



The kindness of strangers

Surely there is not one among us who has not been helped by a stranger in a critical period in our lives? **Nandini Sarkar** explores the mysterious ways the universe supports us through unknown quarters

Jesus was sitting in the midst of a crowd when a messenger arrived, saying, “Your mother and brothers are outside, asking for you.” Looking at the people around him, Jesus said, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers, but those who do the will of God.” Mark 3:31-35

Have we met before?

This story provokes the question: Who do you consider family? I have heard people from dysfunctional families say that their friends and colleagues have been more supportive than family, and people from happy families say that the turning points in their lives came from chance encounters with people they barely knew. In

the Biblical story, Jesus tells the crowd they are as much his family as his own mother and brothers, because they are connected by a common love for God. The Buddhist scriptures tell us that no one in the world is actually a stranger. Each soul, in its journey through countless lives, has been linked to every other soul through different family roles. In her book, *Dancing in the Light*, Hollywood diva Shirley Maclaine reveals the instant bonding she felt with an unknown Russian director who was new in Hollywood. Eventually, through past-life regression, she discovered they had been connected in past lives as mother-son and as husband-wife.

Against this backdrop, people whom we label 'kind strangers' are perhaps those who have re-connected with us in this lifetime through spontaneous demonstrations of fellow feeling. In Shankar Mahadevan's

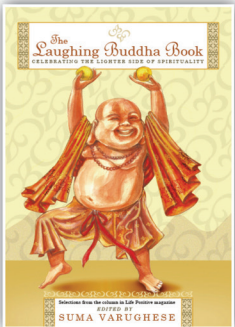
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classic *Breathless* song, which is about people meeting briefly and then separating, there is a line that goes: "*Hum jo mile hain hume aise hi milna thaa, gul jo khilen hain unhe aise hi khilna thaa, janmo ke bandhan, janmo ke rishtey.*" Roughly translated, this means, "Flowers bloom because they have to and we have met because we had to; my friend, these are the bonds of lifetimes, the relationships of lives gone by that have briefly re-surfaced." How often I have remembered these lines in the course of myriad meetings over the years with myriad strangers in myriad settings, for my company, C-Quel. Such encounters lend a great charm to the already rich tapestry of life.

Pulitzer prize-winner, Tennessee Williams, immortalised this concept of kind strangers in his play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The central character, Blanche Dubois, a disillusioned person with many skel-

etons in her cupboard, says, "All my life, I have depended on the kindness of strangers." Soni, a staunch devotee, learns through experience that the Divine is playful and as part of the Divine leela, strangers come to delight and surprise us. Soni was eagerly looking forward to the visit of her guru, Neem Karoli Baba, to a family wedding feast. After waiting for hours for Baba to show up, she finally gave up in dejection. A big, black dog had strayed into the gathering, nosing around the scraps of food thrown in the litter area. Angrily, she shooed it away. Some days later, meeting Baba in his ashram, she asked why he had disappointed her. Baba replied with his luminous, captivating smile: "Oh, but I did come! I was the dog that you turned away!"

One day, during a school tiffin break, I was craving an ice-cream but had no money. Suddenly, I saw my brother Partha in the distance, gorging on an ice-cream cone. I ran up to him to claim a share, then happily ran back to my waiting friend, Pallavi. Back home, when I narrated the incident to our mother, my brother flatly denied either having the ice-cream or meeting me in the break. I called Pallavi and she testified having seen me eat my brother's cone. But my brother whipped up a frenzy of denial saying he had carried no money that day, a fact supported by my mother who checked our bags each morning and who was very strict with pocket money. Besides, he had no reason to lie, as mother did not ban ice-creams. For years into my adulthood, I thought over this incident. Finally, I concluded that it could have been another boy, Narayan, in our school, who was my brother's age and looked a lot like him. But how could I have mistaken Narayan for my brother in broad daylight and how could Narayan, with whom I was certainly not friends, passively tolerate my licking his ice-cream? Whoever it



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Vinayak Lohani, whose family of underprivileged children run into thousands

was who shared his ice-cream, thank you, through these pages! I have never forgotten that act of kindness on a hot summer's day!

