

Do your little bit of **good** where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world. –
Desmond Tutu

Kindness as an Avenue to Awe

--by *Awakin Call Editors*, Apr 07, 2019



*What would happen if schools focused on kindness and gratitude before achievement and academics? This is a question that Andy Smallman not only entertained, but also acted upon. In 1994, Andy with a group of dedicated parents and their children started **Puget Sound Community School [PSCS]** “founded upon the belief that people are intrinsically compelled by their own curiosity and desires to learn, and when provided a positive and supportive environment...will enthusiastically pursue meaningful and challenging tasks.”*

*At PSCS, kindness was not just a concept, it was part of the curriculum—a **class**. The kindness class became so successful, that Smallman offered an **online version** open to the general public. 250 “students” from around the world joined the class and practiced random acts of kindness that rippled out in their communities. In 2011, Andy created a website called **Kind Living** which offers self-paced kindness classes.*

*But Smallman didn't stop there. In 2012, Andy was asked to adapt the kindness class for **The Compassion Games**, an annual event in September in which cities all over the world compete cooperatively to determine which is the most compassionate. So Andy developed **The Secret Agent of Compassion**, a “coopetition” (cooperative competition) between cities based on compassionate acts. Smallman, who is excited about how awe “has become a secular, or generally acceptable, way to refer to the divine,” sees kindness as “both an avenue in to recognizing awe, and is the result of experiencing awe.”*

*What follows is the edited transcript of an Awakin **Call** interview with Andy Smallman. You can listen to the full recording **here**.*

Anne Veh: I was touched to learn Andy's favorite pastime: walking his puppy, Benson, to the “give and take” garden that the two came across by accident. What touched me was how this tiny garden raised profound questions and reflections in Andy. In a recent blog post he writes, “I hesitated for a minute before taking the ring--perhaps the taking should be done by children. I was quickly reminded of a philosophy I shared in a recent kindness class--the

idea that there is no giving without someone receiving. Andy, I'd love to ask you to share how this garden continues to inspire you.

Andy: My wife and I got a puppy last fall, and one aspect of having a puppy is that you go for walks. I've been a runner for years, but at that pace I don't notice things that I do walking. Not that I'm a fast runner, but my focus is breathing, trying to get into that runner's rhythm, and I wouldn't notice things in the same way that I do when walking, especially with a puppy who has to stop and smell things--the puppy has his own pace. I've been trying to pay attention to that.

So I've just been awed by the things I'm noticing that have been there all along. Kind of like Annie Dillard wrote in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. There are all these treasures for us to find--do we have the eyes to see them? And one day, I saw this tiny patch of land and it had this sign that was painted purple with "The give and take garden" and a smiley face on it. It really just spoke to me and I just stopped and took it all in. There were little toy cars and figurines and rocks arranged just so and little plants.

I decided I would tell myself the story of how this all got here. I imagine, based on the evidence, this had been put together by a child--some young person still tapped into that wonder and beauty of being human--they haven't been influenced by the obligations of growing up. I then pictured that this child had a parent who understood the importance of nurturing that, trying to support their child, and together they just made it happen. The first time, I didn't think that I should take anything. I felt that the first responsibility was to give something. So I brought a little toy car that was actually given to me out of playfulness, I believe by my mother, in my Christmas stocking. And I left it. When I came back later, it was gone, and it just tickled me to no end. I really kept trying to imagine the curator, this child, maintaining and following this. And there's so many more pieces around this, from how it brought others there--or, I attended a workshop in July and was given a little stone with the word *courage* on it, and I wanted to leave that there. Yeah, there are neighborhood treasures for us if we develop the eyesight to find them.

Anne: Oh, thank you, Andy. I can imagine the child who created this, and the joy of seeing what's taken and what's added. I can imagine a daily ritual of visiting the garden too.

Andy: I took Benson there Monday. Seattle has had a pretty rainless summer, so I noticed it was a little dry in the give and take garden, so may need a little rain.

Anne: In your blog post you mentioned a stone with the numbers 1-4-3 and a story connected to one of your students. Could you tell us about that?

Andy: Sure. At PSCS, I facilitate a lot of classes. The idea is for the students to match their goals, and their goals often change to the things that they're doing in the present. I always say, "Live your life in the present and not as constant prep," because a lot of what we do to young people is we're constantly telling them to do this because it will serve them in the

future. I want them to pay attention to what they want to do in the future, and plan things in the present that excite them.

