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Judging Strangers

Before my five-year old granddaughter Gabby moved to Japan with her parents this fall, she was afraid of our landline phone. When it rang, she would run wide eyed to my side. It is loud and with four handsets, it rang all over the house. She wondered, though why I usually didn't answer it. I explained that I didn't know the people who were calling, and I didn't want to talk to them. She interpreted this as strangers were calling. She had been warned at her pre-school about talking to strangers so strangers calling us was a scary idea. John tried to explain it to her by telling her that they were usually robo calls. This didn't help because now she decided that robots were in our phones calling us. This was even more frightening. This started me thinking about not only what we tell small children about strangers, but how we think of strangers.

With these questions in mind I bought Malcolm Gladwell's new book, "Talking to Strangers". I expected that there would be a discussion about judging people by appearance, race, ethnicity, clothing style, that sort of thing. I was initially alarmed by the fact that he was talking about people's reaction to Hitler, Cuban spies, pedophiles, Bernie Madoff and his Ponzi scheme. These cases felt extreme. I don't meet people like that I thought. It turns out that we are evolutionarily wired for dealing with strangers. In case by case Gladwell made his points about how we all deal with strangers.

In 1939 Neville Chamberlain had been prime minister of Britain for a little over a year. World War II was looming. If Germany invaded Czechoslovakia it would almost certainly be war. Chamberlain's idea dubbed Plan Z was to meet Hitler. Few government officials had met Hitler. Winston Churchill never met him and neither had Franklin Roosevelt. Chamberlain flew to Germany several times. He spent hours with Hitler. The men talked, argued, ate together and walked. Chamberlain believed what Hitler told him. Hitler gave him a double handshake

after all. But Chamberlain was deceived. Chamberlain was acting on the same assumption that we all follow in our efforts to make sense of strangers. We believe that the information gathered from a personal interaction is uniquely valuable. You would never hire a babysitter for our children without meeting that person. Companies don't blindly hire employees. They are interviewed. Their behavior, their demeanor is observed. Chamberlain and Hitler made a deal and signed it. Hitler took less than six months to break the deal. The puzzle of this book is, why can't we tell when the stranger in front of us is lying to our face?

To this end, let's look then at judges who have to make decisions about giving bail to defendants. A judge meets defendants face to face, looks them in the eye and tries to get a sense of who that person really is. A group of scientists from the University of Chicago using computers put judges to the test. They used the records of 554,689 defendants from New York City from the years 2008-2013. They looked at whose list of defendants committed the fewest crimes and turned up for their trial date while out on bail. The people on the computers list to be released on bail were 25% less likely to commit a crime while awaiting trial than the people released by the judges. The judges met the defendants face to face. What feeling did they get from the people in front of them? The computer only has what is on paper. The second puzzle is: How is it that meeting a stranger can sometimes make us worse at making sense of that person than not meeting them?

Tim Levine is a psychologist who studies why we are deceived by strangers. Levine's answer is called "Truth-Default Theory." In other words, we have a default to truth: our operating assumption is that the people we are dealing with are honest. To snap out of truth-default mode requires a trigger not a suspicion or a sliver of doubt. We fall out of truth-default mode only when the case against our initial assumption becomes definitive. We start by believing and we stop believing only when our doubts and misgivings rise to the point where we can no longer explain them away.

In the 1990s and early 2000s chances are you heard about Bernie Madoff. Madoff was exposed as a fraud. He was the mastermind of the biggest Ponzi

scheme in history. There was a lot of suspicion about what Madoff was doing. His returns did not go up and down with the stock market like they should have. He said he had “gut feelings” for when the market was about to experience a downswing. In Madoff’s case everyone defaulted to truth for years. Everyone except one man named Harry Markopolos. He was an independent fraud investigator. He started warning the SEC when it was a 7-billion-dollar scheme in about 2000. He came back in 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2008. Each time he got nowhere. People finally listened when the scheme got to \$50 billion.

