FOREWORD BY DANIELLE STRICKLAND

ASHLEE EILAND

# HUMAN (KIND)

SNEAK PEEK

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## HOW RECLAIMING HUMAN WORTH *and* EMBRACING RADICAL KINDNESS WILL BRING US BACK TOGETHER


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ASHLEE EILAND


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WATERBROOK

HUMAN(KIND)



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For Delwin, Brooklyn, Myles, and Journey.
You are, without question, the greatest
evidence of God's kindness to me.

We are together in this. Our human compassion binds us the one to the other—not in pity or patronisingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.

—Nelson Mandela, December 6, 2000
Johannesburg, South Africa

# Contents

# Foreword

This world is a mess. Our world is a mess. My world is a mess. Even typing that feels cathartic somehow because it's the truth. Amid the complexity of the messy problems in our world—racism, sexism, and violence, just to name a few—grows fear. That fear manifests in our everyday lives in the way we distance ourselves from one another. We are afraid to engage. We are afraid of conversation; our lives have become full of subjects too sensitive and difficult to bring up. So we stick to weather and sports, clinging to whatever is polite enough to ensure we stay out of the tension. Living this way makes us feel uncertain and overwhelmed and paralyzes our best efforts to connect. Is there a remedy?

In *Human(Kind),* Ashlee Eiland offers us a deep tonic for our condition. Far more than a self-help formula that alleviates any tension, her invitation to try kindness is a terribly beautiful offer. The cynical among us may scoff at the idea that something so simple could be a way out of our current cycles of pain. But simple does not equal easy. This is an invitation to come out from behind the walls of complexity and despair and get to the task in front of us. Even before that, it's an invitation to get to the task *inside* us—to start applying kindness to ourselves.

I'm honored that Ashlee has welcomed me into her life. She has navigated a rich variety of circumstances to find herself here, in a wise and generous place. The word *kind* describes her well. The pain and beauty of her life are infused here with an opportunity to rediscover our own humanity through another lens. As I read these stories, so beautifully crafted and honestly shared, I wonder who Ashlee is. I find myself trying to define her. Is she an African American woman searching for value, belonging,

and connection in a world full of racial tension and confusion? The answer is yes. And yet she is more than that. Is she a strong, wide-eyed, curious girl growing into a wise and whole leader in a church filled with sexism? Yes, she is, and yet there is more. Is she a contemplative seeker, yearning for depth in a shallow, functional, success-driven culture? Yes, she is, but there is more. Is she a mother who longs to nurture and lead other little humans into the fullness of God's sacred callings? Yes, she is, but there is more. And that's what kindness does, I suppose. It helps us look into and beyond our typical defining labels. It breaks open the boxes we have put ourselves in. Suddenly, we have the open space to explore what else we are and could be and might even become if we gave ourselves permission to explore the *more* of ourselves and of one another.

Ashlee is not just one thing—she is human and therefore complex. Her situation is unique and common at the same time. She is a holy, mysterious, beautiful creation who has a sacred glow in the deepest part of her, a divine yes right at the center. And discovering this is the core call of this book—to move beyond the categories and limitations we put on one another and even the ones we put on ourselves. To uncover the longings, the divine invitation, the sacred image in one another. To uproot buried hopes and possibilities and nurse them back to life—using kindness as a potent remedy. Resurrection power is found in the simple truth that kindness might just be able to bring us all back to life. So be curious, honest, grateful, and friendly, and don't avoid sacrifice, commitment, rejection, or loss, because if we are kind, these things become portals to healing and wholeness.

