The Kindness of Strangers

by Theodore Dalrymple

It is nearly Christmas—or what Google, with its acute sensitivity toward Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Druze, pagans, animists, atheists, agnostics, and others, calls the holiday season—and so, contrary to my natural disposition, I should try to write something heartwarming and cheerful. After all, even the greatest misanthrope and pessimist must admit that this vale of tears we call the world sometimes wears a smile.

In fact, as I age smaller and smaller things please me, whether disproportionately I cannot say (for something to be judged disproportionate there must be a standard of comparison). Perhaps the ease with which I am now pleased is a sign of the involution of old age, with its reduced expectations of what pleasures life can supply, or perhaps a

sign of having achieved a degree of wisdom at last. At any rate, a pleasant encounter now stays with me for days. Whereas in the past I was inclined to dwell on the rudeness or unkindness of people, or some humiliation suffered, I now dwell on the opposite.

I was in the Paris Metro recently, for example, on the platform waiting for a train. There were only a few other people and one of them was an accordionist who was about to get on the next train himself to play for the passengers in return for coins. As he was waiting, he played a few chords and looked up. I smiled at him, and he smiled back—aged about 50, he had a very pleasant smile. He came over to me and started to play one of the famous Parisian tunes for accordion. I gave him two euros and he thanked me. Never were two euros better spent: Unlike the music of many buskers, the accordion, simultaneously joyful and melancholy, transforms a ride in the Metro into a real pleasure. He was a very good accordionist, and his pleasure at my donation was my pleasure also.

When the train arrived, he entered a different carriage from mine. This delicacy on his part pleased me also. If he had gone into my carriage, there would have been a slight embarrassment between us. He might have felt obliged to address his music to me; I might have felt that he owed it to me to do so. I recognized that he was a professional, and that he was earning his living—in a very honorable and socially useful way, I might add. It would be unfair to expect him to waste time on someone from whom he had already earned payment. I felt that we had achieved a mutual understanding, and whether it was true or not, the recollection continues to please me.

As does another, this time in England, also of recent origin. Thanks to the general breakdown of public administration in that country, the householder is now often obliged to do what his local taxes are supposed to pay for. I had therefore to go

down to the local waste disposal plant to rid myself of various kinds of rubbish.

I was not sure where to throw my garden waste—the usual place was closed—and I approached a member of the staff to ask who was sitting in a prefabricated office drinking some tea. He opened his sliding window.

“Have you got any biscuits?” he said as he opened it, and before I had a chance to say anything.

“No,” I replied, laughing, “but I’ve got a chocolate.” It was true: I had one in my coat pocket that was given to me the night before at a restaurant after the meal, and I gave it to him.

Whenever I go to the waste disposal plant, I am always pleased, and perhaps a little surprised, at the good humor and helpfulness of the staff. I don’t suppose that they are extremely well-paid, and working among waste cannot be the pleasantest job in the world. A high proportion of those who come to dispose of their waste must be better off than they; and yet they are invariably a pleasure to encounter, so much so that I now even look forward mildly to having to dispose of my rubbish myself. The staff restores a kind of faith in the decency of the common man.

I happened not long ago, just after the death of the Queen, to walk past the local primary school on the railings of which were affixed the drawings, poems, and thoughts of the pupils (*not* students) of the school about the Queen. One of them said:

> *I am sorry she died because I wanted to be knighted by her for discovering a new dinosaur.*

I found this both charming and reassuring. Its naivety was charming, but it also indicated a better set of values than

one might have expected in an age of celebrity. After all, to add to the sum of human knowledge was an ambition that could hardly be more honorable. Ever since the discovery of the dinosaurs, boys (not so often girls) seem to go through a phase of interest in dinosaurs, almost as if to do so were biologically determined, like puberty. But this boy's interest in dinosaurs seemed deeper than average, and as if he had already understood by the age of 9 that extension of knowledge was a good in itself.

My pleasure was increased when I learned that he was the son of my cleaning lady. Well done his mother and the school, I thought, for fostering in him some desire or ambition other than to be a footballer or a pop star, football and pop music being what children most associate nowadays (so one reads) with the word "talent," everything else being insignificant.

All is not lost, then, I thought, and civilization will survive us; the end is not nigh. Naturally, this mood of optimism cannot last long before it is replaced by a much darker mood more conducive to the kind of article that I and most journalists usually write. But the holiday season, as Google puts it, is upon us, and we need a break from gloom, however justified it might be.

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