EXQUISITE INTERRUPTION

A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
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I recently read that one of the most rewarding behaviors is starting a conversation with a stranger. I think this explains the success of Candid Camera. You probably know the show. Each program is composed of a few vignettes in which concealed cameras film ordinary people being confronted with bizarre situations in which they're put on the spot. There are usually actors involved who set up the situation. At the end of the interaction, the actor says, "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*," and the joke is revealed.

It's a fascinating way to watch strangers interact. One of my favorite episodes takes place in a Chicago diner where the Candid Camera actor sits at the counter with a cider donut. First comes along an intimidatingly tough looking man with a Harley Davidson scarf wrapped around his head. He sits next to the actor who is absorbed in his newspaper. While still staring at his paper, the actor reaches across the front of the man and very deliberately dips his donut into the man's coffee, and takes a bite. The Harley Davidson man develops a broad grin, looks around incredulously, and starts laughing loudly. He offers to buy the actor a cup of coffee. The actor casually responds that he doesn't drink coffee, he just likes the taste of it. He says he just wanted one dunk.

Another unsuspecting customer comes along and when the actor avails himself of this man's coffee, the man asks with good-natured sarcasm: "Is it sweet enough for you? You want more sugar?" This man's openness to having a good time with his weird neighbor is delightful to watch. His sense of humor prevails.

Apparently during the many years this show was on the air, very few people reacted to the Candid Camera pranks with hostility. In fact most of the show's unsuspecting stars were thrilled to be told, "Smile, you're on Candid Camera." You can't help but be uplifted by these scenes and the willingness of strangers to engage joyfully in these unexpected circumstances.

We all see strangers interacting constantly, especially in a place like New York City. So exactly how do we think about the word "stranger"? Kio Stark, author of *When Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You* offers a few somewhat conflicting definitions:

- The entire world of people you've never met or encountered.
- Someone who is not part of any group you define yourself as belonging to.
- Someone you can't understand.
- Someone you encounter frequently but don't know anything about other than what you can observe.

Have you noticed how we can be more cheerful with strangers than with the people who we're closest to? My back might be killing me, but I find myself smiling while thanking the bus driver; I may be exhausted and grumpy, but I don't mind when my yoga teacher suggests that we students introduce ourselves to each other before class.

One study by behavioral scientists Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton "recruited people on their way into a busy urban Starbucks with a $5 gift card. They asked some customers to 'have a

genuine interaction with the cashier,' smiling, making eye contact, and having a brief conversation. Others were told to be as efficient as possible: get in, get out, get on with the day. Those who lingered for an extra moment left Starbucks feeling more cheerful and reported a greater sense of belonging."

Another study showed that when one person took the initiative to speak to another in a waiting room, that both people, not just the person initiating the conversation, had a more positive experience. Nicholas Epley, the behavioral scientist who led this study, commented, "This is one of the few research projects that's actually changed the way I live my life."

These studies reveal how influential these encounters with strangers can be. Stark calls the encounters "exquisite interruptions" because they change the expectations we may have had about our day and because they connect us to the community around us.

This brings me to ask how we can deepen and broaden these connections so that our encounters with strangers enrich our lives and theirs? I see three ways of approaching this. First there is the challenge of making time, of rushing less and noticing more as a result. Second there is the challenge of "looking out," keeping our heads up, not buried in a phone or a newspaper, so we actually see who is around us. And finally there is the most difficult challenge of allowing our own vulnerability.

Why does making time matter? We live in a city that values being busy, being in a hurry. Allowing a little extra time as we travel through our day can do more than alleviate the stress of rushing. It can leave space for the interactions with strangers that the efficient Starbucks customer—"get in, get out, get on with the day"—misses out on.

In a 1973 study researchers John Darley and Daniel Batson used the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan to test a hypothesis. The parable is about a man who was been beaten by robbers and is lying on the side of the road. The religious leaders of the day, a priest and a Levite, walk right past him, but the Samaritan, who is a religious outcast, stops to pick up the man, take him to an inn, and pay for his lodging and care until he is recovered.

The study about the parable of the Good Samaritan, entitled *From Jerusalem to Jericho*, was designed to explore what makes people stop to help. The researchers told a group of seminarians to prepare a talk on the Good Samaritan. After being told their task, the seminarians were told to walk to another building where they needed to attend a follow-up meeting. The first group was given plenty of time, the second less time, and the third was told to rush. As they walked to the meeting they all passed by a disheveled man, slumped over on the ground, coughing and groaning.