—Danielle Strickland, author, speaker,
and social justice advocate

# A Rescue Mission

> Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
>
> —Ephesians 4:32, ESV

*Kindness* is such a mushy word. When I think of kindness, I automatically picture people who smile a lot, particularly in situations that would easily frustrate the rest of us. When they're cut off in traffic, they smile. They may even *wave* to wish the offender well. Kind people are unfailingly polite and considerate, usually thinking of others first. When someone gives them harsh or critical feedback, they receive it graciously and without defensiveness. Nothing seems to shake their composure or positive outlook. They simply chuckle in the face of mild adversity and go on about their day. If we're honest, most of us find these folks refreshing, yet mildly annoying. If kindness were personified, it'd be one of *those* people: smiley, gentle, potentially passive. They might be respected but aren't necessarily invited to lend their perspective on wildly important matters.

My perception of kindness in its purest form—maybe yours too—is that it's really reserved only for the likes of perfect preschool teachers or professional do-gooders like Mother Teresa and Mister Rogers. We often

think kindness has no place in the arena of hard-hitting debate and truth-telling activism. If one chooses to bring kindness along, that person is often considered naive, unsophisticated, or—worse yet—weak. It is not a legitimate contender in the ring of human disagreement.

My first job was as an associate at a Blockbuster video store. I was a part of the esteemed cohort of film connoisseurs responsible for transferring all our VHS tapes to DVDs. But before we made the full transition, the familiar saying remained plastered on our exit door for all patrons to see: Be Kind. Rewind.

We often treat kindness as an afterthought or a suggestion that we shouldn't take seriously.

Be kind. Wash your hands.

Be kind. Recycle.

Be kind. Return your cart.

All nice things to do, surely. But when it comes to the conversations and discussions that matter—the ones wherein we defend our values and ideals, our platforms and politics—we expect kindness to take a back seat.

However, I've become convinced that kindness (and its cousins compassion and empathy) must be rescued. If we let it, kindness will be a part of what saves us from the divisions and disharmony that have become cemented in how we coexist, from the sting when we talk about what grieves us and moves us to action, and from the pride of our postures online and across tables as we advocate for that which we believe in so strongly.

Kindness will be able to undo the damage we've done because it's the secret weapon for detecting the intrinsic worth found in every person.

But in order to see the power of kindness on display, we'll always have to sacrifice something, whether it is time or impatience or the dominance of our own opinions. Transformational kindness toward other humans will also require something that frenzied fingers flying across a keyboard never have: bravery. It takes a brave person to come out of hiding, to come

off a Twitter feed or Instagram live video and sit in the flesh with another human being who was crafted with intentionality and great love, injected with the *imago Dei,* the image of God himself.

It takes bravery to look someone in the eye, choosing to believe that person is worthy and choosing to be changed by intentionally engaging both kindly and respectfully with one whom the Creator called "very good" (Genesis 1:31, NIV).

In Ephesians 4 the apostle Paul charged the church at Ephesus to be kind to one another. This was after he called them to maintain unity and right before he urged them to live lives based in love, as Christ did by sacrificing his very life for them. He called them to "get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (verse 31, NIV). All these negative traits seem to thrive in our current culture.

In its original Greek the word *chrēstos,* which we translate *kind,* means "useful toward others," "good-natured," and "gentle."[1] Jesus used the same word in the gospel of Luke when he spoke these words to his disciples and the multitude: "Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is *kind* to those who are unthankful and wicked" (Luke 6:35, NLT, emphasis added).

Loving an enemy? Super hard. I'd argue that it's harder than debating that same enemy on social media or gossiping about him in the break room. But Jesus commanded it because he did it first. He even told us how kind his Father is to people he calls ungrateful and wicked! I'm pretty sure we all have a list of folks we'd consider wicked or who seem at least loosely acquainted with evildoing. Jesus and Paul called us to be actively useful toward them, to be good-natured and gentle. Therefore, I'd argue that extending kindness is a lot harder—and a lot more powerful—than we give it credit for.

Kindness does more than facilitate easy pleasantries or cordiality. It melts swords in the arena. It bargains with clenched fists, inviting those fists to become open hands in the ring. Kindness helps us see beyond mere words to our hearts and shows us, truly, how suffering has shaped us and taught us to treat one another. It gives us hope and catalyzes healing between parents and children, neighbors, and nations.

