Beyond the Golden Rule

Treating Others as They Need to Be Treated

In the previous chapter, we looked closely at the phenomenon of mobbbery and the suffering that it causes. I described how individuals who succumb to mobbbery are relinquishing the responsibility to maintain their own moral autonomy in favor of letting the energy of angry crowds draw out their sense of antagonistic tribalism and violent abandon. Another way to think about mobbbery is as the deepening of a collective narcissistic personality disorder NPD, on an individual level, is defined in part as having these elements:

1. A pervasive pattern of grandiosity
2. A need for admiration
3. A lack of empathy

NPD can also include a preoccupation with power, the delusion of being special, exploitativeness, entitlement, envy, or arrogance. This kind of personality, due to its appearance in prominent individuals situated at the top of the executive branch of federal government (and in the two other branches of government), has widened the gateway to believing patriotism is defined by these narcissistic elements. I believe, however, that many of the people who seem to believe in such pseudo-patriotism know in their hearts that it isn’t true—that despite their clinging to entitlements, they are not inherently or innately superior to anyone else. In this false sense of self, they often resort to a strict, partial, and historically dubious reading of the Second Amendment to brutally defend their version of patriotism. This distortion of patriotism and uneven weighting of rights is turning us against each other through mobbbery. Consequently, we are losing our ability to be compassionate and to unconditionally attend to the suffering of others. But perhaps we are losing it because we don’t know we have it in the first place. One of the main tools we have to start to turn this situation around is the capacity to mirror each other empathetically. To “reflect like an untarnished mirror” means diminishing the violent propensities within ourselves so others can feel and see their mirroring potential as well. This mirroring capacity is what Indra’s Net is about.

The Austrian-born American psychologist Heinz Kohut (1913–1981) developed a theory and psychotherapeutic method called Self Psychology that can help us live more equanimously with our own narcissistic tendencies and deepen our capacity for mirroring. In summary, Kohut believed that parents who repeatedly fail to show empathy to their baby thereby cause trauma to the child’s personality and ego-development processes. The child, even though they were preverbal during the initial period when empathy was lacking, remembers this unempathetic parental attitude and comes to believe they are insufficient and unworthy as a person. This unempathetic parental attitude is sure to be encountered in other people as the child
grows older, and their reaction to what appears to be unempathetic can be deeply painful, perhaps felt as depression. This is because it triggers the primal wound regardless of whether the other person is truly unempathetic or is merely perceived that way. One way to protect oneself from this wounding is to engage in behaviors that display the opposite of insufficiency and unworthiness—grandiosity—as a way of defending one’s ego against re-experiencing the lack of empathy from others.

Kohut suggested two methods I believe anyone can use to help transform the suffering of narcissism or grandiosity: mirroring and twinning. “Mirroring” is when someone reflects to another that they are worthy of respect. This is done through positively affirming another. Here’s an example: Let’s say the person caught up in their sense of grandiosity is bragging about something they did. You are irritated because you are conditioned to have an adverse reaction to “bragging.” Mirroring in this situation might look like saying, “I think it is great you have such a talent.” Can you see how such a response is a skillful means that decreases the likelihood that the person feels the need to intensify their bragging?

“Twinning” is a way of conveying that you share similar traits, even narcissistic ones, with the person who is immersed in grandiosity. This helps them to not feel weird or isolated in their sense of self. And importantly, this holds true even if it’s a person who would never confess their vulnerability to anyone and may not be in touch with it themselves. How might one “twin” in this way? Express that you feel celebratory about their accomplishment because you have also experienced something similar. Mirroring and twinning relational skills help narcissists be in relationship, and those of us using mirroring and twinning (thereby using our own narcissism for good) are also helped by not alienating people who irritate us.

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CONTEMPLATION
Attending to Others

Mirroring and twinning may sound like simple practices, and over time, we can come to experience them that way. But when we’re new to these ways of being with others, it requires developing qualities of presence that make space for our own anxiety and allow for other-orientation. Here are two practices that help this process:

1. Cultivate a non-anxious presence

Mirroring and twinning will not be as effective if your presence carries an undertone—or overtone—of anxiety. If you are generally or situationally anxious, do what you can to work on becoming less anxious. Depending on your particular circumstances and disposition, that may mean attending to healthy relationships, diet, exercise, sleep, meditation or prayer, or therapy. It can also be as simple as noticing when you are not anxious and setting the intention to bring that experience in new directions. If you generally are not anxious, think about the reasons why, and continue doing what you do to live with less anxiety.