In Russian folklore there is an archetype called the “Holy Fool.” The Holy Fool is a social misfit, eccentric, off-putting, sometimes even crazy who nonetheless has access to the truth. The Holy Fool is free to blurt out inconvenient truths or question things the rest of us take for granted. Every culture has its version of the Holy Fool. In Hans Christian Andersen children’s tale, it is “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” A king walks down the street in what he has been told is a magical outfit. No one says a word except a small boy, who cries out, “Look at the king! He’s not wearing anything at all!” The little boy is a Holy Fool. The tailors who sold the king his clothes told him they would be invisible to anyone unfit for their job. The adults said nothing, for fear of being labeled incompetent. The little boy didn’t care. The closest we have to Holy fools in modern life are whistleblowers. They are willing to sacrifice loyalty to their institution in the service of exposing fraud and deceit.

What sets the Holy Fool apart is a different sense of the possibility of deception. In real life, Tim Levine reminds us, lies are rare. And those lies that are told are told by a very small subset of people. That’s why it doesn’t matter so much that we are terrible at detecting lies in real life. Under the circumstances, defaulting to truth makes logical sense. If the person behind the counter at the coffee shop says your total with tax is \$6.74, you can do the math yourself to double-check their calculation, holding up the line and wasting your time. Or, you can simply assume the salesperson is telling you the truth because on balance most people do tell the truth. The Holy Fool is someone who doesn’t think this way. Statistics say that the liar and the con man are rare. But to the Holy Fool, they are everywhere. We need Holy Fools in our society, from time to time.

Harry Markopolos was the hero of the Madoff saga. But it is crucial to Levine's argument that we can't all be Holy Fools. That would be a disaster.

Levine argues that over the course of evolution, human beings never developed sophisticated and accurate skills to detect deception as it was happening because there is no advantage to spending our time scrutinizing the words and behavior of those around us. The advantage to human beings lies in assuming that strangers are truthful. What we exchange for being vulnerable to an occasional lie is efficient communication and social coordination. The benefits are huge, and the costs are trivial in comparison. Sure, we get deceived once in a while. That is just the cost of doing business. If everyone on Wall Street behaved like Harry Markopolos there would be no fraud on Wall Street, but the air would be so thick with suspicion and paranoia that there would also be no Wall Street. After exposing Bernie Madoff, Markopolos was so suspicious that people would be out to avenge his efforts that he locked himself indoors, heavily armed himself with guns and with a gas mask in case there was a gas attack on him while the rest of us went on about our business.

In addition to Default to Truth there is a second tool we use to make sense of strangers, transparency. Transparency is the idea that people's behavior and demeanor—the way they represent themselves on the outside—provides an authentic and reliable window into the way they feel on the inside. When we don't know someone, we believe we can make sense of them through their behavior and demeanor. Charles Darwin wrote on transparency and believed that our facial expressions are universal. Social Scientists sometimes like to test hypotheses in the Trobriand Islands which lie 100 miles east of Papua, New Guinea. The archipelago is home to 40,000 people. It is isolated and tropical. People living there fish and farm much as their ancestors did thousands of year ago. Their ancient customs have proven remarkably durable even in the face of the encroachments of the 21st century. The social scientists Jarillo and Crivelli have studied transparency for years. They started with head shots of people looking happy, sad, angry, scared, disgusted and neutral. Before going to the Trobriands they took their pictures to a primary school in Madrid and tried them out on a group of children. Trobriander and Madrid school children agreed most

on the happiness emotion but on everything else the Trobriander's idea of what emotions look like on the outside appear to be totally different from our own. They found the same results in different cultures. Expression of emotions is cultural. The transparency problem is the same as the default to truth problem. Our strategies for dealing with strangers are deeply flawed but they are also socially necessary. We have to make judgements in the criminal-justice system, in hiring processes, in selecting a babysitter. But we have to tolerate an enormous amount of error. This is the paradox of talking to strangers. We need to talk to them, but we are terrible at it.