*Kindness* may be a mushy word, but it's the dark horse of our humanity. It's not loud or demanding, but given enough time, it wins.

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If we're going to find our way back to one another—to be bound together once again—we must start with relearning how to be kind to ourselves. By examining our own stories, looking at both our wounds and our most admirable qualities, we can discover when and where we were taught to love or defend or hide. We can find clues to our wholeness and the gaping holes in need of love and appreciation and belonging.

Each of us has a story like this—a story that taught us something about humankindness.

As we explore what has formed us, we can give kindness another go. We can look at the people and places that trigger us. We can absorb the blows to our pride. Maybe we'll even choose to consider a different perspective because kindness has taught us how to be patient with and gracious to the people and stories all around us.

This is my story—a story of a black woman who grew up in the South and who discovered some wholeness and some holes along the way. As I looked back over my life, there were moments I remembered so vividly. Upon further reflection, they were vivid because they mattered. They marked me in both beautiful and painful ways. But as I sat with these moments and memories, I realized they mattered because they taught me how to be kind to my own worthy self. Recalling them helped

me acknowledge the good gifts I've been given, the gifts I now hope to give to others, and enabled me to see the painful and hard moments as opportunities to be more fully human, to remind myself to receive grace where there's been grievance. In seeing my story and learning how to be kind to myself, I'm reminded that we all have stories. We all have good gifts and hard grievances. But the sum of both equips us to engage others, even those who are difficult to love, with the kindness we find in Scripture, transforming us into something better and more unified.

Laced throughout the book are invitations for you to revisit the stories of your own life, to understand more fully how you have been formed along the way. Saying yes to these invitations will require openness, courage, and a lot of kindness. But if we are bold and brave, kindness will do its work of elevating our stories and rekindling our common love and humanity. Kindness will bind us together, helping us reclaim our worth once again.

1

# Good Hygiene

## (Curiosity)

The school I attended from kindergarten through twelfth grade was an excellent one. I'm not just saying that out of personal pride because I attended it or because it was one of the first schools to equip every student with a laptop starting in the seventh grade. I'm also not proclaiming its excellence simply because I attended this all-girls private Catholic school during the hype surrounding Britney Spears's first album release, the cover and the contents of which were every plaid-wearing schoolgirl's shout of legitimacy.

My school was excellent, in my opinion, because of the nuns.

The nuns who lived on the picturesque campus in a white columned home we all called the White House were mostly elderly and kept to themselves—but there were a few in particular who absolutely defined my experience.

One nun wore shin-length skirts that were usually more festive and memorable than those worn by the other sisters. She wore eyeglasses and rocked wild salt-and-pepper hair that never truly fit the *Sister Act*–inspired image of a nun. She was one of my high school English teachers.

Her cultural relevance combined with her caffeine-fueled energy and nontraditional garb made her one of the most beloved teachers who ever walked the hallways of our school.

Another nun who lived in the White House—the matriarch in many respects—was older and more delicate, but what she lacked in physical strength, she made up for in quick wit and stern instructions. She was the glue that held all of us together, as she was present, accessible, and genuine when it came to matters involving our personal lives. Her wisdom and knowledge of our school's history tied our younger generation to her rich roots. Her presence bridged the gap from the good ol' days to the promise of our present.

There were other standouts too—such as my kindergarten teacher, who sat me in timeout for saying "pee-pee" too loudly. (She also made me cry when she told our class that a strange little man had stolen our freshly baked cookies and we had to go on a hunt around the school to get them back. She was referring to the gingerbread man. I was not amused.) Oddly enough, she turned out to be one of my favorite teachers. My experience of her began to shift when she brought out the primary-colored parachute during library time and when she helped us tackle messy papier-mâché projects, like the oversized stegosaurus named Stephanie that we constructed.