To whatever extent you can connect with non-anxious presence, bring that calm to those who are struggling with their suffering. Your non-anxious presence can be a balm and an inspiration for their path to feeling more at ease.

2. Practice deep perception

Mirroring and twinning require an accurate perception of the person you are with. The act of deep perceiving (using all the senses available) is one of the most powerfully healing activities we can offer someone in need. We act with deep perception when we:
Listen deeply for existential angst  
Affirm the emotional experience  
Validate rather than judge  
Encourage and inspire  
Reveal bright eyes and smile because this is what reflecting mirrors, diamonds, and pearls looks like on the face  
Share appreciation  
Share blessings for a fortunate future  
Encourage wisdom teachings  
Warn against the dangers of engaging in violence

We know that creating heaven on earth, metaphorically bowing as we mutually refresh our garlands with fragrant flowers, requires us to create the conditions for living in a world with as little violence and as much access to our basic needs as possible. For some, the reduction of violence begins with opposing abortion or promoting vegetarianism and veganism. It appears the energies of empathy, compassion, loving-kindness, and mutuality are more present when we observe a baby or child who we know is completely dependent on another human being for their survival. What causes us to turn away from the initial interest in life toward its destruction? Once we recognize an older person’s ability to survive without help, we leave it to them to fend for themselves. For most of us, without practices like cultivating a non-anxious presence and deep listening, we will be carried along by the cultural inertia of assuming all others can fend for themselves.

Given our proclivity toward competitiveness and brutality, we need to check our perception and ask ourselves, "Just because this person is older and can seem to care for themselves, are they really protected from the brutality that can reduce them at any time to the vulnerability of a child?" Of course, the answer to this reflection is no, but what do we do with that reality, the fact that all of us can be reduced at any moment to the state of vulnerable dependence? What do we do with the psychic aggression that comes forth when we impose the expectation of independence on others? Whether you practice mirroring and twinning or other intentional approaches to being with other people, cultivating non-anxious presence and practicing deep perception are certain to support your effort to have fewer bloody fingers and more fragrant flowers on the garlands of your life.

We will encounter various examples of mirroring and twinning, and other ways to be in relationship amid difficulty, in the subsequent chapters of this book. Several of these chapters look at classic religious parables from different faith traditions through the lens of preventing mobbrey and fostering spiritual kinship. Before we go on, however, I want to introduce one additional way of thinking about the transition from what I call the "individual self-template" to a community-minded template. And that is—moving beyond the Golden Rule to the kind of higher order of relational commitment that is necessary to fulfill our potential as spiritual kin.

We’ve all been taught some version of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” I don’t want to belittle this ethical maxim—it lies at the heart of promoting unconditional civility. It is not based on gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, blood ties, or any of the myriad ways we categorize each other, and I appreciate its recognition of ourselves, our needs, and the shared lived experience between us. Living by the Golden Rule is an invitation to pause before potentially hurting another, but given the rise in mobbrey,
isn't it time for a rule that promotes even greater relationality? I think we need to transcend the Golden Rule and move toward what I am calling the Platinum Rule: treat others as they need to be treated for their ultimate well-being, not simply as they want to be treated.¹

Let me say a bit more about the Golden Rule before we look at the Platinum Rule in detail. Abiding by the Golden Rule means we apply our self-template to others because we have been conditioned to believe that if we reflect on our needs first, it will result in a "golden" outcome for another. Sometimes that works just fine, but too often the results are off base because the starting point is self-centered and thus presumptuous. This presumptuousness is commonly expressed, for example, in giving advice to someone who is distressed. Perhaps we believe we'd want advice if we were similarly situated, but have we noticed if the distressed person has asked for advice? When we reflect on our self-template, we often think how uncomfortable the situation would be if we were experiencing the same thing, so we attempt to offer something soothing to others when what we're really doing is soothing our insecurity. Perhaps the other person is not uncomfortable at all, or perhaps they are uncomfortable but in a different way than we imagine. I learned this in my chaplaincy training at Zen Hospice Project (now Zen Caregiving Project). In a role play, someone was distressed and I reached out to touch them. After I touched them, the actor asked me why I did that. I was startled. "Isn't that what you're supposed to do?" This was a question coming from my cultural conditioning. We went on to discuss if what I really experienced called for touch. It did not. My touch interrupted an emotional experience the actor wanted to delve into, and I wasn't ready to go there and didn't trust the actor to be well in that deep dive. Presumptions based on our self-template may be the polite thing to do, but they can also undermine the need for constructive conflict, confrontation, intimacy, curiosity, or creativity.

