



kindness

(a user's guide)

ali catterall & kitty collins

Love is like a bibliophile

She's been called everything from the Iron Butterfly to the Smoky Mountain Songbird and the Backwoods Barbie. But to millions of children around the world, she's known very simply as the Book Lady. An offshoot of her non-profit Dollywood Foundation, the Imagination Library was created in 1995 by Dolly Parton from a desire to help youngsters fall in love with reading - a luxury denied her dad, who was unable to read or write. And so the Queen of Nashville packs books off to kids up to the age of five, completely free of charge. As she told *CBS This Morning* in 2020, "I just felt like that if kids can learn to read early on, they're not afraid of it."

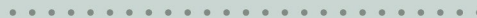
Initially launched in Tennessee, the mission blew like an early morning breeze across the US, then Canada, the UK, Australia and the Republic of Ireland; to date, over 135 million books have been hurtling their way through the postal systems. As for her latest nickname, she adores it. "That is one of the sweetest things ever in my whole career," she told CBS. "When the kids get their little books, they always say it's from the Book Lady. So I take pride in that. Whatever it takes to get them to love the books and to learn to read, I'm all about that." In April 2020, during the pandemic's first lockdown, the Queen of Country began a 10-week bedtime reading slot called Goodnight with Dolly, to comfort kids during a period of great anxiety. First out of the station was a live stream of Watty Piper's 1930 classic *The Little Engine that Could*. "I think it's pretty clear that now is the time to share a story and to share some love," she said.

Any more examples of Parton's wondrousness? How long have you got? To name a few: her Buddy Program aimed to reduce high school dropout rates during the early 90s through cash incentives; Dolly's My People Fund donated \$1000 a month for six months to those who'd lost their homes in 2016's Great Smoky Mountains wildfires; while her annual Dolly Parton Scholarship awards \$15,000 to high schoolers in Sevier County, Tennessee, to help them through college.

Dolly's true (coat of many) colours have been apparent for a long time. As Sarah Smarsh's Parton biography *She Come By It Natural* details, she's made a trajectory from being the butt of bosom-based punchlines to universally beloved icon status, strutting her stuff in a spotlight where women of a certain vintage have typically been invisible. This is the ultra-hard-working, proto-feminist who forbade Elvis to record 'I Will Always Love You' after his ruthless manager Colonel Tom Parker demanded 50% of the publishing royalties.

And then to top it all, in November 2020 it was reported that Dolly Parton had saved the entire planet. Parton, via her own Covid-19 research fund, had donated \$1 m to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, who had been working rather more than 9 to 5 in their efforts to find a cure for coronavirus. Dolly had volunteered the sum after her doctor friend Naji Abumrad, who had once treated her after a car accident, told her all about "some exciting advancements" they were making. The result was the nearly 95% effective Moderna vaccine. (Cue instant choruses all round of "Vaccine... vaccine... vaccine... vacc-iiiiiiiine..." to the tune of 'Jolene'.)

Her benevolence is beyond compare, with peroxide locks of bright blonde hair. And if the world is to have any kind of real-life superhero, the lady who bounced round the stage like a jumping bean at Glastonbury while honking Yakety Sax on a rhinestone-studded saxophone surely qualifies for that honour. What. A. Woman.



If you see someone without a smile today,
give 'em yours.

Dolly Parton
(Twitter post, 2019)

True colours

In 2005, Spain became only the third country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage. Research in 2013 found a whopping 88% of the population said “Hola!” to their LGBTQ+ friends, making it one of the most unprejudiced places on Earth.

So it'd be natural to assume that, when it came to Pride celebrations, the fabulous rainbow emblem would be fluttering from every stiffened flagpole. In your dreams, girlfriend: thanks to a Spanish Supreme Court ruling, only the official flags of Spain, its regions, or the EU flag may be flown from council buildings. And while larger cities and towns openly flouted the law without repercussions, that wasn't the case for little Villanueva de Algaidas on the Costa del Sol.

In June 2020, an eight-metre long rainbow flag proudly flew from the town hall, showing solidarity for the LGBTQ+ community – something it had done to mark Pride Month since 2018. But after just 48 hours, three residents demanded its removal, citing a ruling issued in response to the use of Separatist flags – a ruling which was *in no way* intended to marginalise the LGBTQ+ community. Nevertheless, local officials had no choice but to order the flag be taken down.