Stranger guides

As a child, I had a strong feeling about being loved and protected by an invisible presence. I was brought up in a caring family, so it was not that I was starved of love and seeking it from imaginary sources. This keenly felt circle of protection gave me great confidence to do things that people considered reckless or foolhardy, such as standing up against ragging or against powerful bullies. Later, as an adult, I read about unseen angel guides. I wondered who my 'stranger guide' was, who had taken care of me through my turbulent teens, never demanding anything in return? Even in my spiritual life, I found help from 'stranger' guides, who were outside the Kriya yoga 'family' of teachers that I follow. I was not acquainted with their philosophy and was not in their family of followers but they manifested in my life through various incidents of benediction. Sai Baba of Shirdi showed up ever since my company, C-Quel, was formed. In 2001, after a business meeting in Raipur, the client insisted I visit the famous Sai temple close to their office. There was nothing to do in sleepy Raipur, so I decided to go.

There was a long line and I stood by myself, a stranger in Raipur. To my surprise, the priest beckoned me to come forward, asked me to spread out my dupatta, then proceeded to dump a coconut, flowers and prasad into it. I was puzzled, wondering why he had singled me out, but taking this to be a good omen for

my venture, I soon forgot about it. Some years later, I was in Hyderabad, nervously waiting to meet a difficult customer who was known to send people packing with fleas in their ears. Looking around idly, I saw an upturned Sai Charita Manas on his table. When he returned, I asked him about the book just to break the ice. The dour, reserved man was completely transformed and started speaking animatedly about Baba. In the course of our conversation, he suddenly summoned some of his staff to the room and asked me to give a talk on the spiritual life! Seriously, I did not know if he was sane but I gave a 10-minute talk in a daze because there was no exit route. After this, the man helped

us to implement a critical project. At the start of another major project in Bangalore in 2008, I asked the caretaker of the guesthouse if there was a nearby temple I could visit before my client meeting. This time, I was not surprised when he told me that I would find a Sai temple two hundred yards away. Thankfully, over time, the Bangalore project proved to be a success and opened new business avenues for C-Quel. This time around, shaking off my complacency about Baba's help, I visited Shirdi and offered my grateful thanks for his loving presence in my life, completely unsolicited but so graciously granted.

Before my son's birth, which was going to be through Caesarean section, I was a nervous wreck lying in hospital. My daughter had been born a year-and-a-half ago, also through Caesarean section. I was wondering, belatedly, whether it had all happened too fast and whether anything would go horribly wrong with the baby because my body had not been allowed enough rest after my daughter's delivery. A young nurse entered my room to prepare me for the operation. We started chatting and I told her about my fears. She made an unexpected disclosure, gently stroking my head, "I am the great, great grand-daughter of Sri Sri Ram Thakur. Look, this amulet that I wear around my neck has been handed down directly from the Master to various generations of my family. Let me offer his blessings to you through the amulet." Reverently touching the amulet, I took it as a sign of divine assurance. My son was born a healthy baby and my fears proved unfounded.

A few months before my son's birth, a colleague of my husband had literally dragged us to the Sri Sri Ram Thakur temple in Javadpur, Kolkata. I tell my son Riddhiman that Sri Sri Thakur is his stranger guide because no one in our family knew about him. Each time we discuss this, my son jokingly says, 'Now Mum,

no tears, please,' because he knows, that even today, the memory of the loving assurance I received from a stranger, makes me weep. My personal experiences have convinced me that the invisible Masters, who may be complete strangers for us, are nevertheless with us, on our Earth journey. They send us signs to assure us that we are indeed loved and encouraged to move on, no matter what adverse circumstances we find ourselves in. In the face of this amazing support, freely offered without any preamble or introduction, 'O death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory?'

Science of compassion

Robert Levine, Professor of Psychology, has studied the likelihood of people assisting strangers in need, in dif-

The secret of happiness is to forget about being happy and instead try to increase the happiness of others!

ferent cities and countries. In one series of field experiments, he compared helpfulness toward strangers in 36 US cities; in another, across 23 countries. Professor Levine has conducted conferences on The Science of Compassion. Some people have asked him whether there is anything to be gained by reducing humanism to numbers? Levine's studies indicate there very well might be. He says that by understanding the conditions that bring out the best in people, we may be able to create more compassionate environments. Levine's team found the people of Rio de Janeiro to be the most helpful and those in Kuala Lumpur to be the least, though New York was not far behind. In their 'blind person' and 'hurt leg' experiments, the cities of Rio, Madrid, Prague and Calcutta came forward to help the distressed while in Kuala Lumpur, Kiev and Bangkok, help was offered less than one-half the time. Their most important finding, however, is that the helpfulness of a city is systematically related to specific social, economic and demographic characteristics. In their US

study, for example, Levine's team found that cities that are more helpful had smaller population sizes, lesser population densities, more vital economies, and slower paces of life. (*The Kindness of Strangers, American Scientist*)

Psychologist Paul Bloom says, "While there is no Darwinian payoff in helping strangers, especially those in foreign lands, the explanation for our expanded morality comes from intelligence, imagination and culture. Another factor is the spread of ideologies, both secular and religious, that encourage us to care for distant others, that persuade us to expand our kindness beyond our immediate circle."

