electronics. It costs me nothing to be kind, and the results have been transformative for everyone in our shared classroom space. Students have not, en masse, started refusing to meet deadlines, but the students who are struggling have had time to finish their work. Students have not, en masse, started skipping class, but they're not required to undergo the invasive act of telling me personal details about their lives when they can't show up. Students have not, en masse, started doubting my abilities or my expertise, but they have stepped forward to direct their own education in meaningful and exciting ways that I could not have thought of. The entire process of teaching has become immeasurably more fun.

We should believe students, and we should believe *in* students. Believing in students means seeing them as collaborators—believing they have valuable contributions to make to the way in which syllabi, assignments, and assessments are designed, and life experiences that should be respected in the classroom. This has changed everything for me, not simply in terms of my thinking, but in terms of concrete acts within my classroom. I design assignments differently, grade differently, think hard about flexibility and choice, and fundamentally do not approach my students' disabilities (or my own) as representing the lack of something but rather the positive presence of so much.

Kindness is a discipline. We will not always feel like being compassionate, especially when we're frustrated by the circumstances of our employment, be that shaped by administrative decisions with which we disagree, precarity, or a day when nothing in our classroom goes the way we planned. We have lives beyond the classroom too. We weather

[18] Not every institution gathers every bit of this data, but Viji Sathy, Kelly A. Hogan, and Bob Hen-shaw suggest that it's possible to build a tool to help you understand your student body better: "The More You Know about Your Students, the More Inclusive You Can Be in the Classroom," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 21, 2022, https://www.chron-icle.com/article/the-more-you-know-about-your-students-the-more-inclusive-you-can-be-in-the-classroom.

grief, we worry about our finances, we create families, we support our friends. Whether colored by joy or marred by despair, our lives demand our attention—and sometimes leave us with little left to give to others. That's when, more than ever, we need to pause before replying to a student's email, or take a breath before opening our door for student hours, or consider our options for a moment while on the bus, on the train, or in our car before we gird our loins and start the day. We do not need to direct our energy into niceness. Instead, we need to remind ourselves that we believe in compassion and act upon that belief, even on the days when we are spitting mad, hollowed out, and heartsore.

I feel more comfortable as a teacher now than I ever have. The subconscious sense that students were antagonists lingered inside me for a long time—long enough that it is still a wonder to teach and to experience a teacher-student relationship that lacks that default expectation. I am less stressed, and I no longer have reservations about walking into the classroom.[19] My students rise up to meet every new challenge I present to them. It seems that the practice has been transformational for them and for me.

In the fall of 2019, I taught a brand-new course on history pedagogy. Acutely aware of how little preparation graduate students in history receive before they are asked to teach, I decided to create a class that would give students the opportunity to think about pedagogy before they faced their first classroom full of undergraduates. Students interested in history from our elementary and secondary education programs also joined the course. Together, we thought about skills that are central to historical inquiry: analyzing primary and secondary sources, using maps, creating timelines, building context, and producing synthesis. But we also spent a lot of time thinking about kindness—about the type of teacher that each of them wanted to be, and the ways they could do that within the restrictions and limitations placed upon them by schools and graduate programs.

At the end of term, students had the opportunity to appraise the class through an anonymous online evaluation tool. Beyond the college's standard queries asked about every class on campus, each student in the class responded to the question I had added: What was the most important thing you learned this term? Here are four of the answers (all of them are available upon request):

- The education system needs to change and it is up to the participants of that system to change it for the better.
- Just how important knowing yourself is to the process of creating a teaching philosophy and pedagogy.

[19] Here's a blog post I wrote before I went to the Digital Pedagogy Lab, about the preteaching jitters I used to get all the time: https://catherinedenial.org/ blog/uncategorized/the-pre-teaching-jitters/.

- I've learned that kindness should extend to every part of your life, and education is not an exception. Instead, education is maybe one of the most important places to implement kindness towards others as a philosophy and lifestyle.
- The most important thing I've learned this term is to be yourself when you teach. You don't have to conform to what certain people say. Also teach with kindness and an open heart. Truly believe in your students. And that is what I feel Cate does with us.[20]

A pedagogy of kindness is within our collective reach. We're all trying, I believe, to make a real difference in our students' lives and to provide them the tools and the knowledge to make wise choices as they move beyond the classroom and into new lines of work or study. I've written this book as an invitation, an opportunity to accompany me on the pedagogical evolution I've been (and still am) going through, and to consider adding kindness to the repertoire of thinking, doing, and reflecting that makes up a teaching life. Change is not just possible but meaningful and good. I haven't always taught well, but I take real joy in discovering how to be a better teacher by being in a compassionate relationship with my students and by honoring their humanity in the things that we do.

In this book you'll find ideas for how to approach your own pedagogy, and your own students, with kindness. You'll also find advice, where appropriate, for extending kindness to yourself. Remember, as with any new tool, you don't need to do everything in a single day. Take a couple of these ideas and weave them into your own classroom practice. Blend them with the commitments you already have. Change part of your syllabus if changing everything seems too much (or if there is language that your institution mandates that you include). Carve out ten minutes for yourself if twenty or thirty feels impossible. Adapt these suggestions so that they speak to who you are as an educator and human being.

Kindness is not a destination but a practice and a journey. I am not writing from some pinnacle of enlightenment; I am learning every day how to show up for myself and my students in the most authentic, open, trusting, and compassionate ways I can. I hope this book will suggest ways in which we might collectively do this, and offer practical tips to transform what might feel like an airy philosophy into concrete action. I write as a white, full professor at a small liberal arts college in a rural area, and your experiences may be very different to mine. You are the authority on yourself and your classroom. But I hope that together we can create bright new spaces, rooted in compassion, in which all of us engaged in teaching and learning will thrive.

[20] Fall 2019 survey, Knox College, History 295-Z: History Pedagogy, in author's possession. Full copies of this survey are available on request.