

Distances

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Down
in the
Dirt

But My Dance Card Isn't Yours

An introvert challenges an extroverted vision of peace and harmony.

Marcia Yudkin

"Hey, love your glasses!" While I handed over a dollar bill for a Coke, this chipper, out-of-nowhere comment rang out from clear across our town's narrow-aisled general store.

According to culture critics like Joe Keohane, author of *The Power of Strangers*, this was the sort of moment that too many people avoid, making our public spaces cold and fragmented. A stranger tossing out a compliment represents an invitation to a conversational dose-y-do. If we respond in kind, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has argued, we'll experience a gratifying glow of human connection. And if we make that first move ourselves, we help create a brighter world, where people hum with greater good will toward one another.

In the general store, though, I did not turn to look at the woman. Soda can in hand, I thanked the clerk and left without another word. To me she'd made an inane overture, determined to corral me into her concept of a wonderful day. In my ideal day, I thought through whatever knot I was trying to disentangle in my writing and had functional, minimally cordial interactions – or none – until I was in a mood to relate to people I cared about.

Friendly greetings do produce a lift for many people. Psychological experts say that chitchat augments the reservoir of energy for extroverts while depleting it for introverts like me. Our social expectations favor gregarious people, like the woman in the store. I knew I was supposed to smile at her and encourage further niceties. And perhaps she cursed me after I ignored her, letting the door bang shut behind me.

That there can be an undertow of aggression in strangers' greetings I've seen when I'm running and I don't return a loud "Good morning." I then might hear "Bitch!" or "What a nerve!" after I've whizzed by. Yet while running I do acknowledge people I repeatedly encounter who seem self-possessed, who make little or no claim on my attention. I volunteer a pleasant "Hi" to them, knowing that like me they're minding their own business as they pursue their daily or weekly exercise.

I'm far from alone in disliking the conversational gambits recommended. Among more than 1,700 responses to David Brooks's column on the subject, many pointed out that talking to strangers can be downright dangerous, particularly for women or people of color. To my point, a man from Atlanta said subway rides were for many a respite from socializing, while a woman from Palo Alto wrote, "As an introvert I can't wait to get into a quiet space, even when out in public."

Like me, such respondents prefer to maintain an energy-preserving bubble as we go around in public. For introverts, less idle conversation makes room for thinking, getting things done and talk that matters. The purposeful talk that introverts prefer might take place with intimates, acquaintances or strangers. I was out walking one time when a man in an out-of-state car approached me to ask about land fronted by a "For Sale" sign. I offered three reasons why that developer's plan made little sense. He asked more questions than I answered, and I walked on without an ounce of resentment. But eyeglasses? Unless I'm at the optical shop, that's a don't-bother-me-please disruption.

The concept that spirited greetings require replies in kind is far from universal. In Finland, strangers normally remain silent with one another, and the peppy salutation of the woman in the general store would stand out as gauche. Ditto in Japan, where only 15 percent of people say they would speak to a stranger next to them on an airplane, compared to 46 percent of Spanish people and 60 percent of Indians. The paradise of friendly interchanges proposed by "stranger enthusiast" Kio Stark in a TED talk would have a hard time taking root in Finland or Japan. "When you talk to strangers, you're making beautiful interruptions into the expected narrative of your daily life – and theirs," said Kio Stark.

But in North America, the vision of Keohane, Brooks, Stark and others represents a dream world that many find rosy and warm while others wish there were more respect for reticence and quiet sincerity. Here, extroverts have the cultural upper hand. Introverts can either conform to extroverted norms or get judged as rude. In the light of other countries' differing expectations, it's a conflict comparable to whether people drive on the right or the left side of the road. In Humpty Dumpty's words in *Through the Looking Glass*, the question is who "is to be master – that's all."