Given our proximity to all the nuns, it's no surprise there was much intrigue and curiosity on our quaint little wooded campus about the White House. We all wanted to go inside.

One of the only ways in was by participating in Extended Day, which was an after-school program specifically structured for girls whose parents (or nannies or neighbors) couldn't get to school for pickup by three thirty.

If you were one of the lucky few girls who were hanging around like perfectly good pieces of cantaloupe on a tray of fruit, you walked through

the school building, across the campus, and down a long boarded pathway composed of neatly spaced wooden slats—a pair of high heel's worst nightmare—to the fine arts building. There, you checked in with a teacher, dropped your bags, grabbed a snack (usually Goldfish or Cheez-It crackers) that you placed into your perfectly pleated napkin pocket—and you waited.

If your parent didn't arrive by six o'clock, you had the privilege and honor of an exclusive all-access pass through the heavy White House doors. Inside, the nuns would feed you a modest meal for dinner. But most of the time, your parent arrived within that two-and-a-half-hour window and there was nothing to brag about the next day in the hallways by the cubbies.

I entered the White House twice under these circumstances.

On one such afternoon—I must've been six or seven—I made the familiar trek through the school and across campus to the fine arts building. I swung open the glass door and dropped my JanSport backpack, the *thud* echoing all the way to the top of the pointed glass ceiling. I rounded the corner, collected my snack, and began rummaging through the kitchen cabinets to find Mille Bornes, my favorite card game.

As I spread my snack and the cards on the faded green Victorian rug, a little girl plopped down in front of me. She had sand-colored skin and soft brown hair that was pulled back in a long ponytail, safely secured by a navy-blue ribbon. Her plaid jumper matched mine. Her white socks hosted a fringe of lace. I noted that I hadn't met her before.

"Can I play with you?" she asked softly.

"Sure," I said, without much thought.

"I don't know how to play," she confessed.

"It's okay," I said, crunching my Goldfish. "I'll teach you."

As I dealt her hand, I glanced up periodically to catch her blue eyes. She was staring at my arm. At around seven years old, I didn't know

exactly what was coming next—but I knew I was under her microscope. Self-conscious, I rubbed my right thumb over a patch of sand that had hung on for dear life after my afternoon tour around the sandbox.

"Do you shower?" she finally asked me, her head cocked to the side.

"What do you mean?" I asked, crunching more Goldfish.

"Your skin . . .," she began. Then she stopped. "I mean, your skin looks really dirty. Does your mommy help you shower every day?"

I felt a sudden sting in the lower pockets of my eyelids. I knew tears were close, but I didn't want to make a scene in front of this curious stranger.

"Of course," I choked out as I attempted to appear controlled and even. "Of course I shower. I mean, I usually bathe in a bathtub."

"Then why does your skin look like that?"

"Because I'm African American and I have dark skin."

Her mouth twitched to the side as she stared at my arm without any regard to my discomfort.

We didn't play Mille Bornes that afternoon, and I didn't finish my Goldfish. I abandoned the carpet and raced to my backpack, tore it open, and pretended to read a book.

My mother eventually picked me up, well before the magic deadline. I could smell the scent of her perfume and hard work on her clothes—and I told her everything. Empathetic—and, I know now, silently seething over the ways she couldn't protect me—she listened and assured me that I wasn't dirty and that I was beautiful.

My mother and father worked long hours, climbed their way to the tops of their fields in the Texas oil and chemical industries, and made sure our lives were comfortable. They made sure I could attend this excellent school and dream the same dreams of exclusive access and behind-the-scenes privilege as the sixty-two out of sixty-six girls in my class who weren't black.

I was lucky to be the beneficiary of their hard work.