Living with the Platinum Rule does not mean throwing out the Golden Rule entirely. Starting with how you want to be treated and treating someone like that is, of course, much better than acting out of suspicion, fear, bias, or cultural assumptions. In some cases, it may be the best starting point. Yet, evolving beyond the Golden Rule template of treating others only as we want to be treated opens the door to learning about and respecting difference, and perhaps ultimately gaining cultural competencies we would otherwise never develop.

To decrease the tendency toward mobbety and other forms of harm, we can consider adopting a mantra: "What does this person really need?" Then sometimes actually ask, "What do you really need?" And then consider how that need can be met. We live in a pluralistic society and world, as well as in a postmodern culture with inclinations toward de-classification, de-categorization, de-stigmatization, and so on. In this situation, we are examining more and more the individual, their internal world, and their connections to the external world, and we are doing so with an aversion to clinging to unwanted socially constructed identities. For example, the trans community has been quite successful in introducing a practice of everyone, regardless of identity and expression, self-identifying genders so we reduce the harmful mistakes made in misgendering based on our perceptions. These ways of relating are fueled by empathy, compassion, and respect.

It is time to evolve with intention, so let's move toward the Platinum Rule. I think of the Platinum Rule as having twelve steps or stages. I'll move through them this way in what follows, though these steps or stages are not intended to be rigid or linear—please simply
read and make use of them as they resonate with you, taking particular notice of those that cause you discomfort.

**Step One: Observe**

People are on the move throughout the world due to violence, natural disasters, and the resultant hunger, thirst, and needs for shelter or safety. Forced migrations are causing people, cultures, customs, and beliefs to collide. Some of us feel invaded by strangers and betrayed by our political leaders. Categories of “us” vs. “them,” and the “haves” and “have-nots,” are compounded by changes that are beyond our control, such as climate change. These changes are disorienting, leading to feelings of insecurity and estrangement in one’s “own” land. We have choices before us—resist change or embrace our global kin, wage war or cultivate peace, hoard resources or share generously. Step one of the Platinum Rule is simple, but not easy: observe. Observe your thoughts and emotions about different groups of people. Observe any sense of entitlement, resistance, or fear that arises. And above all, observe how your physical impulses inform your beliefs and vice versa.

**Step Two: Be Curious**

Though the Golden Rule helps us understand ourselves and others to a degree, it blunts our curiosity about others because what we understand about our “self” forms the beginning and the end of our knowledge of how to treat others. The Golden Rule can be used as a springboard for curiosity. Ask yourself, “Should I treat others as I want to be treated without their permission?” Asking this question reveals a very powerful paradox about the Golden Rule: we should treat others as we treat ourselves and we should not treat others as we treat ourselves because we have not sought permission to do so. I think of this as the Curiosity Paradox that forms the bridge between the Golden Rule and the Platinum Rule.

**Step Three: Recognize Human Complexity**

The Golden Rule helps one recognize one’s own human “template,” what it means to be one particular human being—yourself. Through that recognition, you will find that you are complicated (comprised of many parts and processes), complex (not reducible to those parts and processes), and discrete while also interconnected. Using the Curiosity Paradox, we learn that we are complicated and complex, that other human beings are complicated and complex, and that Indra’s Net is complicated and complex beyond our capacity to comprehend. Through recognizing the human beingness of others, we realize that there are not only similarities but also significant differences between us. Because these differences are sometimes complex, the Golden Rule is severely limited and can cause problems. That is, one’s own human template might be experienced as an imposition on another’s human template. The Platinum Rule opens us to receiving the other’s template as another valid manifestation of being human.

**Step Four: Form Intentions toward the Good**

The Golden Rule sounds like it is full of good intention—treating others as we want to be treated. But there is a difference between intent and impact. What if we have lived a life of self-abuse? Do we want to abuse others? What if we have lived a life in pursuit of having all our wants satisfied? Do we want to satisfy everyone else’s wants? Forming intentions toward the good is about being thoughtful before acting, and acting (or refraining from acting) so as to try to bring about positive results for the other. But this does not mean doing whatever
someone else wants even when we perceive it to be harmful—it means practicing attunement to the well-being of others while living, as near as possible, what Buddhists refer to as a “blameless” life for oneself.

