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ON RADICAL KINDNESS

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RADICAL KINDNESS

By Hugh Delehanty

Renowned writer, devoted grandmother, and thought-provoker Anne Lamott shares her latest fascination with an act we rarely consider but desperately need: mercy.

Anne Lamott wasn't planning to write a book on mercy. She'd touched on the subject in *Traveling Mercies* and some of her other bestsellers, and she thought she was done. "But then this thing started to nudge me and tug on my sleeve," she says as she sits down at a cafe near her home in Fairfax, California. "I started thinking about mercy—just the word—and I noticed that if I said 'mercy' or 'merciful' to people, it could change their whole day."

What emerged was *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, her timely, thought-provoking, and—yes—funny take on a topic most of us don't give much thought to. "Mercy, grace, forgiveness, and compassion are synonyms, and the approaches we might consider taking when facing a great big mess, especially the great big mess of ourselves—our arrogance, greed,

PHOTOGRAPH BY GETTY IMAGES/KIM KULISH

Anne Lamott is an activist, public speaker, author, and writing teacher out of the Bay Area.

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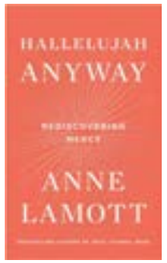
poverty, disease, prejudice," she writes. "It includes everything out there that just makes us want to turn away, the idea of accepting life as it presents itself and doing goodness anyway, the belief that love and caring are marbled even into the worst life has to offer."

In a pink puffer jacket, sporting her trademark dreadlocks with golden highlights, Lamott is no faint-hearted church lady. Over the years, she has written evocatively about her struggles with alcoholism and her mid-life conversion to Christianity, but this morning, as the conversation begins, the first thing she wants to talk about is her grandson, Jax.



Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy, the latest from prolific writer Anne Lamott, delves into one of our most sublime emotions—to reveal how vital mercy is to life, how we so often ignore it, and how we can make it a bigger force in our lives.

Hugh Delehanty: Why mercy? Why now?
Anne Lamott: I have a seven-year-old who lives with me, and I feel it's a catastrophic time to be born into. But I also feel strongly that the counterintuitive thing to do in the face of the danger and chaos is to find mercy within yourself and operate from that place, instead of strategically trying to suss things out. I spend a lot of time with little kids, and I've noticed I become really merciful and open when they're around. They're crazily generous. My grandson will give stuff away that I don't want him to give away. The merciful heart is really rich at four or five, but then it begins to diminish.

In kindergarten you're all part of the litter, all sleeping on the floor together. Then, in first grade, you learn subtraction—something before anybody else—and you start getting esteemed for that. Pretty soon, you go from being in the litter to being singled out for praise. You start putting things in the drawer that don't serve you, like wonder and connection to life. Your parents don't want you to be *one of*; they want you to start excelling. And that leads to perfectionism. But if you're getting your value from excelling, you have to do more and more things perfectly, and, pretty soon, you're a completely doomed human being.

When did that happen for you?
In school, I was quick and sharp, and that started to isolate me from the other kids. Some of them were jealous because I was such a star student, and they teased me about my crazy hair. There was this system of beauty and wealth. Gold, silver, bronze. Beautiful or rich was gold, and everybody else was just fighting to be at least silver.

You feel like you're separating from others, but you're really separating from yourself and life. And that's terrifying and painful, so you start thinking about ways to cope. You get skittish, your central nervous system revs up, and you become much more watchful, not in a childlike way, but in a haunted way. I started to be known for being funny right around then because it was the best way to deflect criticism.

You talk about mercy as "radical kindness." What do you mean by that?
It's radical in the sense that you would never expect it. I find a warmth in my heart where once there was bad energy. I may have the conviction that someone has sinned against me to such a degree that I'll never have anything to do with him or her again. But, instead, I begin to see the fear and grief behind their bad behavior, and my heart softens. That, to me, is the hugest miracle of all.

Can you give an example?
A man in our neighborhood just hates me and my dog, Lady Bird, who's like Dinah Shore running around the neighborhood, so sweet and so loving. He constantly calls the Humane Society to talk to me about keeping her on a leash. A few weeks ago, he and I really got into it. He took a picture to show the Humane Society that Lady Bird was not on a leash, and I said, "Make sure to get a picture of your dog and my dog kissing and licking each other's noses, because that's what they were doing." I was on red alert. But afterward I said to myself, "Do you want to be right or do you want to be happy?" So, I prayed deeply, and the other day when I saw him, I didn't go into the story I usually tell myself. Lady Bird started running over to his dog and I said, "Sorry, sorry"—automatically, it was weird—and neither he nor I got into being morally superior. You take action, and insights follow. That's mercy at work.

