

AT RANDOM

by Marci Murray Hales

Intentional, respectful, compassionate

With all the discussion of the New Millennium, I am reminded that for me it is an opportunity to look at my past and learn for my future. I have decided that in my life I want to do my part to create a culture of caring, and I invite you to consider doing the same. I want to look past the obvious and potentially *pat* ways I can do that and, instead, challenge myself further. In the Walt Disney movie *Pinocchio*, the Blue Fairy tells the wooden boy that in order to be a "real boy" he must first show himself to be brave, truthful and unselfish. What do you think it takes to make someone a "real person"? What qualities would a fairy decide one has to have to be worthy to be made human? For it is a privilege and honor to be a human. And it's also very hard some days.

Of course God, not fairies, created us to be human. But the familiar tale of *Pinocchio* illustrates the importance of honesty and connections. When *Pinocchio* made a connection with someone who was compassionate towards him and convinced him of his uniqueness and value, *Pinocchio* became a "real boy."

I think the world today craves compassionate connections. I realize we live in a world where people are busy taking care of themselves. We live in a culture where lawsuits are rampant. People hesitate to give help to those in need because they might be taken advantage of. And many have been scammed. No one wants to be seen as someone who can be taken advantage of, or as naive.

But in our hurry not to be taken advantage of, have we lost sight of true justice and true compassion? I think we can be compassionate and still live life competently.

In this cellular- and computer-connected world, are people making and keeping the emotional connections

that make the important difference? A friend of mine now living in Hawaii told me in a recent telephone conversation that she's living in what many consider to be Paradise. But often it's lonely, she says, because she's been unable to make meaningful connections with people, including her neighbors. So it's not really Paradise for her or her husband after all.

This lack of compassionate connections with others is evidenced in many aspects of society. The recent school shootings have been a catalyst for discussions about how our society is doing at raising our young. We're all aware of the tragedy in Colorado and the many other shootings that happen every day in our communities. Many sources have reported that the boys who did the Columbine shootings were treated very badly by some of their classmates. That does not excuse their behavior in any way, but it does cause me to think. We have always had guns in this country. So while looking at gun control is important, there are other issues to look at too. Why were these boys treated so poorly by other classmates? How are people of all ages learning to deal with their difficult emotions?

It's easy to place the blame on others; but we each need to ask ourselves, "What have I done to try to understand that kid down the street, or that kid whom people at church have already written off?" Do we encourage our own and other's children to be kind to one another? That means getting involved!

What example do others see in our own lives? The pressure to be better than others is so strong right now. I hear all the time about how mean kids are to other kids. These are age-old problems, but I think it's harder to cope with now for a myriad of reasons.

What are we doing to let people know that all are valu-



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able, needed and important? More importantly, do we really believe that? Are we encouraging those around us to recognize they are valuable just as they are? To know that life is tough sometimes and that people are not always kind to us; but in the end it is all going to be okay. It appears as though the two young men in Columbine knew more about living in a culture of cruelty than in a culture of compassion.

As we become more disconnected from one another, it's harder to reach out. Being kind to others is not always fashionable, but it doesn't make us a doormat either. God doesn't ask us to be a doormat. He does ask us to step out of ourselves and what's just good for us and look at another's perspective before we make our choices. Many of us are so tied up in the pursuit of success, in being right, or the one who wins, that we have forgotten to be kind, to be compassionate. Some of the most unkind people I have ever known claim to have a close relationship with Christ and can easily quote Bible verses and biblical justification for their behavior. Being religious does not make us automatically kind, however.

While seasonal giving and crisis-caring (as at Christmas or when there's a natural disaster) are important, it's the daily, intentional and positive connections we make that help a person feel cared for. Do we smile and say hello to the people we see on the street? Can we name three things that are important to our neighbor? How about to our own children or spouse? How about having a nurturing conversation with that teen you know instead of complaining to your friends about teenagers these days? How about telling "good" kids how much you appreciate them? What is our response when someone at the fast-food counter gives us the wrong size of french fries, or

the man who bags our groceries uses paper instead of plastic? How about the waitress who has forgotten our refill, or the person in the car ahead of us who hasn't noticed the light has changed to green? What about when our spouse forgets the one thing we wanted most at the store, or a child gets side-tracked on his way out the door? The bottom line is, how aware and invested are we in the people around us on a daily basis?

Little things do make a difference. It's like throwing a pebble into a pond. I want to encourage you that being compassionate in small and intentional ways makes the world a better place for all of us. It is creating a culture of caring by saying to ourselves, "This is what Jesus would do if He were standing here with me." It's not about impressing someone or because there might be some personal payoff, whether that be at a conscious or subconscious level. It's about choosing to step out. It's not just about words; it's about intentional, caring behaviors in the incidental occurrences of our everyday lives.

As I strive to be a caring and compassionate person today and in the New Millennium, I want to authentically live by (what Tony Alessandra has coined) the *Platinum Rule*—Do Unto Others as They'd Like Done Unto Them. In essence, this equates to respect for others no matter who they are. It means concentrating on the *us* rather than the *them-versus-us* mentality of today's culture. It means doing our part to create a culture of caring so others know they are "real."

I invite each of you to join me in that challenge of making intentional, respectful and compassionate connections—even when it is easier said than done.

MARCI MURRAY HALES (BS '91) plans to move with her husband Michael (att.) to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, this fall. She stays busy as an Army officer's wife and believes it's a privilege to stay home with their two young children, Cassandra and Alexander. Marci earned a master's degree in social work from the University of Michigan in 1993.

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