

## Why Talk to Strangers

I remember seeing somewhere; on a coffee mug or a T-shirt, I suppose, the cutesy statement “Strangers are friends we have yet to meet”. There is something about the way in which this idea is here so neatly packaged that makes it almost nauseatingly saccharine, but on considering the meaning of the words, they are actually quite profound.

“Strangers are friends we have yet to meet” is a striking idea because it is a reversal of what we are so often told. Strangers get a bad deal pretty much everywhere when you come to think about it. Government campaigns warn us of “stranger danger”; myths and fairy stories often involve the arrival of a stranger and the negative consequences of contact with that person; the press is buzzing with concern about asylum seekers and illegal immigrants and much of science fiction is about contact with aliens who have malevolent intent.

I’ve been wondering why strangers get such a bad press. I guess it’s because they are unknown. Strangers can be vectors for disease, especially in the past. Maybe also because we often entertain aggressive and imperialistic intent, we perhaps see in the stranger intentions which actually originate from within ourselves.

I have been thinking about strangers in relation to all the news about terrorism. Once we dub people “terrorists” and decide that they are irrational we close off the possibility of dialogue and understanding. It is a fair bet that people who are willing to kill people, and even themselves, have a long history of feeling threatened, frightened and hard done by. Of course the authorities must move to protect us, but if our only response is defensive and we close our hearts, things can only get worse.

Ironically, the real danger often lies within. Governments always justify limitations on civil liberties by saying they are protecting their people from some external threat. In my lifetime I have been variously protected from the communists, the IRA, and now Muslim fundamentalists. Fear of strangers causes us to do to them what we fear they will do to us. In order to protect this country from attack our government attacks other countries; so that we may have a free society our government imprisons people without trial; to safeguard freedom of speech there is discussion about making it illegal to defend acts of terrorism. The same dynamic happens in families. The parent who is abusive to their family cuts them off from contact with the outside world as a way of “keeping them safe”. I think it’s time to rehabilitate the stranger. The stranger may offer us help and support to escape from those dangers that are all too familiar. A stranger is an outsider, someone who may bring us new ideas, and resources, but surely more important than the material benefits of seeing strangers as potential friends is the idea that they offer the possibility of relationship. We can only truly manifest ourselves by forming relationship with those who are not like us.

When was the last time you reached out to a stranger?

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Comments and feedback on this article are warmly welcomed.