But that one afternoon taught me how curiosity shapes and forms us. Sometimes we become nosy, jealous, or envious of another's experience. At other times, we long to draw close and know more, genuinely wanting to be charitable, kind, and helpful in relationship. On one side of curiosity, we're the explorer, searching for answers and hoping to know more about why or how someone else exists. But on the receiving end, curiosity can do the opposite work. It can make us feel like a specimen being poked at on the biology table, like a betta fish in a really small bowl. We're not invited into anything. Rather, we're examined and then left alone. Curiosity can be a catalyst for real relationship, or it can isolate and exotify, making someone feel completely "other."

I don't think the little girl who sat before me that day was malicious or ill willed. I think in her childlike curiosity, she wanted to tell the truth; she wanted to be friends and to know more. She genuinely wanted to help me.

But sometimes even the most innocent, childlike curiosity doesn't lead to great discoveries. Instead, it can inadvertently lead to years of confusion and even more questions that require a delicate undoing—an undoing that some of us are still trying to navigate with careful intentionality. For me, that undoing has been slow, deliberate, and thoughtful—an everyday and yet mostly invisible part of my existence.

I spent years trying to convince myself that I wasn't dirty, that I was worthy to walk the hallways of my excellent school with the standout nuns and to take up space. I spent years trying to remind myself that I was one of the lucky few. But sometimes, I learned, being lucky and having opportunities makes you stand out in all the wrong ways.

I realized that gazing at the inside of the White House wasn't as glamorous as we all made it out to be. Gazing, digging deeper for the sake of more information, doesn't always pay dividends in the context of

real relationship. Our curiosity may be satiated, but at what cost? Sometimes the cost is a glaring dent or a hole filled with even more questions. As far as the White House was concerned, if you got the answers you wanted—if you were one of the last ones left—giddy curiosity met harsh reality. The reality meant you stood outside the front door in the dark, waiting for someone to answer.

# Cherie

## (Sacrifice)

There's something subtly remarkable in recalling the people your parents chose to care for you when they were away. The people who protected you and looked after your well-being in their absence were critically important. While I was at school, it was the nuns and Extended Day teachers. When my parents went on dates or needed to go to parties and work functions, more often than not I went to Cherie's house.

Our family lived about twenty-five minutes from Cherie, which felt like an eternity back then. It was a straight shot down one farm-to-market road, but there were countless stoplights hindering us from getting there quickly. Go, slow down, stop. Go, slow down, stop. For twenty-five minutes. Looking back, I'm sure my parents could've figured out other, more convenient childcare options, but there was only one Cherie. My mother recalls seeing a man and a woman on a walk one evening while driving through another neighborhood. They were holding hands and strolling along as if they had nothing but time to be with each other. She remembers thinking how loving they seemed. Little did she know, that was Cherie, walking hand in hand with her husband. One thing led to another, and through a mutual friend, my mother became acquainted with Cherie. The

rest was history. Over the years we grew so close to her family that I don't remember ever ringing their doorbell or entering their one-story brick house through the front door. I couldn't even tell you what color the front door was if you asked me.

My parents always parked on Cherie's short, slanted cement driveway, and we walked through the garage and the back door into the laundry room. During the short journey, we were quite likely to encounter at least one of the eight cats—sometimes the dog. Inside, the washer and dryer greeted us, and oftentimes there was a cat perched atop a rumbling machine, soothed by the massage. Then there was frequently another cat curled up for a nap on the counter in the kitchen. From there, through the living room and dining room and bedrooms, each door revealed another creature: two birds, a couple of ferrets named after old-school Houston Rockets legends Mario Elie and Sam Cassell, a tank full of fish, a snake—and a tub filled with mice that I quickly learned weren't just for show.

But my parents trusted Cherie. And for good reason. She'd successfully raised four kids of her own and had earned a reputation for being a responsible and nurturing caregiver. Since my parents played club volleyball and had friends in that neighborhood, they heard about her quite a bit. As I got to know her myself, I came to love her humble spirit and quick smile, her eager and willing attentiveness, and her hospitality.