So, I offered a class on human development. I was presenting Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and at the top are these people who are self-actualized--in most cases, people present Mother Theresa, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Gandhi. Those people seem so out of reach to American children. I don't think self-actualization is just for those rare individuals. I think it's there for anybody. So, what occurred to me was Mr. Rogers of the Mr. Rogers TV show. I thought the students might find him more approachable.

I found an article in *Esquire* magazine by Tom Junod on his experience following Mr. Rogers, and how Mr. Rogers, whether he was filming a show or fixing food or whatever, was the same. There was no disconnection between who he was behind the camera or in front of the camera. He didn't play a character.

One aspect of Mr. Rogers' day was that he would weigh himself every day, and Tom was privy to watching Mr. Rogers strip down to his boxer shorts and get on a scale, and every day he saw the numbers 1-4-3. He weighed 143 pounds and said to Tom that "I've weighed 143 pounds as long as I can remember." So, he decided that there was meaning in that because "There's one letter in the word *I* and four letters in the word *love* and three letters in the word *you*," so every time he looks at the scale he sees an "I love you" message. That touched me. The Internet was starting to grow and I had the idea of trying to start a 1-4-3 movement. We would create buttons and hand out things on city buses to present this idea that love is all around you. So we created these little buttons, 1-4-3 on the button with Mr. Rogers' initials underneath it, F.M.R. That didn't go viral online, but certainly touched a lot of people, and one of the people it touched was my niece Stephanie. That Christmas Stephanie was at the Pike Place Market and found a stone in a little shop--a stone with 1-4-3 on it. It didn't have the F.M.R. initials, but it was the same font as our 1-4-3. So she bought it for me and it was such a touching gift. This now is years and years ago. Stephanie and I regularly have dinner together, and I told her about the give and take garden. I said, "I want to leave the 1-4-3 rock there," and she thought it was a great idea. So I left the 1-4-3 rock, and the next time I came back it was gone.

So that's the 1-4-3 story. The most recent post on my blog, which is kindnessandy.com, is about Benson and me walking this past Monday; we saw 1-4-3 spray painted on a sidewalk.

Anne: Wow. Such a beautiful story. I'm curious how you and Melinda came to start the Puget Sound Community School; what led you to found a school on kindness?

Andy: That's a lovely question. I don't want to sound disrespectful to fans of public education, but I have concerns about it. I call myself the product of public education in the 1970s and early 1980s. I graduated in 1981, and I did really well by public school standards. I had a high grade point average. I got off-the-chart SAT scores. But I had no idea who I was. I knew how to take tests, so I was lucky that way. I knew how to please teachers so I was lucky that way. So it manifested in meaningless records of my success, but I didn't know

what I wanted to do. I had the wherewithal to go to college--a lot of eighteen-year-olds say, Well, I guess I'll go to college now. It wasn't as expensive back then, but still.

So I ended up taking off. I first was a busboy; I had a buddy in Alaska and he hooked up with a guy on a string of radio stations, so I ended up working as an AM DJ. I started studying Eastern philosophy on the side. I was inspired by the old David Carradine [Kung Fu](#) TV shows--that was a real huge deal and source of inspiration. I was trying to look inwardly, so I started studying things like Buddhism or Daoism and found a lot of meaning. I traveled, had entertaining jobs that paid the bills, but felt unfulfilled while doing them.

I had a friend who knew I enjoyed spending time with children and suggested the Big Brother program in King County, Washington State. I went in and talked to a caseworker, then spent two months going through training and background checks. I was matched with this little boy, a third grader, and it was in that moment that I knew I was supposed to be an educator. So I decided I would start looking into going to college. The one that spoke to me was the Evergreen State College in Olympia. Evergreen is a very student-centered college where if you have the means and focus, you can take things to an independent level and learn in an individualized way. I had it in my mind that to become a third-grade teacher, but when I graduated, I still wasn't a certified teacher. I went on to a master's program to get my certificate and ended that program writing a paper: "First Do No Harm." It was about why I am not applying for teaching jobs. I suggested that teachers should have some form of a Hippocratic Oath. It was a little over the top, but it was in the right spirit.

