On Being Nice

Most books that want to change us seek to make us richer or thinner. This book wants to help us to be nicer: that is, less irritable, more patient, readier to listen, warmer, less prickly … Niceness may not have the immediate allure of money or fame, but it is a hugely important quality nevertheless and one that we neglect at our peril. This is a guidebook to the uncharted landscape of niceness, gently leading us around the key themes of this forgotten quality. We learn how to be charitable, how to forgive, how to be natural and how to reassure. We learn that niceness is compatible with strength and is no indicator of naivety. Niceness deserves to be rediscovered as one of the highest of all human achievements.

Published in 2017 by The School of Life
70 Marchmont Street, London WC1N 1AB

Designed and typeset by FLOK, Berlin
Printed in Latvia by Livonia Print

A proportion of this book has appeared online at thebookoflife.org.

Every effort has been made to contact the copyright holders of the material reproduced in this book. If any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publisher will be pleased to make restitution at the earliest opportunity.

The School of Life offers programmes, publications and services to assist modern individuals in their quest to live more engaged and meaningful lives. We've also developed a collection of content-rich, design-led retail products to promote useful insights and ideas from culture.

www.theschooloflife.com

ISBN 978-0-9955736-4-2

On Being Nice

THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

Contents

3

Losers and Tragic Heroes

Our societies are very interested in winners but don't really know what to do about losers – of which there are always, by definition, many more.

For a long time, around success and failure, the rhetoric tends to be very upbeat. We hear about resilience, bouncing back, never surrendering and giving it another go. But there's only so long this kind of talk can go on. At some point, the conclusion becomes inevitable: things won't work out. The political career is not going to have a comeback. There'll be no way of getting finance for the film. The novel won't be accepted by the 32nd publisher. The criminal charges will always taint one's reputation.

Where does responsibility for success and failure lie? Nowadays, the answer tends to be: squarely with the individual concerned. That is why failure is not only hard (and it always has been), but a catastrophe. There is no metaphysical consolation, no possibility of appealing to an idea of 'bad luck', no one to blame but oneself. No wonder suicide rates climb exponentially once societies

modernise and start to hold people responsible for their biographies. Meritocracies turn failure from a misfortune into an unbudgeable verdict on one's nature.

But not all societies and eras have seen success and failure in such a stark light. In Ancient Greece, another remarkable possibility – quite ignored by our own era – was envisaged: you could be good and yet fail. To keep this idea at the front of the collective imagination, the Ancient Greeks developed a particular art form: tragic drama. They put on huge festivals, which all citizens were expected to attend, to act out stories of appalling, often grisly, failure. People were seen to break a minor law, or make a hasty decision, or sleep with the wrong person, and the result was ignominy and death. What happened was shown to be to a large extent in the hands of what the Greeks called 'fate' or 'the Gods'. It was the Greeks' poetic way of saying that things often work out in random ways, according to dynamics that don't reflect the merits of the individuals concerned.

In *The Poetics*, the philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) defined the key ingredients of tragedy. The hero of the tragedy should be a decent person: 'better than average', often high-born but prone to making small mistakes. At the start, it may not be obvious that they are making an

error. But by an unfortunate chain of events, for which they are not wholly to blame, this small mistake leads to a catastrophe.

Tragedy is the sympathetic, morally complex, account of how good people can end up in disastrous situations. It is the very opposite of today's tabloid newspapers or social media, where the mob rushes to make judgements on those who have slipped up. Aristotle thought it extremely important that people see tragic works on a regular basis to counter their otherwise strong inclinations to judge and moralise. Aristotle thought a good tragedy should inspire both pity and fear: pity for the tragic hero based on an understanding of how easy it is to make the slip that leads to disaster; and fear for oneself as one realises how open our lives are to careering out of control. All of us could quite quickly come apart if ever events chose to test us.

Tragedy is meant to be a corrective to easy judgement. It exists to counter our natural instincts to admire only the successful, to spurn those who fail, and to dismiss unfortunates as losers.

We are currently uncomfortable around the idea of a good person not succeeding. We'd rather say that they weren't good than embrace a far more disturbing and less well-publicised thought: that the world is very unfair. But

without the idea of tragedy, we make existence for everyone far crueller and more judgemental than it need be.