I don't remember ever seeing Cherie with shoes on her feet. Her spirit was like her wispy blond hair: free and light. Yet the lines on her face hinted at the triumph and trial of motherhood: raising two gorgeous, strong-willed daughters and two hardworking sons, plus caring for her grandkids, who I pretended were my little brothers and sisters. She smelled like the smoke from her cigarettes, but the scent was sweet, and it grew to be familiar and even comforting to me.

No one ever mentioned the fact that Cherie and her family were white—and that my family and I were black. No one ever had to. When

I was under her roof, I felt as if I were her priority. I felt that she enjoyed having me there. I had access to the fullness of her life; she wasn't hiding anything from me. I felt as if I were another one of her kids, receiving the best of her. Black or not, I felt I belonged.

Cherie's house was a major backdrop of my early life and so much a part of me it felt like a second home. It was an oasis made of brick and mortar, a retreat where I was invited to adventure and explore, a new strand of freedom tucking itself into the folds of my fragile identity each time I visited. I remember going barefoot in the backyard, tiptoeing across the pavement's pebbles, and sinking my feet into the cold, damp grass.

I didn't know many black kids who were allowed to go outside barefoot. At least, I don't remember it being encouraged in our house. Perhaps my parents wanted my feet to be protected from any scratches or scrapes or anthills. After all, our ancestors had spent too many years trying to preserve the dignity of their own brown feet: bare feet that were often shackled and enchained. Covered feet were better. They were safe.

But at Cherie's, my shoes came off—and I was free. I was the free little black girl stitched into the fabric of Cherie's white family, privy not just to her pets but to all the drama too: forbidden tattoos and job dilemmas and arguments and breakups. I was the unassuming yet ever-present little black sister.

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As free as I felt in Cherie's care, there was one time when it became clear that her care, unlike her love, had limitations.

One day, my mother dropped me off at Cherie's and had a conversation with her about my hair. I imagine it went something like this:

"Hey, Cherie," my mom said. "Thanks again for taking Ashlee. I really appreciate it, especially on such short notice. I don't know what kind of

fun you have up your sleeves for today, but if her hair gets wet, don't worry about washing it."

"Are you sure?" Cherie asked in response.

"I'm sure," my mom said.

Then my mother would've left, confident and happy knowing her daughter was confident and happy in this white woman's home. I'm sure she suspected we'd be playing in the sand or splashing around in the water from the hose out front and I would soon need to be cleaned up or dried off.

But she also knew that Cherie, as much as she loved me, had no idea how to care for my head of black-girl hair. Cherie knew how to nurture my wit and adventurous spirit; she knew how to meet my needs for food and sleep. She knew how to bring my creativity to life as we played dress-up and watched the fish swim in her tank. She knew so much about how to care for me.

But my hair? She had no clue.

I don't remember what we did that day, but I do know that when my mother came to pick me up, my thick, kinky hair was in knots. A comb was stuck in the strands, my curly black tresses were knotted between porcelain-white fingers—and Cherie was in tears.

"Cherie! Are you okay? Why'd you wash it? I told you not to worry about washing it."

More tears.

I don't know why Cherie was crying. Maybe she was frustrated because the shampoo that cleansed and moisturized and smoothed her hair wasn't having the same effect on mine. Perhaps she felt frustrated with herself because instead of heeding my mother's words, she had taken them more as a suggestion. Perhaps she was anxious about how my mother would react to seeing her daughter that way.

I wonder if more than anything, Cherie felt a sense of deep shame. Shame that her actions had caused more harm than good. Shame that she couldn't care for me in this way just as she'd shown her care for me by making me sauerkraut for dinner, letting me taste coffee with too much sugar for the first time, or giving me a kitten of my own for my sixth birthday. Maybe Cherie felt shame because she, as a white woman, had no idea how to care for such an important part of my being—my hair.

Out of charity and true love, Cherie had attempted to tackle something she knew nothing about. And what I imagine she ran into was a shocking realization that as much as she knew how to love me—how to help me kick off my shoes and run freely into new adventures that would shape my sense of freedom and belonging—she would never know what it meant to manage my blackness.