So I was a certified teacher but the challenge was, I didn't find any environments that were honoring of both students and teachers. Over the next couple of years, I did some substituting; I did some tutoring, where I could interact with students the way I wanted to. Through a series of crazy coincidences, I was asked to be a part-time teacher at a private elementary school outside Seattle, called The Little School. I took that job and, Wednesday afternoons, came in and was there with with a group of fifth and sixth graders from December through June. At the end, the director asked if I wanted a full-time job with fifth and sixth graders. I said, "I'll do it if I can write my master's thesis about trying to empower children to take charge of their education," and they said okay. In that thesis I first proposed this idea of community-based middle school. Over the next couple of years, I had a number of parents appreciate the way that I was educating their kids. Together Melinda and I decided to make a go of creating a community-based middle school. Melinda's background had been in administration, so I brought this passion for student empowerment and Melinda brought structure. If anyone's trying to start a school, they need to have a passionate focus and put administrative structure in place. Those two things together have allowed PSCS to thrive.

So what I was suggesting is that the mainstream educational system is antiquated. The memorization, choosing which things students [learn](#), only being with people your own age, being in a building all day long. These are industrial-age, conveyor-belt concepts. PSCS has

been a school for the 21st century, but also a model of how to work with young people and integrate them into the community.

Anne: That is extraordinary. I'm hearing such a deep listening from you--you knew you were being guided, and to have that trust, and that leap of faith, especially in a marriage is quite extraordinary.

Andy: For us, it's just kind of normal, but in the founding year of PSCS and the few years getting rolling, people would want to talk about this risk that we were taking. I'd say, "I get it, but I don't feel like this is a risk on the level that you're talking."

First, I felt like I'm channeling this--it's not me, it's coming through me and it's my role to help make it **come** into being and there are others who have their own role in making that happen. And the second thing I told people is, the bigger risk was NOT to do it. I remember saying, "I don't want to be 70, 75, 80 years old and look back and say 'I wish I'd done it.'" We had the wherewithal then, to go--you know, if this doesn't work, we'll go do something else, but this is what we should be doing NOW. In that sense, it's building in the now with an eye toward how that moves you into the future. We had just put a down payment on a house and we had an infant and no savings--so you factor all of those things together, a baby, a mortgage, no savings and we quit our jobs to start a school, and we said "Yeah, that doesn't seem risky."

Anne: [laughing] That's so beautiful. I want to ask about early memories--or life experiences--or mentors who have inspired you. You've mentioned third grade a couple of times. Your own experience, and the experience of having a relationship with a third grader

Andy: Yeah, I didn't notice that until later, and I think it was a message for me--and I'm still needing to study that. My experience in third grade was really bad--I was born in in Nebraska and my parents were the PTA presidents, very involved in public schools and dedicated and volunteer-oriented. And my third-grade year--initially I was to be placed in a third-and-fourth-grade combined classroom with a couple of teachers, and my older brother was just fifteen months older and was going to be in that class too, so the decision was made to not put me in that class. Instead I was put in a class with a teacher that scared me--I didn't have the self-awareness to recognize that, and it wasn't until years later that I connected the dots. So the teacher is--take this with a grain of salt, it's a recollection of a scared third-grade boy looking at this many years later--is the classic schoolmarm. She was the authority--you did what she said, you sat where she said, you you didn't get up unless she said you could. If you weren't quick enough or you weren't doing what she wanted or she just didn't want to take the time to tell you, she would move you by your earlobe--take a student, grab their ear, and pull them.

My parents were honored as lifetime members of the PTA--this was an evening event. I have two older brothers and I think we were home with a babysitter--and then we were going to

surprise my parents, so we could be there to see the ceremony. The meeting was in the gym and next to that was a hall; we were kept in the hall and then we were going to be brought out when the appropriate moment was--and my third grade teacher was given the task of watching us, and when it was time to bring us out in front of that room full of people, I remember being pulled out by my ear, and it was humiliating and awful and I, you know, nearly wet my pants--it was so awful for me.

That was the year that I started having night terrors and by the time I was in fourth grade I was hospitalized for a week and remember electrodes being attached to my head and my family being in family counseling/behavior modification to try to figure out what was causing this. It was my biggest shame. As much as older brothers may tease, the one thing my brothers knew that you left alone was, you didn't out the fact that I screamed at night. I don't recall them ever telling somebody--it was just humiliating and I honestly wouldn't talk about that till well into my twenties when I was at Evergreen.

