

Hello, stranger

Talking to random people

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While enjoying my fresh wok lunch in Amsterdam, I noticed something odd: other folks coming in for something to eat ignored the person standing at the counter, preferring to order through a digital kiosk. The crazy thing about this? They are just centimetres apart!

In fact, they are so close that the staff member peeks at the display to get a head start on picking the right vegetables – all without any words spoken. Now, I get it: modern technology allows us to be more efficient, but I think I might be witnessing something deeper: we prefer not to talk to each other anymore.

Perhaps I am noticing these things because I am reading the book ["The Power of Strangers: The Benefits of Connecting in a Suspicious World"](#) by Joe Keohane. In his book, the author discusses his own experiments with talking to random strangers, enriching it with research and historical literature about the origins of mankind, hospitality, and the sheer need to connect with others to survive.

Think about it for a moment. When was the last time you greeted somebody you didn't know? When did you spontaneously engage in a conversation? Chances are you don't even remember! Likely either you or the other person were "busy" with other things (like tinkering with a smartphone).

As a human species, we have reached where we are today because our ancestors collaborated. You don't need to go out hunting for food, do you? We evolved from tribes to larger communities where meeting strangers had the potential to grant us access to food and other resources. Unknown people were treated as guests and were offered generous hospitality for this reason.

Now, with the rise of digital technologies, one can't help but feel something might be at risk, an intangible cost of modern efficiency: our ability to talk to strangers.

We shop online, scan our groceries at the self-checkout, order a taxi via an app, and sit behind our screens in the cafe or coffee bar. Contact with random strangers is becoming rarer and rarer. Yet there are surprising benefits to having a simple conversation with someone you don't know.

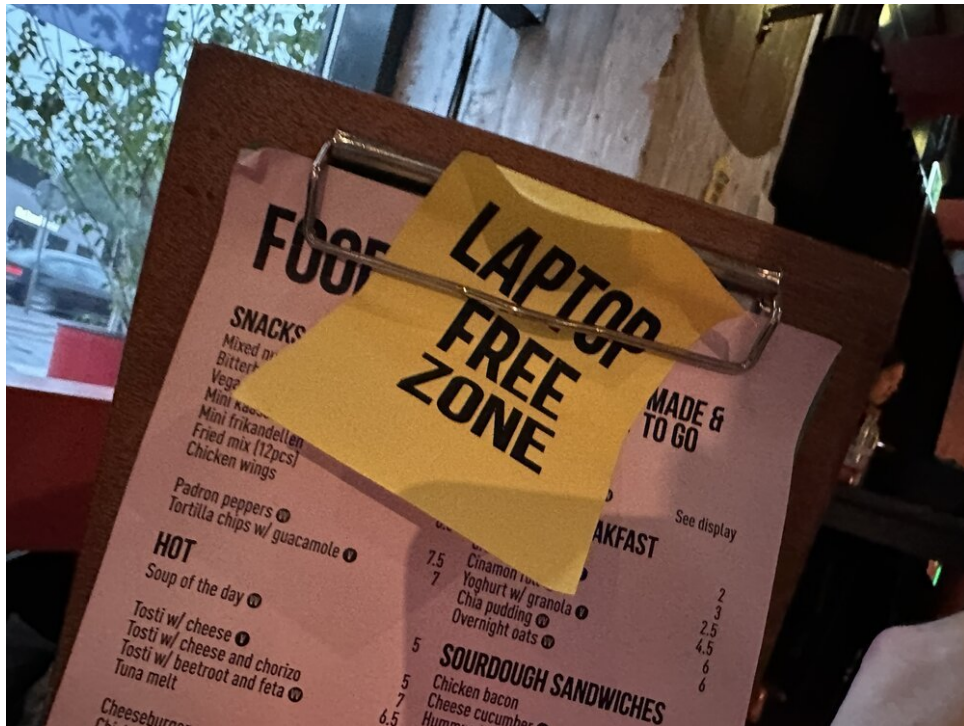
Even a short and simple conversation can make you feel good. You might learn something unexpected, and without a doubt, it has the power to enrich your understanding of others. Like the author of the book about meeting strangers, I set out to see for myself if this was really true.

Over the past few weeks, I have been engaging in conversations with random people: at the train station, in the supermarket, on the street, and in the city. I always start cautiously, simply greeting someone or making an 'easy comment' on things like the weather or something equally innocuous. Once you get a reaction, you can easily 'feel' if the person is open to further discussion. An open-ended question, like "where are you going?" (at a train station), often yields great results. I've had multiple conversations where people shared more than just their destination, often providing detailed reasons for their travels. Being a good listener ensures the conversation flows naturally.

It's genuinely enjoyable. I've learned a plethora of unexpected things, such as life in Suriname, how the role of train conductors has evolved over the years, what the volcanoes are like in Iceland, and a policymaker's thoughts on the impact of AI on people's comprehension of the world.

Conclusion

I truly believe that more people should connect with others by simply talking in an analogue and natural way. It could foster a better understanding of one another, serving as a powerful antidote to the increasing polarisation of our modern world.



A laptop free zone in a bar in Amsterdam - I wonder when I will encounter the first smartphone free zone...