I'll never know for sure how Cherie felt about that day. But although I felt as if I belonged in her family, I later realized there would be some aspects of my identity that she would never be able to shape, form, or tease out with the capable fine-tooth combs of her smile and her warmth. She taught me humility, grace, authenticity, and the joy and comfort that can be found in simple things—in, say, a bowl of sauerkraut and a cup of coffee. She taught me what it means to welcome strangers and treat them like family—to set them free and encourage their sense of discovery and delight in little, everyday things.

But Cherie couldn't teach me, a young black girl with thick black hair, to love my blackness. She could tell me it belonged, but she couldn't tell me how to embrace and defend it for myself.

She couldn't teach me how to see my blackness for what it really was outside the safe haven of her home. She couldn't teach me to care for it when it would surely be battered from stares and name calling and discriminatory work practices. She couldn't teach me to make it my own, giving it its own unique expression, a runway for its fullness.

Cherie gave me so much, but she couldn't give me that.

Cherie passed away when I was in college. Even after I'd graduated from high school, I'd call her on her landline—a number I still have etched in my memory to this day—so we could catch up. After she got sick and as her illness progressed, I talked more and she talked less. Then her daughters would relay my side of the conversation to Cherie and talk for her. Eventually, there was only silence on the other end.

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Today, I silently honor this woman every time I walk around my home with bare feet or drink a cup of oversugared coffee. I honor her and her family's legacy in my life whenever I walk into someone's home and see more than one cat lounging around or sauerkraut offered on a sandwich board. I honor her when I visit the zoo with my kids and answer their million questions about animals, holding close the memory of Cherie's own little zoo.

I honor her for what she gave me—and for the ways she tried so hard to give me what she never could.

To me, sacrifice means giving up something important or valued for the sake of others. Cherie wasn't perfect. But she sacrificed, regularly. She embodied sacrifice in the way she gave up her valued space: her comfy couches and her warm pebbled porch. She gave up her very body: her strong embraces and her wide smiles whenever I came inside with a scraped knee or elbow. She gave up her ramen and coffee and tablespoons of sugar—even one of her kittens—all for my sake.

At their best, our loved ones often try as hard as they can to give us everything we need. They sacrifice for us, trying to give us freedom and permission to be our best selves and to live unencumbered. They give up their finances and dreams so we can pursue the dreams birthed from our own childlike awe and wonder.

But real love for another human can take a different form, one that says, *The pressure's off, and I still accept your love.* Because despite the willingness of others to sacrifice, there are aspects of you and me that are galaxies away from their ability to understand, parts that are completely unknown or too complex to explain. If someone else were to hold these parts of our identities between their fingers, they'd be too puzzling to figure out, like a Rubik's Cube with ten of one color, when there should be only nine.

So, we have a choice. Either we can resent the fact that some people can't give us everything and demand that they try harder, that they sacrifice even more of themselves. Or we can sit patiently under the comb, knowing in our hearts that the outcome might be less than desirable—but also knowing that trying is the best offering some can give.

When I left Cherie's house that day, my hair was in knots, but my heart was intact. And to this day, I can confidently say that I imagine my dreams and desires with such freedom because of what Cherie *did* give me all those years ago.

For all her trying and all her sacrifice, I honor her.

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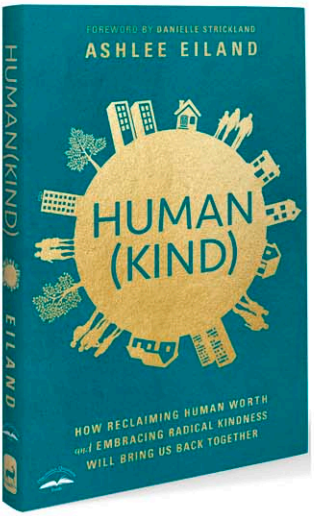


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