

EXQUISITE INTERRUPTION
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
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The hidden camera reality show *Candid Camera* is one of the most successful television shows of all time. Each episode 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 unsuspecting and bewildered subjects hear the show's catchphrase, "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*," and the joke is revealed.

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 in front of the man and very deliberately dips his donut into the man's coffee, and then takes a bite. The Harley Davidson man grins broadly, looks around incredulously, and starts cracking up. 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.

Later, another unsuspecting customer comes along. When the actor avails himself of the man's coffee, the man asks with good-natured sarcasm: "Is it sweet enough for you? You want more sugar?" These men are open to having a good time with their 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 when people engage joyfully in unexpected interactions with strangers.

The original meaning of the word “stranger” referred to someone who came from a foreign land, who was probably just passing through. They were foreigners – in loyalty and language, as well as in custom and culture. Kio Stark, author of *When Strangers Meet: How People You Don’t Know Can Transform You* offers several somewhat conflicting definitions of the term:

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

Depending on how we define stranger, our experience of a stranger can lead us to curiosity or it can lead us to war. And within our own communities, our experience of a stranger can bring us closer or divide us in misunderstanding.

Our own experience of strangers depends on where we’re coming from in any given moment, whether we’re alone or with someone, whether we’re near home or on a trip, whether we’re tired or rested. When we’re going about a routine day we’re often in our own heads, missing opportunities to connect that can be transformative.

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 interacted more fully 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 encounters with strangers can be. Kio Stark, who wrote the book about how strangers can transform us, calls these 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.

We have varying degrees of comfort—whether we’re more introverted or extroverted—of engaging with strangers. And it depends on how we define strangers.

Before we can connect with strangers, however, we need to overcome our fear of doing so – fear that we’ll say something stupid, fear that we’ll be rejected, fear of exposing our vulnerability.

Some of us don’t experience this fear. One friend I talked with over the phone while we were sheltering in place told me what she missed most was talking with strangers on the sidewalk, in restaurants. Another friend of mine a couple of weeks ago was telling me just before Thanksgiving that she couldn't wait for Thanksgiving. She was planning to spend the day alone at home in the morning. And then go to her favorite diner. Order a big breakfast and talk to whoever sits down next to her.

Some of us feel more concerned, more at risk, about exposing our vulnerability. Brene Brown, author of *The Power of Vulnerability*, writes that “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.” She describes how we develop our sense of worthiness, of love and belonging, when we have the courage to be imperfect. And in doing so we are providing the opening for others to uncover their vulnerability.

We're saying, "I'm not ok, and you're not ok, but that's ok." Like the people in the waiting room, we invite more positive experiences into our lives. The opportunity to have a conversation with a stranger is one in which we can open a pathway to joy and belonging.

Once we decide to take the risk, there's another element: we need to find the time – or make the time – for the encounter not only to happen, but also to unfold.

This can be difficult to do, especially in a city that values being busy. We're often in a hurry or just focused on accomplishing something, so there's no room for chance encounters, especially those with people we don't know. 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 people.

In a 1973 study, researchers John Darley and Daniel Batson used the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan to test a hypothesis. The parable describes 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, takes him to an inn, and pays for his lodging and care until he is recovered.

The study about the parable of the Good Samaritan 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. Those who were in a hurry rushed past. Those who had time to stop and help did so.

In addition to allowing ourselves a little vulnerability and slowing down when we can. We can be attentive to those moments that can become our exquisite interruptions.

Whether we're standing in line, on the bus, on the train, 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. Silently we can say

May you be safe
May you be happy
May you be healthy
May you live with ease
May you be safe
May you be happy
May you be healthy
May you live with ease

For me, focusing on strangers and their well being is an antidote to my busy, anxious, egotistical mind. And it's a triumph of curiosity about their lives when I secretly connect with each of them.

There's a paradox about these exquisite interruptions. It can be easier to strike up a conversation with a Starbucks cashier or someone next to you at a diner counter 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 of directions or some other form of practical assistance.

The challenge is when we open up to the people in our own community because 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? Our tendency is to 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*, 20th Century philosopher Martin Buber provides a construct for better understanding vulnerability. Buber writes 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 resist merely collecting data and instead 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 bring us all closer. We can do this by lingering a few minutes after worship meet someone new, 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 and sustained on these moments.

Imagine a world full of exquisite interruptions, making connections that transform our lives. Join us at Coffee Hour today. I dare you to dip your donut in someone else's coffee.