You've written that mercy isn't something that you do, it's something that you are. Tell us about that.
We come into the world merciful, and we can be that way again once we realize we have so many stories about ourselves and other people and so many defenses against feeling exposed. Little by little, we can start dropping that armor and practice being real instead of putting on those great social personas we've mastered. When you're real with somebody, they will be real back. And when you're back in your original, merciful, authentic selves, that breeds wonder and a deep sense of presence.

But that doesn't come easy.
It takes a lifetime to heal from the toxic self-consciousness we all develop in school. But the good news is that's why we're here. You can begin when you decide to do anything that makes you feel enlivened again. You do it imperfectly, two steps forward and one back. The hardest part is extending mercy to ourselves. To use a merciful voice with yourself when the work doesn't go well or you've acted like an a--hole.

Several years ago, Maria Shriver asked me to come to Los Angeles to take part in a women's

I WANTED OUT FROM MY TOXIC OBSESSION WITH SELF. I HAD TO GET BUSTED LITTLE BY LITTLE.

conference. I just loathed her husband, then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, and I wrote, "Thank you so much, but I need to be honest and say that my work as an activist is mostly directed at your husband." She replied, "Of course, I would never want you to be part of a conference when your feelings about my husband are so strong." I thought to myself, "What an a--hole, Annie." So I threw myself at her mercy. I wrote, "I will not be able to express in words how contrite and full of exhausted fury I am with myself for having said something like that about your dear husband. I don't expect for you to be able to forgive me, but please know that I noticed what I did and I'm humiliated by my behavior. God bless you both." And she took me back in and we started over.

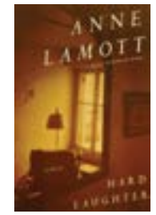
In your book,* Bird by Bird, *I was taken by author Geneen Roth's insight that awareness is learning to keep yourself company. Can you say more?
The idea, especially for women and girls, is that you're supposed to become great company. In the 50s and 60s, when all the power was in the hands of men, you wanted men to find you brilliant and entertaining. But doing that you lose connection with your own crazy, beautiful, mixed-up, obtuse self. Becoming friends with *that* person and looking in the mirror and saying "Hi" is the beginning of new life. It's not being full of yourself in the pejorative sense. It's like, "Wow, I'm full of myself, my little self, my higher self, and all the selves I've ever been."

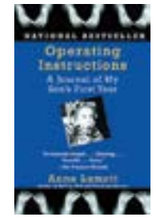
What do you do to quiet your mind?
[Deep sigh.] I pray a lot, I do meditation not very well, and I have certain things I say, like the prayer, "Lord, have mercy on me. Give me a break." Usually the break I need is to go very, very easy on myself. To drop down to a more maternal place, instead of that clipped high school coach in my head who's unhappy with me because I dropped the ball.

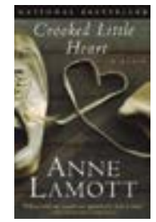
Being in recovery for 30 years helped me clear out a lot of that garbage and self-loathing. There's a famous saying in recovery, "You're as sick as your secrets," and I absolutely believe that. I don't keep secrets because this jungle drum starts beating inside me. I always spill the beans. Before I got sober, I converted to Christianity. And that came, as so many things do, from my exhaustion with being the way I was. I wanted out from my toxic obsession with self. I had to get busted little by little. My mind is classically alcoholic. Half of it thinks everything's going great, and the other half says the jig is up and they're going to find out what a loser I am. Without dropping down out of my head, without meditation, without prayer, it's like a Ping-Pong game in there. It's partly about dropping down, but it's also about stepping back and letting things get bigger and more spacious, so I'm not caught in this cramped, clenched fist of a mind. Just relaxing the thinking muscle and breathing down into my heart space. Once you start breathing, you can get your sense of humor back. Then you're halfway home.

How has working with your heart and mind affected your writing?
With writing, I don't talk about inspiration much. I talk about showing up and just doing it. I never feel like writing. Ever. So I have a lot of tricks. I give myself very short assignments and write godawful first drafts. And I use bribes. Once my butt is in the chair, if I write for 45 minutes, I get to take the dogs to the park or watch the news at the top of the hour. One thing I've learned about writing is that you have to stay with it. If you do that, it will let you know what it needs to be. The most important thing is to keep your butt in the chair. Then something will shift. Something will get back to you. That's the secret of life: Be where your butt is. ●

Lamott's novels and non-fiction books speak to wonder and the human heart, and are "concerned with real lives." Here's a selection:







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