So then, I was matched at twenty-one with this third-grade boy and didn't even connect the fact that my motivator to go to college was to become a third grade teacher until after.

I tell people that my gift, or sometimes I like to refer to this as, "What is your superpower?" is empathy for children, understanding and patience. I like to believe children can be with me and feel safe and know they're going to be respected for who they are--these are all founding principles of PSCS.

So I believe that was nurtured through that experience of my night terrors and in third grade, and while I wouldn't wish that on anyone, I also wouldn't trade it--it's part of my past and who I am. With the first-year students--we serve middle and high school students, so there are a lot of sixth and seventh graders that are new--we'll do circles, and I'll facilitate [something](#) this fall called "new student seminar" and sixth-and seventh-grade seminar, where we just come together and just talk. I'll tell them this, and it will often open them up to talk about their story and I tell them, "Everybody has a story and when you hear it you can't help but appreciate and love that person a little--when you hear someone's pain, you feel a little more connected to that person."

And one of my motivations now is to help people recognize that and develop that empathy without having to hear the story. If everyone has a story and you can only respect or care for someone when you hear it, how about we just assume they have a story and care and respect for them before we hear their story.

Anne: Thank you so much for sharing. It is profound to realize--some of our greatest challenges in life become our greatest gifts. I'd [love](#) for you to share how you formed circles in the school and also about the students' role; could you walk us through a typical day?

Andy: That's a common question and I always smile because it's such a reasonable question--and there's really no typical day. We do get into a routine, but I don't want to imply there aren't other things that happen.

Every school day basically begins in circle ("check in"), facilitated by one of the students and we never know who's going to do it. At the start of the day--our school day is 9 to 3:40; a lot of schools are starting later now because adolescents need sleep, but we've been doing that for 15-20 years--the role of the adults is to be sitting in the circle and being silent. We don't have a big enough space that everybody can actually be in one circle, so there's the outer circle of chairs, and then people will sit on the floor when the whole school comes together.

There's a circle of chairs that kind of holds the space--but anyway one of the students is going to say "Hey, let's get check-in started" and that student, whether they're a sixth grader or twelfth grader, holds the authority in the room and our job is to give our respect to that person, who's now going to run the meeting for the next ten minutes. They'll say, "Any announcements?" and if I have an announcement I'll raise my hand and wait to be called on, then make my announcement. Announcements range from things happening at school that day to visitors to upcoming opportunities.

Next they'll confirm that there are a couple of students who can get the kitchen ready for the day---we don't have job charts. We have volunteers, so there's a list the students have created that says Kitchen--AM for morning and PM for afternoon, and a facilitator at check-in will ask for volunteers and then the names will get written. So during that morning meeting the student who's leading, the facilitator, will confirm that there are two students ready to do it and they'll take care of that right after check-in--emptying the dishwasher and making sure the counters are clean. If you don't want to do that, you don't have to--we don't want you to feel mandated to--but we do help the students understand that without people contributing, the community really doesn't work.

The last thing at check-in is what we call "appreciation." Perhaps THE most significant thing that happens at the school--more significant than classes or the activities or the independent work--is this concept. And it was an idea that I had years and years ago; humans have a propensity to focus on the negative, and appreciation is a concentrated effort at PSCS to focus on the positive. We can end this meeting in positivity, and when I first describe this to people it sounds hokey and I can understand that--until you experience it, and it seems like one of the most naturally [human](#) things to do.

They'll say "Anybody have any appreciations?" and people will raise their hands, get called on, and say "Hey, I want to just appreciate the bus driver today--he was singing out the stops as we were coming to school." Somebody else raises their hand, "I want to appreciate my mom; she got up early today and made me pancakes." Some end up being stories that take a minute; others are just a name, and it goes as long as it needs to. And then the facilitator dismisses us, and that's 9:10. The two people doing the kitchen go do that, and then the first activities that the students have collaborated with the teachers to create starts

at 9:20. We bookend it at 3:30; we have check-out and it's basically the same thing that I just described, and it takes 10 minutes at the end of the day. So we come together in circle and end in circle.

