

# Small kindnesses

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The Green Goblin



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Harini Nagendra, the Azim Premji University Prof, prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong.

Credit: DH Illustration

This year's CoP meetings -- the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference, held in Dubai -- were either an unmitigated greenwashing disaster or a promising start to international climate action, depending on who you ask. Whichever version you choose to accept, there can be no doubt that our environment is fraying, collapsing, speeding towards disaster. Air pollution is at an all-time high in Indian cities; deaths from stray dog attacks fueled by towering waste dumps; villages and towns are beginning to be submerged by sea-level rise across the

Indian coastline; and the collapse of biodiversity is visible around us. The planet continues to warm, invisibly, relentlessly, while world leaders squabble about the difference between 'transitioning away from' vs 'phasing out' fossil fuels -- small word choices that make a huge difference to policy, and global economics.

What can citizens, communities, concerned institutions do when the drivers of change are global, the solutions global, but the people affected -- all of us -- are deeply local, rooted in place, experiencing environmental collapse but seemingly powerless to do anything about it?

We can't afford to sink into despair. For when we despair, the end is inevitable. When we lose hope, we stop acting. Even if the large arena of international realpolitik is beyond our capacity to grasp or influence, there are still many places where we can make a difference.

One of the best ways to do this is through small acts of compassion. During this holiday season, 'Small Kindnesses', a beautiful poem by American poet Danusha Lam ris, is a much-needed reminder of the importance of tiny gestures, of connections; of the fact that a good society is one where care for strangers is everyday, automatic, yet deeply appreciated.

I watched a beautiful rendering of the poem by Helena Bonham Carter (it's on all your favourite social media platforms, do look it up). Carter is, of course, best-known for playing the horrifically horrible witch Beatrix Lestrage in the Harry Potter movies -- I marvelled at how someone who portrays evil to such perfection can also talk of kindness with such empathy.

What acts of small kindness can we perform for the environment? In this, we can draw inspiration from many. In Bengaluru, from the residents of Koramangala, organising to protect the precious raintrees earmarked for destruction (to build yet another flyover, this time in Ejipura), impelled by the need to help their neighbourhood protect the trees that save residents from air pollution and heat waves, and the birds that nest in these massive canopies; in Hyderabad, from the citizen group that successfully moved the court to save the centuries-old Chevella banyans, motivated by the need to eradicate 'tree-blindness' from the city, showing the city how to plan for growth in a sensible manner; in Mumbai, from Naima and Nisha Ramakrishnan -- the 14-year-old twins who were interns in our 'Forests of Life' festival -- cataloguing and tagging the old trees of Mumbai to show the busy residents of the city that heritage lives all around them, whether in the giant baobab at the Children's Museum, or the branches of the mahogany tree, planted in 1864 by David Livingstone, the famous Scottish explorer, yet brutalised by lopping today; and in Chennai, from the boatmen who saved dogs, children and elders from the fury of the floods, working tirelessly to help the city devastated by the incompetence and ill-planning of others.

These are small acts of kindness that keep the world spinning on its axis, and help us to stay afloat when darkness surrounds us.

This December 31, when we light candles to usher in the New Year, let us make each spot of light count toward a small kindness for the environment. When a thousand such actions congregate, we can form a confluence so large and powerful that no one can ignore or dismiss us, wordsmith our intentions or greenwash our actions away.

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