

THE HOLY INTIMACY OF STRANGERS

I pick up hitchhikers. I don't think much about how they look before I pull over or anything like that. I tend to only take into account whether I'm on the right side of the highway when I do it. I sometimes get hassles about this from my friends, especially from my wife, because I am supposedly putting my life at risk. But I ask you, who is at greater risk? Me, for having literally opened my door to a stranger, or the hitchhiker, who has literally put his safety into my hands? The car, after all, is mine, and where it goes and how it gets there is entirely up to me.

But my primary reasons for doing it are really simple. First, I do it because I used to hitch quite often. I hitched short distances in the east for years, generally between

towns. Once I hitched down the east coast from New York to Florida. This was a wonderful trip, full of occasional side trips when my ride pointed someplace out to me, saying, “you really ought to see that sometime,” and I answered, “why not now?” My life in those days wasn’t going anywhere very quickly, and the trip itself to Florida was undertaken just because I wanted to go there and didn’t want to spend much money doing it. So one reason I pick up hitchhikers is that I am in some way paying back some sort of cosmic karmic balance: others picked me up and dropped me off where I wanted to go, and now that I have the opportunity I do it too.

The other reason is that hitchhikers are fascinating people. Many of them are either very young or very old. The older ones are becoming fewer as the years go by but their paucity makes me think that as time catches up to them they either die off or find the economic level where they can afford to travel in some other, more comfortable way. Or they may have simply found that where they are has more attraction than it used to. Whatever the reason, the older hitchhikers are a dying breed and are almost only old men, tattered backpacks on the road at their feet, their thumb jerked out and a forlorn, mournful look to their faces. They usually have mustaches and beards, completing the image of looking like old, unhappy walruses.

We’re often afraid of strangers and sometimes that fear is justified. All we need to do is turn on the news any given day. This child kidnapped and murdered by an unknown assailant. This woman raped by a man she’d met at a bar. This man robbed of his identity by answering a few innocuous questions on the Internet. We all grew up with our mothers voices ringing in our ears: “don’t get in strangers’ cars.” “If someone says I’m hurt and he’s supposed to take you somewhere, don’t believe him. Find your own

way home.” “If someone comes to the door, don’t let him in unless your dad or I am home too.”

These aren’t bad bits of advice and who knows, they probably saved many lives. But we’re overly conscious of the danger of strangers to the detriment of the blessing of strangers. Someone once said that god created people to hear himself, or herself, talking. There is a benefit to strangers, to having new people in the community, people unknown to one or another.

Consider. Our very welcome, intoned at the start of every service, says that if someone comes to us, whether he agree with our beliefs or we agree with hers, we welcome that stranger. Whether you are black or white or brown, female or male, older or younger, whether you are gay or straight, progressive or conservative, poor or rich: We welcome you. Strangers have only recently shaken off their aura of uncertainty in civilization. They were traditionally objects of distrust and sometimes pity. The stranger to towns of Europe in the Fifteenth Century often carried contagion, usually of disease, sometimes of ideas. Strangers in Biblical times were allowed to stay in a town only after having been questioned and verification of their purpose proved in the public square. More often, it was simply easiest to kill them. Took care of several problems at once, since the chances were that the reason one was a stranger to an area in the first place was because he had been hounded from his old place, and who wants a troublemaker in town anyway?

There are other traditions, of course, that honor the stranger. In nomad societies, one is oneself a stranger at least some of the time, and it is in the best interests of the individual to shelter the stranger, since one may have need at some future point of the

same shelter by someone else. Homer's epics are repositories of correct and incorrect behavior for his audiences, including the traditional expectation that a stranger who appears at a feast will be granted immediate entrance and a lion's share of the food, and the host will not ask his name. This is a part of Greek tradition of *philoxenia*, or "love of strangers." One of the Eight Objects of government, according to the Chinese, was the entertainment of strangers, and Hindu law recognized that strangers demand and must receive the accommodation the host can provide. The Egyptian Book of the Dead suggests that the good person, appealing to the gods after his death, should declare, "I have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, and a boat to the shipwrecked sailor." Among the ancient Jews hospitality was central to religious practice and, according to the book *A Rabbinic Anthology*, "The Synagogue was... a center for study and charity and social work. Strangers were fed there, hence *Kiddush* was recited on Friday and festival evenings during the service, save on the first two evenings of Passover, when strangers would be given hospitality... in private homes because of the domestic paschal ritual."