During the week there are other circles that we call seminars, where people are meeting because they're in a similar situation, like to be a student on the path to graduate. You come together and you agree that you're going to be part of senior seminar, where twelfth graders all work together with at least one of the members of the staff. They do that all year long, and they get together once a week to support each other. There are other seminars--advisory, where each of the teachers advises roughly eleven students. So the eleven students come together with that teacher for about ten minutes a week to support each other. So while we don't have academic requirements we do have community requirements, presence requirements, and attendance of these seminars. Check-in/check-out are mandatory, which takes twenty minutes of your school day. And that appreciation concept has become so profound that it forms the basis of our graduation ceremonies, where each graduate is honored in appreciation for about twenty to twenty-five minutes. All the students sit on stage. The seniors come forward--they spent a year writing a credo. They present their credo. They've chosen someone to speak on their behalf and then they sit down, and for a spontaneous twenty minutes people tell stories and appreciate that person. I get up and hand them their diploma to applause. So our graduation ceremonies are day-long events; we have six to ten graduates, so you can start to imagine what that ceremony is like.

Anne: It's extraordinary--what a gift for a child to have this form of education. In the service-based community we come in circle a lot, and our Awakin gatherings that happen all over the world are a very similar format. It's just confirming--and makes me smile inside. We're wired to come together, to share stories, to be connected, and to take it to the level of a formal education is extraordinary.

Andy: Well the thing that makes it extraordinary, and creates fear in people, is that we're not requiring students to take academic classes. So it kind of blows people out of the water. We don't make them take those things, and they don't need them to graduate. What we're trying to do is help our students develop strong self-awareness skills and understand what it means to be community-aware so that you're part of something bigger than yourself. My founding vision for PSCS is if people are in healthy environments, we don't need to require them to do things. They will demand of themselves things at a higher level than we can require of them. Because as soon as we say, You must do this thing, they don't learn it for life. They don't learn it because it's passionately intriguing or important to them. They learn it to check it off of the list. And so much of what we do to students is teach them to check boxes that are meaningless. And I want to eliminate that from the conversation and have students do things that that they are excited to do, the belief being that they have an entire life to learn. Let's get them living a life of meaning in the present. That's the best prep for their futures--feeling connected and feeling important, and feeling that their lives have meaning now; not after they graduate from college or grad school or whatever it is. So that's

what we really work to do. And when it's when it's happening it is a spectacular thing! Students don't want breaks; it just feels good to be there.

Anne: At Puget Sound Community School, you don't only involve students. You involve family. And I am sure even bring teachers in.

Andy: Yeah, and I say that on the website--we don't just enroll students. We enroll families. And all this is a collaboration. We're all connected. And we try to help parents to understand how to be parents in this environment. Since there are no mandatory academic classes, students--if they have [homework](#) for instance--they are choosing it. And parents are so conditioned to be the homework police in our culture. And one of the first things I tell them is, Don't be the homework police. Just enjoy your relationship with your child. A lot of avoidance happens between children and their parents because of school. And the point is that it poisons the relationship. And I don't want that to happen.

Anne: Absolutely. When my daughter was in English, in third grade, the school she was attending didn't give homework until fourth or fifth. She and her friends came home demanding homework. And we were having a parent evening with the teacher and saying, Our children are really wanting homework. It was so great that it was coming from them.

Andy: I've seen that a lot. Third and fourth grade is younger than the students I work with. But even in middle school, students will start thinking they're not going to measure up to their neighborhood peers. Because they are not being forced to do something. Or they don't have a grade. And even parents sometimes are like "How do I know how my child is doing if you don't give me grades to look at?" What I try to do is turn it back to "What do you know, what is your relationship with your child?" The students themselves have a hard time recognizing the things that they do naturally. A passion or strong interest that they work so hard at--they have more time to do those things. We are conditioned to think you have to experience pain in school to learn. And that is so not right. We learn best the things that give us the most joy.

Anne: Are other schools following suit? How do you see the ripples of all this lovingkindness and focus on human development in your greater community or other schools?

Andy: That's a lovely question. When Melinda and I were starting this school, and with our founding board--we are also a 501C3 non-profit so we are governed by a board--and one of the ideas in our mission was to be a model. So part of my work was going to be trying to do this as a kind of reach-out work. In the first ten years of the school, it was pretty exhausting. My wife and I had a second child so I kind of scaled that back. But I haven't ever turned any one down who wants to talk to me about starting a school, or come visit. People find us and then want to know more. So I am taking regular calls. People come in to visit as far away as Germany--and I helped someone in [Puerto Rico](#).