**Step Five: Acknowledge Imperfection**

The Golden Rule does not require us to check in with others to determine whether treating them as ourselves is a beneficial choice. Living by the Golden Rule is assumed to be beneficial, but our personal human templates are necessarily imperfect, formed as they are by our own desires, wounds, and habitual behaviors. Knowing about our own imperfection, we can momentarily refrain from speaking and acting and allow ourselves to be inspired by the Platinum Rule. Merely having formed intentions toward the good in the past does not mean we have activated those intentions now, in this situation. We can check our intentions through an internal dialogue that surveys the variety of responses we can have to another. We can then remind ourselves that our objective is not to cause harm and choose the behavior or behaviors that we believe will be most beneficial to the other. Bringing observation and curiosity to bear, if we cannot determine whether our behavior or refraining from behavior had a beneficial impact, we can ask others about the impact we had on them.

**Step Six: See Others as Kin**

The Golden Rule is usually seen as a way to form connection, but when it skips over meaningful differences, the connection formed may be superficial or misleading. The Platinum Rule asks that we take a leap of faith to believe that somewhere, somehow, we are deeply related even in the midst of our differing appearances or beliefs. For example, if the white segregationist Strom Thurmond, the late US senator from South Carolina, could possibly be related to Rev. Al Sharpton, an African American Christian pastor and civil rights activist, then you too are certainly related to others who don’t look like you, think like you, act like you—or want exactly what you want. Seeing each other as kin on an instinctual level means I recognize you as a relative and thereby hold the potential to care about you. The Platinum Rule does away with a competitive notion like “blood is thicker than water” and replaces it with an ethic of communal interconnection: “There is water in blood.”

**Step Seven: Transform Your Narcissism**

The Golden Rule has served civilization well in helping us connect to one another through the cultivation of empathy. But because we are imperfect beings using ourselves as templates for how to treat other imperfect human beings, we run the risk of narcissism—believing that who we are, what we believe, and how we act is the superior way to be and live. Compounding this deluded self-aggrandizement is the rise in the use of social media. Sharing information about ourselves to large groups of people for their approval has unfortunately become the greatest source of validation for many of us. The Platinum Rule requires us to work harder and make a greater investment in self-transformation in order to bring about good. We mirror and twin others, even and especially those we don’t initially understand, and we work to allow others to mirror and twin because doing so supports our growth in relational skills.

**Step Eight: Cultivate Selflessness**

As the Platinum Rule begins to take hold in our lives, as self-reflection deepens, and as narcissistic tendencies start to abate, there is a greater likelihood for compassion, lovingkindness, empathy, and interpathy to flower. “Interpathy” is a word coined by pastoral theologian David
W. Augsburger that means “being able to enter a second culture cognitively and affectively, to perceive and conceptualize the internal coherence that links the elements of the culture into a dynamic interrelatedness, and to respect that culture (with its strengths and weaknesses) as equally valid as one’s own.” In addition to curiosity, empathy, and interpathy come generosity and a joy that arises from this new orientation toward others. These kinds of felt energy counter depression, meaninglessness, isolation, alienation, and purposelessness. Selflessness increases our capacity to be present for another’s needs.

I was unexpectedly called into interpathic space while putting the finishing touches on this book. I sent the manuscript to a Hindu chaplain who shared via email that my many uses of the word “caste,” coupled with the fact that I’m grounding my writing in Buddhism (seen by some as superior to Hinduism), might fuel Hinduphobia. Shocked by my own cultural insensitivity and fearful that my love for the Bhagavad Gita might actually inspire loathing of Hindu people, I called the chaplain right away to understand their perspective. I listened and I understood. I recalled when I was in an interreligious immersion group with people who refused to go into a Hindu temple (on religious grounds) but entered the houses of worship and practice for every other religious tradition we visited. I remembered my Hindu roommate in law school who gave me her Kali statue that remains on my altar to this day. I brought to mind my Hindu neighbor who burns incense outside his door in the morning—a ritual that brings me pause, appreciation, and joy. I remembered his children, whom I’ve adopted as my play grandchildren. I recalled my history with the word “caste” and remembered that I was not initially taught about the British colonial form of classifying people that was imposed on India. The chaplain was correct when she pointed out that Hindus are scapegoated for the modern caste system and that they are unfairly punished for it. This is wrong. I do not want to perpetuate Hinduphobia. I chose to edit my manuscript in the “eleventh hour” in the interest of promoting truth, complexity, respect, and spiritual kinship. This is an example of how I’ve practiced interpathy.