Antonio Carlos Alcántara, a Torremolinos shopkeeper who had grown up in Villanueva de Algaidas, had a beautifully simple solution. “It bothered me that they had to pull down a flag that wasn't hurting or bothering anyone,” he told the Guardian. Having pre-ordered hundreds of flags ahead of Pride (which was now cancelled due to Covid), he took to the town's Facebook page to offer them gratis to anyone who wished to wave one. Responses poured in: “The whole village wanted to put up a flag.” Quicker than you can say “There's no place like home”, this typical *pueblo blanco* (white town) was transformed, *Wizard of Oz*-style, into a riot of colour, as 500 flags billowed brightly from balconies and bars. Meanwhile, the council says that even if they're not allowed to fly the flag, they will *always* stand for tolerance, equality, open-mindedness and respect.

Kindness is to stand in the shoes of the outsider, the unfavoured, the ‘stranger’, and having stood in those shoes change the world, so it is better for them as well as you. Like different colours in the rainbow flag we exist side by side, different but equally important to the whole. Long before the flag came along we stood together in protest and in celebration, all of us so different yet so alike because we wanted the world to be fairer, and just and decent. Now we stand with those same values and the flag announces us.

Vive la différence!

Lord Michael Cashman

(co-founder of Stonewall, activist, actor, author)

Kindness tip

Use your phone for its original intended purpose: speaking to people! Yep, actually pick up the phone and call a friend. Groundbreaking, right? And a bit scary. But feel the fear and do it anyway. Messages can be so impersonal, or they can get lost in translation or just ignored. All too often, a careless word or bust-up on social media between friends can also cause serious damage if left to fester – another reason to pick up the phone and talk things over properly. And if you're feeling particularly brave and fine of voice, sing a song down the phone. Encourage the recipient to do the same, making a whole chorus in the process. “Ring a friend/sing a friend” has a certain ring to it.

Wherever there is a human being, there is an opportunity for a kindness.

(Attributed to Lucius Annaeus Seneca)

Kindness tip

Next time you're entering a supermarket and there's a homeless person outside, ask if you can get them anything. Better still, ask them what they actually need.

And even if you can't contribute financially, perhaps take the time to talk to them.

It won't break the bank

Hurricane Katrina was one of the most ferocious hurricanes to ever hit the United States; the third deadliest, in fact, in US history. Reaching a windspeed of over 170 mph at its peak, followed by devastating floods, the 2005 Category 5 superstorm was responsible for over 1800 deaths, made millions more homeless in New Orleans, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, and caused an estimated \$100 bn of damage.

Infamously, it also exposed serious failings in the country's disaster response systems. While local, state and federal organisations were widely criticised for their handling of the tragedy, it ultimately led to the resignation of the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and did lasting damage to President George W Bush's reputation.

But one unlikely organisation did step up in the hour of need. Hancock Bank, a community bank founded in 1899, had itself been badly affected by the disaster. The head office in Gulfport, Mississippi was completely decimated, along with some 40 local branches. They had no electricity, no customer records, and most ATMs were out of service. Bank staff, too, had suffered their own personal tragedies and losses. But in the immediate aftermath, employees collected the literally filthy lucre from waterlogged banks, casinos and ATMs and quite literally laundered it. They washed and ironed banknotes, set up makeshift tables outside branches and did what they do best: they gave out money. To absolutely anybody who needed it. Whether they were an existing customer or not. With no computer records available, and many people not having access to ID or personal possessions, they operated a trust system, scribbling IOUs on scrap paper with just a name, address and social security number. In this way, the bank gave out around \$42 m. As Hancock employee Gay Todd told CNN, "they looked after the community."

This act of faith was repaid in buckets. When almost all the money handed out was eventually returned, there was a shortfall of just \$300,000. The bank's Chairman, George Schloegel, said, "Basically, people are honest and

want to do the right thing. And they'll stand by you if you stand by them." George went on to become mayor of Gulfport in 2010 in a resounding victory, taking nearly 90% of the vote. There was another benefit, too: as communities started to rebuild, and life slowly returned to relative normality, grateful recipients put their money where their mouth was. By the following year deposits at the bank had increased by a whopping \$1.5 bn. Kindness, it would seem, is good for business.

.....

The greatness of a
community is most
accurately measured
by the compassionate
actions of its members...
a heart of grace and a
soul generated by love.

Coretta Scott King

(Address at Georgia State University, 15 February 2000)