The thing I tell people is: Don't replicate what we are doing. Find where your heart is, and if you find that you are inspired by what we are doing, take that in. But put it through your own interpretation. So that's a bit of the coaching that I do.

I also get contacts from educators who want to talk about implementing kindness in schools. And part of what makes their challenge so much harder is, at PSCS we have a provision that you can stop what you are doing and bring everybody together. A sixth grader can say "Hey--I want everyone to come together and listen to me." It's called a super meeting. But let's say a teacher learns about me through this call and wants to reach out and talk about, How can I implement a kindness circle in my school?--The challenge is related to structures within the school that the teacher doesn't have any power over. Does that make sense?

Anne: Yeah! Wow! I have been so blessed to volunteer with other ServiceSpace volunteers in bringing kindness circle to local middle school and high schools. We have one where we've been coming in the beginning of the year. And I was just thinking about the teacher of the senior class--she said "Wow! We really miss you and look forward to bringing more kindness." It made me realize that there is so much gratitude but also invitation for more kindness.

Andy: I think we are driven. Baby toddlers--little children--are naturally kind. They don't necessarily have the sophistication to [act](#) on that. But they really are spectacularly wired for love and sharing and kindness. And I also think we are wired for empathy and being tuned in to each other. There are lots of things that cause us to lose some of that--because of the way that we have structured our world competitively. When you get to be a five-year-old you are put into a more formalized school and told that if you are not reading there is something wrong with you. These challenges move us away from something that's natural and a lot of what I do is to guide people gently back to who they always have been. Not that they stopped being that. They just lost sight of it.

Birju: Andy, I was writing down questions and I'm curious if I could jump in and ask a few.

Andy: Sure, please do.

Birju: First of all thank you for what you do. I was wondering if you had stories of how the children that you worked with changed as a result of these practices?

Andy: My favorite story actually starts at the school I taught at before PSCS. I had a fifth grader--his name is Johnny. And we're actually close friends. He was a fifth grader back in '92, '93. Johnny is profoundly dyslexic; he wasn't reading, he wasn't writing at that time. Johnny though, as I got to know him in that year, was as soft and caring a young fifth grader as I had met. I just had this concern for him moving on to middle school. And I had a conversation with his mom, and I said, Just be sure wherever you send him to school, that he doesn't start thinking that there's something wrong with him. But Johnny then became one of my great teachers that year and said something that is actually the seed of all the

kindness work. He said "Andy, why are we..."--referring to the general population, "Why are we so focused on the negative?" --referring to the way that the news works and the way we talk to each other as people. And he said, "Wouldn't it be more interesting if the news reported on the happy things instead of all the unhappy things? If instead of talking about all the people that got into car accidents, we talked about all that didn't?" Such a profound idea. So I gave him a level of structure which became the Good News Newspaper that he started to tell the positive stories and giving him some practice writing and reading.

Johnny became one of the founding students of PSCS. His dad was instrumental--his dad is David Spangler. David's well known in ServiceSpace type of things. So, Johnny came to PSCS. In 1994, I managed to get all the students dial-up internet accounts in PSCS, which was kind of remarkable. *Newsweek* magazine was so fascinated they wrote a full page about our school, simply because I had gotten the kids online in 1994. And one of the things I connected them to was a teacher in Europe who was connecting children with Holocaust survivors via [email](#). And kids anywhere in the world could write and ask a question of someone who had been at Auschwitz and other concentration camps. I thought, This is spectacular! You'd send your message out and everyone on this mailing list could read your questions. The guy would go interview the survivor and then write up their response. This is incredible!!

I connected that idea to Johnny and created the first kindness class with the same concepts. I got ahold of mailing-list software and then I would send out a theme on Sunday nights, like "Do something kind for your neighbor." It would go out to whoever wanted to participate: students at PSCS, parents, people in Europe, people in Australia, whoever. And by the end of the week, people would write back and tell their stories. Meanwhile Johnny keeps growing and being connected to who he is, and he suggested we have an in-person kindness class. And so we were having these in-person classes and we would meet out in public settings.