How have we traveled from this honor of the stranger to this fear of the stranger? Well, there is a code of hospitality and it is not all one-sided. The stranger also has requirements he must uphold. For instance, to steal from one's host was an affront not even countenanced by an enemy. The old priest's salvation of Jean Valjean in the opening pages of *Les Misérables* is all the more impressive to Hugo's audience because it recognized, in Valjean's theft of the reformatory silver, a sin that outstripped even Valjean's striking the priest in his escape. To refuse a host's generosity in any way—to

refuse to sleep where he provided or to turn up one's nose at cabbage soup—was tantamount to giving him the finger and released the host of his obligations.

Among the Iroquois where I come from in upstate New York, there's a tradition of hospitality along these lines. This is cribbed from the Access Genealogy Indian Tribal Records website:

In many of the villages there was a stranger's home, a house for strangers where they were placed while the old men went about collecting skins for them to sleep upon and food for them to eat, expecting no reward. They called it very rude [for white men] to stare at them as they passed in the streets, and said that they had as much curiosity as the white people, but they did not gratify it by intruding upon them, by examining them. They would sometimes hide behind trees in order to look at strangers, but never stood openly and gaze at them.

Their respective attention to missionaries was often the result of their rules of politeness...Their councils are eminent for decorum, and no person is interrupted during a speech. Some Indians, after respectfully listening to a missionary, thought they would relate to him some of their legends, but the good man could not restrain his indignation, but pronounced them foolish fables, while what he told them was sacred truth. The Indian was, in his turn, offended, and said, we listened to your stories, why do you not listen to ours? You are not instructed in the common rules of civility.

Another group, the Cherokee of Virginia, has a cautionary tale about proper etiquette for strangers. It seems an Indian hunter, in his wandering for game, fell among the back settlements of Virginia. It started to snow and he sought refuge at the house of a planter. But he was refused. The hunter was also hungry and thirsty, and he asked for a bit of bread and a cup of cold water. But the answer to every appeal was, "You shall have nothing here. Get you gone, you Indian dog!"

Some months later, the planter got lost in the woods, and after a weary day of wandering came to an Indian cabin. He knocked on the door and was welcomed inside. He asked the direction and distance to the settlement, but it was many miles away and he'd never reach it before dark, so he asked if he could remain. He was told he was

welcome to stay and everything they had was his.. They gave him food, they made a bright fire to cheer and warm him, and supplied him with clean deer-skin for his couch, and promised to conduct him the next day on his journey. In the morning, the Indian hunter—because it was, of course, him—and the planter set out together through the forest. When they came in sight of the planter’s home, the hunter, about to leave, turned to his companion and said, “I just wondered, did you even recognize me?” The planter was abashed: he had been in the power of one to whom he had been cruel. Naturally, he expected now to experience his revenge. But as he started to make excuses, the Indian interrupted him, saying, “Listen, just do this for me: when you see a poor Indian fainting for a cup of cold water, don't say, ‘get you gone, you Indian dog.’” And the hunter turned back toward home.

The website where I found this story must be recounting something recorded by an early American author, because it follows its retelling with this archaism: “Which best deserved the appellation of a Christian, and to which will it most likely be said, ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me.’” of course, one of the primary sources in our culture for behavior and advice is the Bible and this particular reference would, again, have been greatly familiar to its audience.