The seminarians had been measured for personality differences and degrees of religiosity. But neither of these factors correlated to which students stopped to help the needy man. The key influence on whether they stopped to help was how rushed they were.

Simply slowing down allows us to be the compassionate people we hope to be.

The study of the seminarians and their reaction to the needy man was from the 1970s so there were no cell phones. I'd be curious to see if even some of the non-rushing seminarians might have been too distracted by their phones to notice the disheveled man.

The second way in which we can broaden and deepen our interactions with strangers, our exquisite interruptions, is by looking out, keeping our heads up. On the bus, on the plane, in the waiting room—we're busy horrifying ourselves with the latest Trump tweet or burying ourselves in a book, we literally don't lay eyes on the people right next to us. While standing in line or sitting in traffic, instead of distracting ourselves with our phones or indulging ourselves in why we in particular deserve to be airlifted past all the other people in our way, we can consider a different approach.

We can look around at the strangers in line or passing by and offer them compassion. Silently we can say:

May you live with ease,
may you be happy,
may you be free from pain.
May you live with ease,
may you be happy,
may you be free from pain.

For me, it's not easy to throttle my busy, anxious, egotistical mind to focus on strangers and their wellbeing, but it is a triumph of curiosity about their lives and their suffering, and a triumph of the power of connection when I secretly bless them.

Slowing down and looking out are challenging, but the third and most elementary challenge is fear: fear that we'll say something stupid, fear that we'll be rejected, fear of exposing our vulnerability.

Brene Brown, author of *The Power of Vulnerability: Teachings on Authenticity, Connection, and Courage*, examines the difference between people who have a strong sense of worthiness, of love and belonging, and those who struggle for this sense. She concludes that those who have a sense of worthiness, love, and belonging have the courage to be imperfect, to let go of who they think they should be. They are willing to be vulnerable.

Brown calls people who have developed this courage "wholehearted." She writes "Vulnerability is the core of shame, and fear, and our struggle for worthiness, but it's also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love."

Moreover when we project vulnerability, we are providing the opening for others to uncover their vulnerability. It's really saying, "I'm not ok, and you're not ok, but that's ok." The opportunity to have a conversation with a stranger is one in which we can open a pathway to joy and belonging.

There's a paradox about vulnerability though. It can be easier to strike up a conversation with strangers like the Starbucks cashier than the people whom we don't know well in our own communities. It can be easier to extend a hand and try to connect with a stranger with whom we have nothing in common, especially someone in need. When we help people who are marginalized, we can be more open. However when we open up to our peers, our vulnerability is amplified. Our tendency is to collect and analyze bits of data: What is their work? Who are they friends with? How old are they? What role do they play in this community?, and we compare them to ourselves. We silently ask ourselves: Will it be ok to be vulnerable with this person? Do I have the courage to be imperfect in this person's eyes? So we need extra courage to reach out to people in our own communities.

In his essay *I and Thou*, Martin Buber provides a construct for better understanding vulnerability. Buber wrote that modern society's prevailing view of relationships is I–It which he describes as "experience"—we collect information about a person, we analyze it, we make deductions about it, and we decide how it fits into our overall scheme of humanity. In an I-It relationship, we are the observer, and the It is the observed. Buber contrasts I-It with I-Thou relationships which he describes as "encounter;" in encounters we enter into a relationship with the person, and both the I and the Thou are affected by the relationship. Instead of seeing the other as a collection of data, we see the whole person.

Buber puts it like this, ""When I confront a human being as my Thou and speak the basic word I-Thou to them, then they are no thing among things nor do they consist of things. The person is no longer…a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, the person is Thou and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but them; but everything else lives in their light."

It takes great discipline and faith to work against the norm, to catch ourselves collecting data and reset our minds to see the whole person. And it's risky because it requires vulnerability. But it is a spiritual practice full of opportunity. Our own congregation offers such an opportunity; we can practice I-Thou right here.

We are an extremely curious bunch—there is no intellectual matter that at least a few people in this congregation aren't knowledgeable about. Mixing our curiosity with vulnerability holds enormous potential, it gives us the impetus to approach people we don't already know well in our community and to bring us all closer. We can do this by lingering a few minutes in the vestibule after worship to shake hands with people with whom we've never spoken, by making the effort to wander at Coffee Hour, and by making eye contact as we come and go. Buber acknowledges that I-Thou encounters may only last a moment. But, he points out, communities are founded on these moments.

Imagine a world full of exquisite interruptions. We can create this by slowing down, looking out, and by risking our vulnerability. So dip your donut in a stranger's coffee, offer a warm hello to your seatmate on a plane, and introduce yourself to someone you don't know after this service.