There was one time, Johnny had this idea, and we were in a mall outside of Seattle. There were still pay phones at the time. And he had the idea of putting a dollar bill under a pay phone, then finding the number and going to another phone to call it. If you were walking by a pay phone and it rang, what would you do? Johnny was fascinated by questions like this. Most people walk past it, but the people that stopped, you'd want to engage with. So he'd say to them when they picked up the phone, "Look under the phone, there's a surprise for you!" And they would get the dollar--there's lots of stories like that with Johnny. He now has a Masters and works with kids in the autism spectrum, and is developing a private practice for helping kids who have more social or neurological needs. He's in his thirties and one of my good friends.

Birju: Wow. My gratitude for sharing the story. There's a caller in queue so I'd like to invite the caller in.

Sarah: Hi, my name is Sarah Grace. I literally have tears because I'm so moved--I'm almost 63 and I'm ready to come to your school right now! For me, school was a nightmare, a complete nightmare. And I just wanted to say how much I appreciate what you're doing. The only year that wasn't a nightmare was my second grade year, at an alternative school. But we moved a lot and I went to many different schools and each one was a nightmare. I have some kind of dyslexia and I had some inabilities, but I had a hard time learning in that environment and there was a lot of cruelty. But when my son went to school--I homeschooled him in first grade, and that was the most amazing year for me, personally, because it was 100% child-led. And I'm just amazed by him and when I sent him to school, which was just difficult because I had imagined homeschooling forever, I just saw such [changes](#) in his whole demeanor and he was really bored a lot of the time. I just can't say enough of how moved I feel. Thank you for what you're giving. It's amazing.

Andy: Sarah, thank you for that. It's really meaningful to have people affirm the work that I and those with me are doing. And I also appreciate hearing your stories. It reinforces this idea that we have work to do, as a culture and as a society, to respect and honor children better. And you're at 63, I can hear the pain that you have still, with your school experience.

We involve people of all ages. Obviously our enrollment is children, but people that have the desire to [share](#) with students, we bring in as volunteers. I don't care what it is you offer to the students, I care that you love it. I want students to be surrounded by people who are excited by what you are doing. And--did you say your last name is Grace?

Sarah: Actually that's my first name, Sarah Grace.

Andy: Got it. That's a lovely name--it seemed relevant to the conversation.

Sarah: Thank you.

Birju: I wanted to follow up, Andy; if I had to put my cynical glasses on, one thing that would come to me is, you're going to teach children kindness and nothing else and they're going to grow up to be starving artists or yoga teachers. You just spoke about someone teaching young people on the autism spectrum and I'm curious if you can share what happens to people who have been exposed to learning in this way. Do they adjust, or work to shift this [culture](#) and society?

Andy: When people grow up in an environment that allows them to know who they are and what they're growing into, they will grow up into the diversity of the culture. We've had students who moved on from PSCS--most choose to go to college. It isn't that difficult if you know what you want to do. We've had some go into the military. We've had some who volunteer. We have a lot involved in tech. One of our early students is working for Google. Name a category and we probably have somebody who's doing that. One in Seattle is a tattoo artist; in fact, another former student came in and had Mr. Rogers tattooed on his leg

by her hands, and she posted it on Facebook and people were saying, “Hey, have you told Andy yet?”

So it really just runs the gamut of society, what people are interested in and what they do.

Birju: Let's go to our next caller.

Caller: This is Emily Chamberlin. As Sarah Grace said, your story is deeply moving. I have found hope hard to come by lately and it is lovely to see how deeply you embodied that. I have a reflection and then a question. I've heard a lot on this call about how transformative this approach to education is to students, and I just want to say that I taught it at Quaker school back East with a very similar philosophy for sixteen years.

It's deeply transformative to teachers as well. I was formed by that school. I remember someone saying to me, when I first joined the staff, your charge is to recognize and respond to the light in each of your students and colleagues. That changed my relationship with my students, my colleagues, my work, with all of life because I came to understand it's not up to you to show me that light. It's up to me to keep coming around and sort of answering it in you; it becomes a living practice and that's what I hear so powerfully embodied in your story.

Andy: Emily, I am so thrilled that you dialed--Emily is a facilitator for Center for Courage and Renewal. I attended this workshop and it was--the way I described it to people is, I got to experience what it's like to be a student at PSCS. Earlier I told the story about coming back with a little stone that Emily had given me and the other participants--it had the word *courage* on it--there's a picture on my blog of me setting it at the give and take garden and, Emily, you'll be pleased to know it's no longer there.

Emily: Andy, can I ask one quick question? I was struck by the story of your third-grade experience and that paradoxical relationship between greatest pain and greatest giftedness--I just wondered if you had anything to say about the relationship between kindness and the suffering.

