

# What Robin Williams Taught Us About Kindness

Kate Osher, a writer and attorney, last year [told a story](#) about tragedy and the kindness of a famous stranger.

Osher's husband had committed suicide. Following his wishes, she was on a "travel quest" to scatter his ashes in places that had touched his life. Intending to fly with a Tupperware container of her husband's ashes, she encountered a "belligerent" TSA agent who demanded that she discard the ashes. Osher's reaction was strong and her "hysterics" attracted a real cop who, after examining the death certificate for her late husband, used common sense and allowed her pass through security, Tupperware in hand.

Still hysterical, she made her way through the throng of humanity at Los Angeles International Airport. No one seemed to care about her distress. Osher collected herself in an airport bar. There she sat, facing a wall, feeling alone with her grief.

Then words of kindness came to her. Osher felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. She recognized the "soft voice" of Robin Williams, who standing behind her, said, "Miss, I just want to be sure you are OK. I see you are traveling alone, and I saw what happened, and I just really want to be sure you are OK."

Robin Williams listened as Kate Osher shared her story. Williams' voice got even softer as he spoke words we now know were born from a felt experience: "Addiction is a real bitch. Mental illness and depression are the mother of all bitches. I am so sorry for all the pain your husband was in. I'm so sorry for the pain you are in now. But it sounds like you have family and friends and love. And that tips the scale a bit, right?"

Walking her to her gate, Williams got her to laugh by “impersonating people we passed by.” With a “playful” and “not insulting” spirit, Williams made “fun of the TSA agents, especially the one who gave [her] such a hard time.”

True kindness is inclusive. Mistakes may call for correction, but Williams understood that they didn’t call for derision.

Now they were standing at her gate. Williams told her she “had a wonderful laugh” and “a beautiful smile” and they parted with a big hug. In Osher’s words, his compassion “sustained me during one of the most difficult moments of my life.”

This was another day in [the kindness office](#) for Robin Williams. Williams was a world-famous actor and comedian, but being kind and compassionate was his way of being in the world.

We don’t know how many people noticed Osher’s distress that day or how many felt an impulse to come to her aid and didn’t. We can imagine why strangers could’ve ignored an impulse to be of help. Travelers moving along to their flights may have thought, *I don’t want to be a busybody. She may not welcome my intervention. I never have the right words. I have my own troubles. I don’t know what her issue is; maybe she’s crazy.*

“Kindness is love in action,” observes psychologist Robert Holden in his book [Loveability](#). Robin Williams’ encounter with Kate Osher is a story of kindness, love, and hope. By his actions, he reminds us that in our nature is an impulse to connect with other people, despite our own personal suffering.

Adam Smith, the father of economics, is best known for being the author of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. In his less famous book [The Theory of Moral Sentiments](#), Smith begins with a bold observation about human nature:

“No matter how selfish you think man is, it’s obvious that

there are some principles in his nature that give him an interest in the welfare of others, and make their happiness necessary to him, even if he gets nothing from it but the pleasure of seeing it." [Note: Smith's usage of English has been modernized by Jonathan Bennett of the [Early Modern Texts](#) project]

Smith writes, "We always have the strongest disposition to sympathize with the benevolent affections." Thus, being kind increases our own happiness:

"Generosity, humaneness, kindness, compassion, mutual friendship and esteem—all the social and benevolent affections—when expressed in someone's face or behaviour, even towards people who aren't specially connected with ourselves, please us on almost every occasion."

Smith observed that there is a voice within, a voice of "reason, principle, conscience" that helps us, on occasion, to place the happiness of others above our own. This inner voice, which Smith called the "impartial spectator," teaches us that "we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other." As a consequence, "we must always humble the arrogance of [our] self-love."

Smith didn't invoke religion to construct his theory of the "impartial spectator," but many have other names for the "still, small voice." No matter the name we give for this inner voice, we all know the voice that speaks for kindness, compassion, and Love. It notices our selfishness, offers gentle correction, and speaks of a better way to walk in the world.

In contrast to the "impartial spectator," we also know well the selfish internal voice which cares mostly about the ego's "holy trinity" of "me, myself and I." When we choose the guidance of our ego, impulses to be kind are dampened.

Smith, as well as many religions and spiritual belief systems, would agree on this: Every human being is born with an “operating system” that allows us to choose between the voice that speaks for kindness and Love and the voice that speaks for our egoic selfishness.

Robin Williams taught that despite our own suffering, the voice that speaks for Love can never be extinguished. Does not everything—the quality of our own life and the quality of our relationships—depend on which voice we listen to moment by moment?

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