**Step Nine: Speak the Truth for the Benefit of Others**

Assaults on the media, the use of the label “fake news” even for real investigative reporting, attacks on scientific findings particular to climate change and infectious diseases as “hoaxes”—these and related phenomena have diminished one of the greatest ethical values for the evolution of a civilized humanity: truth. In a lie-based cultural context, the Golden Rule can manifest in the sentiment, “I don’t want to hear the truth, so I won’t tell you the truth.” The Platinum Rule, in helping transform narcissism, paradoxically helps us strengthen our egos enough to handle hearing truths that might be difficult to bear, even those that concern ourselves. It also helps us to tell difficult truths to others while maintaining the intention to bring about beneficial outcomes.

**Step Ten: Practice Appreciative Listening**

Most people want to be heard when they speak, but many people do not say what they really want to say about their experiences of vulnerability. This is usually for fear of being shamed, ridiculed, rejected, or exploited. The inability to speak one’s truth means we live in inauthentic expression, leading oftentimes to meaningless chatter to fill the gaps of the uncomfortable silence between strangers. The Platinum Rule helps us form the intention to listen to others with the ears of appreciation—appreciating the fact that, no matter what is initially said, we are taking in the miracle of a unique human being.
This person exists and has an embodied combination of experiences, stories, perspectives, concerns, and obligations. Their life is full of complicatedness and complexity. Appreciative listening can lead to the kind of awe that increases curiosity; it is a type of listening that invites others out of their fear of being shamed or exploited and into flourishing, revelation, insight, genuine friendship, and solidarity.

**Step Eleven: Witness the Expansive Potential in Others**

The Golden Rule does not require us to understand how we can live up to our greatest human potential. What if I want to be treated in a way that never challenges me, and so I never challenge you? Consequently, when we live by the Golden Rule, we limit ourselves to who we presently are. A developmental and spiritual interpretation of the Platinum Rule suggests that we treat others as they need to be treated for their ultimate well-being. It challenges us to develop our faith in the capacity of humans to change and evolve, and it invites us to see ourselves and others beyond our superficial and temporary presentations. Enacting the Platinum Rule allows us to express surprise and awe when someone attempts to push past their self-limits. Witnessing the expansive potential in others inspires goodness through the mirroring of wholesome pleasure—the feeling of ease that comes in the presence of the good and the vanishing of negativity. When we witness in this way, shame, ridicule, rejection, and exploitation may be diminished, giving way to a sense of pride, self-acceptance, and healthy boundaries.

**Step Twelve: Rest-Reflect-Recharge-Return**

The Platinum Rule orients us toward the ultimate well-being of others even when we don’t treat ourselves that way—that is, when we don’t remain curious about our own potential and well-being, instead opting for habitual desires and familiar behaviors. In order to protect ourselves against the burnout that can come when we don’t apply the Platinum Rule to ourselves, we need to commit to the curative cycle of rest-reflect-recharge-return (the Four Rs). Without such restorative cycles, the Platinum Rule, just like any other rule for relating, can be utilized in unwise ways. The Four Rs that constitute the twelfth step could, paradoxically and interrelatedly, be the first step. Imagine disregarthing steps one through eleven and just living the Four Rs to begin with. To live regularly into the twelfth step prepares us for all the other steps, restores us between steps, and helps us experience all these steps as being in service of the cultivation of a non-anxious presence when we are with others.

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**AFFIRMATION**

*I commit to the ongoing journey of being mirrored and twinned as I learn to do the same*

Some things seem to come in an instant, and we have been conditioned to expect that our desires will be met immediately. But the path of wisdom requires taking countless steps and encountering many wise ones along the way. Trust that as you learn to mirror and twin and as you allow yourself to be vulnerable as others mirror and twin you, you will do your best to lead others and let others lead you away from mobbery. I commit to the ongoing journey of being mirrored and twinned as I learn to do the same.