

“It Costs Me Nothing to Be Kind”:
A Forum on Catherine J. Denial’s
A Pedagogy of Kindness

Robin E. Field
King’s College (PA)

Every August, the incoming first-year students at our small Catholic liberal arts college are welcomed with the words of our first president, Fr. James W. Connerton, C.S.C.: “King’s teaches its students not only how to make a living, but how to live.”¹ Nearly two decades after first hearing this phrase, I am struck anew by the profundity of Fr. Connerton’s words, having read Catherine J. Denial’s book, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*. What an awesome responsibility we faculty have in our classrooms: to facilitate discussions about current events, historical precursors, and ethical decision making; to assess the credibility of information and arguments in contemporary media and within our own writing; and to ponder our responsibilities to promote the common good in our communities and in the world. For in these deliberations—reading, thinking, debating, writing—comes the joy of the liberal arts classroom for ourselves and our students, on the best of days.

But what happens on the other days? The days when we enter the classroom filled with stress over our never-ending to-do lists, exhausted from caregiving responsibilities or our own illnesses, overwhelmed by the “breaking news” relentlessly pushed into our consciousnesses on our phones, computers, and other devices? What about the days when half our students are absent and the other half are unprepared to discuss, or simply uninterested in the course material we so carefully selected at the beginning of the term? Or the days when the students are full of excuses of every variety: illnesses, family emergencies, broken computers, flat tires, unexpected work shifts....What happens when we faculty become burned out and frustrated? Denial would likely say, “Why not be kind?”²

This response is breathtakingly simple and yet too infrequently seen in academia.³ Like Denial herself, I received advice in my pedagogical training as a graduate student suggesting I set inflexible policies about attendance, participation, and late work. And, as Denial writes, “I was urged to be on the lookout for plagiarism, to be vigilant for cheaters, to assume that the students wouldn’t do the reading, and to expect to be treated as a cog in the consumerist machine by students who would challenge their grades on a

whim.”⁴ While my syllabi offered punitive policies during my first two decades of teaching as a graduate student and then faculty member, my in-class behavior showed a different personality all together. I recall gently nudging a dozing student awake in an early morning class, to receive after class an apology and explanation that the student came straight to class from an overnight shift at a warehouse job. In another instance, the first-year student with red-rimmed eyes and a flat affect had just lost a parent the night before, but could not imagine asking their chemistry professor about taking the exam on another day; because I asked the initial question about their well-being, I then could connect that grieving student to the Dean of Students, who excused them from classes (and the exam) that week. And I allowed a make-up quiz—in a class where no make-up quizzes occurred, according to my syllabus—when a student emailed me photographs of her house on fire. In reality, I was a “super nice lady,” as one student described me in a course evaluation, someone who listened to my students, believed that they struggled, and accommodated their needs. Similarly, Denial writes:

When a student comes to me to say that their grandparent died, I believe them. When they email me to say they have the flu, I believe them. When they tell me they didn’t have time to read, I believe them. When they tell me their printer failed, I believe them.⁵

Believing students is part of the choice to be kind. Like Denial, I would rather have some students take advantage of this kindness than allow other students to suffer unnecessarily due to stringent policies and penalties. I think back ruefully to my first year of graduate school, when I suffered a second-degree burn on my dominant hand and arm the night before a paper was due: it never crossed my mind to contact my professor to request an extension, and yet I am confident now that he would have done so without hesitation. Denial writes, “It costs me nothing to be kind.”⁶ Indeed, I now realize that being kind is an essential part of my job description.

Fr. Connerton, my college’s inaugural president, wanted our students to learn more from the faculty than just the knowledge leading to a good job. He charges King’s faculty to model for our students “how to live.” What kind of model was I for “how to live” if my syllabus said one thing, but my actions said another? The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown of Spring 2020 solidified my resolve to prioritize kindness, compassion, and grace, as I observed students attending Zoom classes in closets to find a quiet space within a noisy home and myself sharing a single laptop with my children, themselves thrust into online education as second and fourth graders. The

way to live during that tumultuous time, I realized, was to practice kindness. I have maintained this philosophy and its attendant pedagogical practices in the subsequent five years: offering automatic extensions on major assignments, shifting to ungrading whenever feasible, implementing UDL techniques in designing courses, and crafting policies that allow greater flexibility rather than punitive consequences.

Cate Denial's *A Pedagogy of Kindness* offers a pathway for implementing kindness toward students and within their learning experiences, and for strengthening faculty and staff members' prioritization of their own well-being. Denial presents four chapters of strategies, advice, and personal experience: Kindness toward the Self, Kindness and the Syllabus, Kindness and Assessment, and Kindness in the Classroom. (In another act of kindness, Denial has written a short book—just over 100 pages of text—in clear, engaging prose. I read it in one sitting.) Readers are bound to find strategies that will resonate with them in at least one of these chapters. For instance, amongst the participants of the book club at my college reading Denial's book, my female colleagues—both the parents and the child-free—found the ideas in the Kindness toward the Self chapter tremendously useful; while my male colleague gravitated toward the strategies in Kindness and the Syllabus. Additionally, Denial's endnotes offer practical resources for syllabus revision, teaching strategies, and self-care, as well as a reading list for those interested in a deeper dive into specific topics.

In this Author Meets Critics forum, four scholars offer their responses to Denial's book. These respondents work at research universities and liberal arts colleges, range in their career trajectories from graduate student to tenured faculty member, and embody diverse categories of identity. While lauding Denial's book, the respondents also ask important questions and proffer counterarguments that ultimately deepen how we readers may understand the impact of practicing kindness—upon the academy, our students, and ourselves as faculty and staff members. Denial offers a response to these scholars with gratitude and grace, complimenting their astute observations and highlighting forthcoming research that continues the conversations. I invite you to step away from the likely frenetic pace of your daily life to ponder Denial's invitation to be kind and her interlocutors' thoughtful responses to *A Pedagogy of Kindness*.

¹ "Mission and Traditions," *King's College*, <https://www.kings.edu/aboutkings/traditions-mission/index.html>.

² Catherine J. Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2024), 9.

³ See Emily Hamilton-Honey, “A Kinder, Gentler Academy is Needed—But We Must Fight for It,” *Zeal: A Journal for the Liberal Arts* 2, no. 2 (2024): 99–105, <https://zeal.kings.edu/zeal/article/view/68/56>.

⁴ Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 3.

⁵ Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 11.

⁶ Ibid.