

On the Kindness of Strangers in America

by Norman Berdichevsky (March 2018)



Fisk Tire Ad for *Saturday Evening Post*, Norman Rockwell, 1917

The most recent incident of mindless violence in which a disturbed 19-year-old gunned down 17 fellow students in a high school he had previously attended produced another veritable rash of doomsday hand-wringing about what can be done to prevent such events in the future and, even more depressingly, whether anything at all can be done to change what appears to be a trajectory of violence embedded in American history and mass culture. Such ruminations are often predicated on the initial understanding that somehow Anglo-

American culture, as it took shape in the new world frontier society of North America, has simply contracted an inherited and incurable disease.

I teach at a private language school in Orlando, Florida which attracts several hundred new students each semester primarily from Latin America—notably Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia. The great majority of these students have expressed to me their high regard for American society which they have found to be a hope for starting new lives here as the only long-term solution to their own aspirations to lead secure and prosperous lives free from political turmoil and the violence of a huge criminal underclass many of them believe is pampered by their respective governments and left-leaning ideologies over the past hundred years.

It is of course hardly advisable for a teacher to enter into political discussions yet the irony of my experience at the school is that the majority of my students deeply identify with what is frequently labeled as “conservative” traditional family values, hospitality and courtesy, and the rule of law. Time and time again they have raised issues of everyday mundane matters over which most Americans probably no longer deem of value or believe existed only on the Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* covers. Whenever I have shown slides of Rockwell’s art, there is an immediate gut reaction on the part of a large majority that these images represent the still-existing class of decent Americans willing to extend a helping hand they have seen, not just in Hollywood movies but in real life and which they no longer dare to believe will ever reappear in their homelands.

A month ago, I had an interesting experience on my way home

from work that I shared with the class, not out of any expectation that they would seize upon it as an example of precisely what they had meant in our discussion and had tried to explain in class.

There are so many stereotypes about Americans and all their problems and their characters usually portrayed on television documentaries or soap operas or sitcoms as selfish, egotistical and only concerned about money.

I had a minor auto accident on my way home while making a right turn and damaged the right side of the car producing several dents on the lower right of the chassis, a flat tire, and several areas of scratched paint. I have roadside assistance which I called as soon as I was able to enter an outdoor shopping plaza so to find a good place to have them change the damaged tire. I don't have any of the basic tools in my car to change a tire but did have a spare tire in the trunk.

While I was standing next to my damaged car waiting for roadside assistance to arrive, three different men stopped their cars and asked if they could help me change the damaged tire and replace it (without any thought or hint of expecting compensation). These three voluntary offers were spread out at approximately intervals of fifteen minutes each by drivers who had pulled into the plaza to do some shopping and spotted me and my damaged vehicle with an obvious flat tire and damage right side.

I am seventy-four years old and in good physical shape and so

did not represent an image of a “charity case” in desperate need of assistance. The first one had a jack but didn’t have a wrench that fit while the second one had to explain that he first needed to do some shopping but would return to help me in 15 minutes. The third offer of help came from two black men who addressed me as “bro” and were eager to help but, by this time, it was too late—the roadside assistance company called to let me know that their repair vehicle was only a few minutes away.

Relieved at the repair, I phoned my wife and told her I would be home in 10 minutes and not to worry. As I was just about to drive off, another driver pulled up in front of me and explained that he worked in an autobody shop that repairs damages such as dents, scratched paint and repainting of vehicles. He had just finished with his work at a garage but had all his tools with him and offered an “on the spot” repair of all the damage for a price that was a fraction (about half) of the cost in a repair shop (I know because I have had such work done before). I told him I would agree if he could follow me home which is what he did and indeed fixed everything including repainting (through his work connections) in the exact color in only 2 hours!

Like many other Americans, he was anxious to find new business and demonstrated initiative to supplement his regular job. This, too, was and still is in many ways “typically American” in the positive sense.

When I finished telling the story to my class, the immediate reaction was the incredulity of such an event in their respective homelands. Several Brazilians in the class only drive armored vehicles in order to avoid the possibility of

robbery or kidnapping. They could not fathom why such total strangers would offer their help including the black men, given their understanding of racial tensions in the United States.

What does such an “insignificant” or anecdotal tale of the kindness of strangers or the entrepreneurial bent of many skilled tradesmen have to say in the great debate over American society? Maybe nothing. Or maybe, as I begin to better appreciate that in the eyes of many foreigners who came here hoping for a better life, there is still much that contrasts favorably with their own experiences back home and the many negative comments they hear through the media about American society.

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