Andy: That, I think, is more about compassion than kindness. This spring, I facilitated a group called the Compassion Action Team and we really talked about the root of your question--and this ranged from sixth graders to twelfth graders coming together, maybe eight or ten of them and me. I began this by trying to have them understand that compassion is recognizing that suffering exists in the world, and first looking at where they may have suffered. These children start to open up to each other and then the response that would come, the human response, that was naturally kind and now more compassionate. We all have a story that generally involves some suffering. Sarah Grace was moved to call because of the suffering she had. Wanting to recognize that, and give us the gift of calling to tell us that, is an act of kindness. So that would be the thought that I have on the connection between suffering and pain; I would branch that into compassion and then look at, What is

it that we suffered or what is the pain that we have, as part of being living creatures, and how do we share that with each other.

Birju: Thank you Emily. I would like to go to the next question that we have online.

The question is from Adonia, who says:

I was wondering how you see the policy of not mandating students to take classes translate into real-world working at a job. When students work for a grade to fulfill a requirement, doesn't this translate into trying to get money in real life and fulfill an expectation? How do you equate the pressure of getting a good grade to getting a high income in real life?

Andy: Yeah, that's a lovely question and somewhat sophisticated. Behind that, I think, is this idea that if we don't have to suffer through school, then we're not going to know how to suffer at work; and I don't think you have to suffer to get a good job or move in the direction you want. I will say, I'm not interested in helping students learn how to get high income. But I am interested in helping them know who they are and go for what they want. And if that's high income, I can help them do that.

But the idea--if they don't get some practice doing some things that they may not want to do, then what if they're given a task in their jobs that they don't want to do?--here's how I talk about that with students. They say they're interested in going to college, so either I or their advisor or one of the teachers will help them recognize, What does it take to get into that college? Inevitably, you will find things the student does not want to do. Instead of me trying to create an environment in which they are mandated to do these things, they can make a decision--do they actually want to go to that college? And if they do, then they will do the work. One of our teachers is an expert at helping them recognize that you actually *want* to do that when you want to go to that college. It's a mind shift, it's an awareness of what you're doing.

So, now you're working your tail off because you want to go to that college, doing things because you are motivated to do them. When you're an adult in a work situation--there are a lot of people unfortunately that have to take a job they don't love to pay the bills. And I want to acknowledge that. If you've taken a job, ideally you've taken that job with the understanding of what the job entails. And if that is distasteful to you and you can afford to not take that job, don't take that job. But I'm talking from a fairly privileged position of what work you can choose to do versus what work you have to do, to survive. But basically, students challenge themselves to do things that they initially think they don't want to do, in internally driven ways.

Birju: Thank you. One more question--how can folks who are moved by what you've been sharing support your intentions in the world?

Andy: Ah! That's a great question! The school itself is a federally recognized nonprofit. We rely on significant donations, and most every dollar donated is given back in tuition aid. So

families that otherwise couldn't afford to can come. So if somebody wants to support the work and maybe they have the means, they can make a donation. Yay! That would help in so many ways. Other ways--if people are local, they can volunteer. And there are ways to get in touch with me online. Or learn more about the kindness initiatives--the simplest way is kindliving.net. But andysmallman.com gets you there and my personal blog is kindofandy.com

One of the things that I stress is, if you found something moving about this, how do you want to show support? Send me an email! I just love hearing people say kind things.

Birju: We'll follow up with an email to our callers and also share contact information. And any thoughts from you, Anne, before we close?

Anne: Andy, you know, a lot of what we practice within the ServiceSpace community is creating a space. Thank you for sharing, really, some of your deepest vulnerability. That's where we really grow, and also just honoring the unique path in each of our hearts. Thank you so much! And before we close--I was watching a really sweet video about the school--one of your students wrote a kind note and said, "Everyone smiles in the same language."

Andy: That's a girl named Mattie, who is now in grad school training to be a counselor. The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation commissioned that video. A camera crew from [San Francisco](#) came up, Storytellers For Good, and they filmed us for seven hours and created a four-minute internet video.

Anne: Well, it's quite extraordinary and I just want to thank you and all your students, Melinda, your family and friends for the richness of today's call.

Andy: Thank you, Anne. I appreciate that. This has really been a joy for me.