A recent study of 15 diverse populations, reported in the journal, *Science*, found that the societies that treat anonymous strangers most fairly are those with capitalist market economies. Bloom says as people become increasingly inter-dependent, the distinction between 'us' and 'them' becomes less sharp than it used to be. The effects of our kindness, he adds, are not a one-way street. It feels good to be good! The scientific finding is thus a bit of a paradox. The secret of happiness is to forget about being happy and instead try to increase the happiness of others!

Outreach

Why do you care about me? Thousands of abandoned children, orphans, street children and children of sex workers have asked Vinayak Lohani this question. Vinayak Lohani, founder of Parivaar, did his B.Tech from IIT, Kharagpur, followed by MBA from IIM, Kolkata. With these credentials, he could have easily earned a fortune like many other young men of similar pedigree, who became Silicon Valley millionaires. Surprisingly, Vinayak did not appear for the placement process at IIM. Immediately after his MBA, he started Parivaar, inspired by the spiritual



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and humanistic ideals of Swami Vivekananda. Starting with just three children in a small rented building in West Bengal, with limited financial resources, Parivaar's residential institution now has more than 675 resident children from destitute backgrounds.

Great to know that help is always at hand and good to remember that the universe is not going to be friendly with jerks!

Parivaar's day education covers more than 3,000 students in far-flung tribal areas in West Bengal and Jharkhand.

There is a parallel here with Jean Webster's 1912 classic, *Daddy Long Legs*, the story of young Judy Abbott, an orphan, whose life is transformed due to a rich benefactor whom she has never seen, except for his long shadow. Vinayak is Daddy Long Legs for thousands of abandoned children who would have languished on the streets or been sold in the flesh trade. It is heartening to note that social entrepreneurship is a fast growing trend in India. This is not only a sign of the New Age in which people are spiritually more evolved but also reflects a wonderful trend in modern education that focuses on social responsibility. Publicly listed companies in India today are mandated to devote a percentage of their profits to corporate social responsibility and the Daddy Long Legs effect is spreading, with more and more companies getting into the socially driven mode.

In this context, I can never forget V Ramachandran, Director HR, Asia-Pacific of the iconic company, Motorola. Once, Ram was waylaid by an unknown housekeeping boy in the huge Motorola facility at Bangalore. The boy told him that even though it was the


15th of the month, the labour contractor had not paid his salary. Ram called me because C-Quel was responsible for contractors' compliance and wanted us to ensure that all the 500 contract workers were paid their salaries by the seventh of each month. Thereafter, as long as he was with Motorola, despite his stature and work pressures, he would personally review the monthly report with us. I saw the power of that one intervention in the lives of 500 lower middle-class families that desperately depended on their monthly salaries. They did not know Ram personally and Ram certainly did not know them personally, but a simple, humane management intervention had a wonderful multiplier effect on human happiness.

I remember reading a blog in which the author outlines various instances of strangers rallying to help her in times of critical illnesses, job losses, the falling apart of her marriage and so on. The author finally concludes, bluntly, for the benefit of the non-believers, that if we want to attract help we have to stop being jerks. I could not agree more with her. I have seen that the help I have come to expect from strangers as part of the universe's benevolence, automatically dries up whenever I am being selfish, self-centred, unfair, inconsiderate, or arrogant. Great to know that help is always at hand and good to remember that the universe is not going to be friendly with jerks! I love these lines from Zafar, which say, "Sabka makam dil me mukim tu, kaun sa dil hai jisme nahin tu?" The Lord is the goal of every human heart, and he resides in every heart as love. Knowing this, can we ever think of even a stranger as somebody who does not merit our kindness and help?



Nandini Sarkar is Co-founder, C-Quel, a management services company. A lover of the spiritual Masters she is a follower in the Kriya Yoga tradition.

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आज ही अपने विक्रेता से प्रति मगाएं अथवा हमें सम्पर्क करें।

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