The reference alluded to above is from the gospel of Matthew 25:45. it’s in this quote that Jesus said something he often said, sometimes in so many words: Treat other people as you’d like to be treated. But he went a little beyond that in this one, in which he says, “Truly...as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.” Jesus was here referring to clothing people, feeding them, and sheltering them. This is the strength of the Biblical and Christian admonition to treat every stranger as an angel. In

our times the idea that such a person could be an angel has reached a ridiculous level, but it's in Jesus' message that we should treat people well because there is a Christ in them, what Buddhists call the godhead.

The Bible's benefit as a behavioral text lies, among other things, in its presentation of the correct way to behave with strangers. This is in keeping with the society out of which the Bible grew, a nomadic and wandering society. In Deuteronomy 10:18 the author writes of God that "he executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." The author of this passage, known to Biblical scholars as J for Jahwist, since he or she uses the archaic "Jahweh" in referencing God rather than the more recent "Elohim," is pointing out that, as you once were, friendless and without a home to call your own, so is this stranger, not the ideal stranger but the literal one before you—dirty, smelly, ranting, whatever—and you must do for him as god did for you. To paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, you don't work with the stranger you want, you work with the one you've got. One of the most profound and hard to interpret tales from the New Testament is the story in Luke 11 about Jesus' reception at the home of Martha and Mary, the sisters who gain favor with him by taking him in, and Mary especially gains favor by sitting and listening to his stories while Martha gets the laundry and the dishes and the housekeeping done.

In Romans 12:13, in a list by the author of what the follower of Christ ought to do to behave as if he or she were Christ, we are told explicitly, "Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality." Because earlier, in Luke 10:58, the lesson was taught that Christ himself was among the strangers and the outcasts. "Foxes have holes, and

birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” Louis Schwebius, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Alexandria, Virginia, points out that “Jesus and his followers went beyond welcoming the foreigner to the more radical notion of welcoming the marginalized: children, women, tax collectors, the poor, lepers, prostitutes, even our enemies. There were no foreigners in Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God. In his vision... we are all God’s children and we are all loved.”

In the popular Touched by an Angel theology epitomized by those unsolicited “angels at our door” kind of stories we all get forwarded by our parents and well-meaning friends, we should be good to the stranger because he may just be an angel or even Christ himself. But that’s bogus. The act of kindness to the stranger should be granted simply because she is herself worthy of it. Schwebius again: “It is easy to be hospitable to someone who is a lot like us. It is people who are different that test our spiritual development—and who help us develop spiritually... When we welcome what is uncomfortable, we grow”

What an incredible notion. We grow by discomfort. But why not? We build muscle by shredding and tearing what is there through taking the muscle beyond its comfort zone and then the resultant muscle that builds over it is stronger, thicker, less inclined to tear. Why shouldn’t strength of character also be built that way? Schwebius one last time: “When we make true connection, we touch what is holy.” The strangers among us—and here I’m referring to the greater us of community, maybe Menomonic, maybe America, maybe mankind—touch us in ways that, because they are discomfit us, thereby make us better people. The sin for which the people of Sodom are destroyed is not homosexuality but the abuse of inhospitality. Consider, Jesus was an outcast, a

stranger everywhere he went; before him, Moses and the Israelites were strangers for forty years, and before them Abraham, the founder of the three major religions, wandered the then known world. Buddha made his way in the world by begging and walking; Mohammed spent years traveling the earth, teaching, prophesying, and relying on the goodness of strangers. The Lord Rama made a regular practice of wandering and appearing to people at random and at one point even makes the admission he “is never quite at home in my own body.”

It is the holy intimacy of strangers that gives us the opportunity to act for the betterment of someone else, with no consideration for our own reward, beyond perhaps the good feelings we receive, both from the recipient and in our own hearts and souls. What would I have you do? This: welcome the stranger, not necessarily into your house, but into your car, into your community, into your arms. Give her money when she asks you to, as much as you can. Listen to him when he wants to talk. I ask you to do this, not because the stranger may be a god who is revealed to you, but because by doing so you reveal the god in yourself.