Another interesting problem in talking to strangers is that some people are mismatches. We tend to judge people's honesty based on their demeanor. Well-spoken confident people with a firm handshake who are friendly, and engaging are seen as believable. Nervous, shifty, stammering, uncomfortable people who give windy, convoluted explanations aren't. In a survey of attitudes toward deception involving 58 countries around the world, 63% of respondents said the cue they most used to spot a liar was gaze aversion. This is nonsense. Liars don't look away. Levine feels that our stubborn belief in some set of nonverbal behaviors associated with deception doesn't serve us. The people we all get right are the ones who match, they look honest and they tell the truth. When a liar acts like an honest person or when an honest person acts like a liar, we're flummoxed. These people are mismatched. Bernie Madoff was mismatched. He was a liar with the demeanor of an honest man. Likewise, Hitler was mismatched. He fooled Chamberlain with his firm handshake. After spending time with him Chamberlain perceived him to be trustworthy and honorable.

What we can learn from this is that we should forgive people who are fooled. To assume the best in people is the trait that has created modern society. Those occasions when our trusting nature gets violated are tragic. But the alternative to abandon trust is worse. What is required of us is restraint and humility.

While Gladstone tells us how difficult and complicated it is to deal with strangers, Jesus says this is not an excuse. Jesus hung out with a lot of the wrong

kind of people, tax collectors, lepers, the blind, deaf and crippled, outcasts, the lost and women. With this mind we now look at the story of the Good Samaritan.

In response to a lawyer's question, Jesus tells the story of a man who traveled from Jerusalem down the Jericho Road and was attacked by robbers and left bleeding and dying. Along the road come a Levite and a priest who passed on the other side. In Jesus' day this was a scary road to travel—the stuff of horror movies. Jerusalem was 2500 feet above sea level and the trek was seventeen miles down a windy road to Jericho, which was 800 feet below sea level. The road was noted for the robbers and thieves who camped out waiting for unsuspecting travelers. Halfway into the journey the man falls into the hands of the robbers and is beaten and left for dead. A priest and a Levite both separately come upon the man and rather than stop to help, they continue on their way. They are too scared to stop and help. The Samaritan who did stop is the “other.” He is one of a despised people of the ancient Jews. They were the ones who lived on the wrong side of the tracks. They did not keep kosher laws and were considered unclean, almost dirty.

The Samaritan bandaged the man's wounds, placed him on his own donkey and took him to an inn. The word of inn in this case is not like the inn where Joseph and Mary couldn't find a room. This inn was top of the line. Not a Motel 6 but a five-star hotel, a Hilton. The Samaritan gave the innkeeper two coins worth at least two days wages to take care of him. He promises to give more if needed. He goes out of his way. He disrupts his plans and his schedule for a stranger.

Jesus then asks the lawyer which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robber? The answer of course is the Samaritan, but the lawyer can't even say the word. He says the one who shows mercy. The word neighbor should not be seen as geographical place. There should be no limits. All barriers disappear. We are neighbors to all races, creeds, skin colors, ranks geographical areas or educational levels. We should reach out to all human beings with love and compassion. Wherever there is a need we are challenged to respond in kindness and grace. The Jericho Road passes by our door every day.

One more example of talking to strangers. You may have seen a recent Otis R. Taylor column in the Chronicle. A year ago, a white man who lives in a 4- million-dollar home in Piedmont took in a black homeless couple to live in his in-law unit. It has been a difficult year for all three of them. Neighbors initially called the police when they saw people who didn't look like they belonged in the neighborhood. The homeowner expected them to look for jobs, but they were unwilling to work because they would have to give up their federal assistance which is their security. You can lose a job after all. There have been disputes over cleanliness especially about carpets. They felt he was disrespecting them. He worked long hours and travels a lot and they felt he is avoiding them. He was just trying to give them space. On the street it is survival, an existence that is physically and mentally draining. Homelessness breaks down minds, bodies and hearts. Recovering from that kind of trauma takes more than four walls. But those walls help, tremendously. The homeowner is committed to continue to provide housing for the two. He is talking to strangers. He is a true neighbor.

As for my granddaughter Gabby, after she was in Japan a few months I asked her if she worried about strangers in Japan. They after all look Asian and most do not speak English. Gabby told me that there were no strangers in Japan. I hope that is true.