

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
6 February, 2022

Unjudge Someone

A visit to the Department of Motor Vehicles is not my favorite errand. For those of you who have not had the pleasure, let's just say it's some combination of waiting in a seemingly interminable line only to arrive at the window and be told you don't have the proper forms of identification with you, even though you have presented the driver's license they issued and which they insist you renew. There's always a vague uneasiness that the uniformed security guards hovering around the edges might arrest you at any moment for a traffic violation you didn't commit or a parking ticket you never received and therefore didn't pay.

And so it was, anticipating pitched battle, that I finally made my way to the service window armed with a sack filled with papers — tax forms, my passport, my firstborn. And just then, across the way, at another window, I heard a voice asking, “May I give you a hug?” I heard it distinctly, I should say, but I couldn't immediately make sense of the words, since that was probably the very last question I expected to hear at the DMV.

I looked up and stared in complete astonishment as the woman behind the counter stood up, came around to where her customer was standing, and opened her arms. Suddenly, the entire room was infused with warmth and friendliness. Even the security guards seemed less menacing. The effect of the hug extended even to the person who was waiting on me, who took care of business in record time and sincerely wished me a good day.

Meanwhile. Kem was in her own DMV battle — and, alas, lost; she has to return with an original social security card and the witch's broom. But as we left, she said to me, “Did you see those two guys talking?” I hadn't, though I'd noticed as each of them had come in. One was white — short and built, crew-cut, hard-bitten, maybe in his forties — and the other was black — maybe in his 20s with twisted Bantu knots and bright red Nikes. Not two people I would imagine seated together in earnest conversation. But that would be a failure of imagination. They

had struck up a spirited conversation and were deep in it until the younger man was called to the window.

What happened? I have no idea. But I'm pretty sure it started with the hug, or maybe it started with the pandemic, reminding us of our loneliness when we are forced apart, reminding us that we really are all in this together.

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A photo of more people seated in seemingly unlikely pairs caught my eye. The caption says, "In Denmark, there are libraries where you can borrow a person instead of a book [and] listen to their life story for 30 minutes. The person has a title — 'unemployed,' 'refugee,' 'bipolar,' ... — but by listening to their story, you realize [just] how much you [shouldn't] 'judge a book by its cover.' This innovative and brilliant project is [now] active in more than 50 countries. It's called The Human Library."

Created in Copenhagen in the spring of 2000, its motto is "Unjudge Someone." On their website, they feature the "book of the month." January's book is a woman named Yoka. She was born to a Jewish family in the Netherlands, but when when she was two and a half, her parents gave her into the safekeeping of the Dutch resistance. "If you [harbored] a Jewish person in your home, you would go to the concentration camps as well, so people were always very scared around me," she says. "If there was any suspicion [on the part of] the neighbors, the Resistance would come and bring me somewhere else." Yoka lived in sixteen different places until she was five years old.

"No one talked about the war after it was over," she says. "Most people were too busy just surviving.... [And] if you told anyone you were Jewish, you might be the first to get caught if there [were] another war...." In addition, her father was virulently anti-Semitic — undoubtedly his trauma response and survival strategy. Yoka had no idea she was Jewish.

"Then, when I was seventeen," she says, "during a meeting, [a woman] asked who wanted to turn on the lights on Saturday, [when Sabbath-observant Jews don't work]. I [put up my hand] and told [her] I could do it. [She] looked at me and [said,] 'No, you can't; you're Jewish.' I was like, '[I'm Jewish]?"

From then on, Yoka began to piece together her story. And now, she shares it with many people, sitting across from them in The Human Library.

“It’s not about us ‘books,’” she says. “It’s about readers confronting their own ideas; ... our answers [to their questions] might help [them] to look at things in a different way, ... to qualify their opinions.... [We’re] all planting seeds, even if they don’t grow at the moment that we tell our readers something. The fact that they meet us and get a chance to learn from another person’s perspective will make it possible for them to change their mind at some point.”¹

Once you start looking for unusual pairings, for opportunities to have our minds blown and “Unjudge Someone,” they’re everywhere. When I started thinking about this sermon, I remembered a pre-COVID photo I’d saved of two guys seated together on the train, a high school student and a businessman with their heads close together in conversation. It had struck me as much for the image as for the caption. Miguel Munnlyn wrote, “The older gentleman in this picture noticed the younger one reading a book. [He] sat down and asked him questions about the book and what his next steps are as far as his education and [his] future. Then he took his information and offered him opportunities and [mentoring]....

“I share this because this is what ... needs to be done [among my brothers:] Black men holding each other down to better the next generation.... It was amazing for me to see this on my ... ride into work.... To those that see ... the bigger picture, this is for you.”

Going deeper, not only are unusual pairings everywhere, but many of them have changed the course of history: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, John Lennon and Paul McCartney — who met at the ages of 15 and 17, respectively, at the Woolton Parish Church Garden Fete. Yes, I said church!

And then there’s Bob Woodward and Mark Felt, also known as Deep Throat. In 1970, Bob Woodward was a lieutenant in his final year of Naval service, couriering packages to the White House. One night, after a long wait, he was greeted by an older gentleman — Mark Felt, an assistant director of the FBI. Bob Woodward, already planning to transition from military service to journalism, asked him for his card, thinking he might be a useful contact. And indeed, four years later, it was Mark Felt, ultimately the Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who uncovered one the most infamous scandals in presidential history. In clandestine meetings on the bottom level of an underground parking garage, he fed the story to Bob Woodward and his journalism partner, Carl

¹ Please see humanlibrary.org/book-of-the-month-holocaust-survivor/

Bernstein, revealing the Watergate scandal and leading to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

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Who in our lives might we “unjudge?” Who has crossed our path and changed it forever?

I kind of love not-knowing, actually. One of my favorite experiences of this started with the Ovation guitar owned by my friend, singer and songwriter Lucie Blue Tremblay, who generously let me play it whenever she was visiting Provincetown from her home in Quebec. I loved that guitar, I wanted that guitar, and that was definitely not going to happen on my salary. But on my 30th birthday, I opened an impossibly guitar-shaped box to find the coveted guitar. Who could possibly have given me this extravagant gift? There was a little card in the bottom of the box. It said, “Love, Provincetown.” “It’s from everyone,” explained a friend.

Walking down Commercial Street the next afternoon, streaming with joy, I looked into the faces of each person as they passed, and wondered, Did they help deliver this treasure to me? And the feeling didn’t last for days, or weeks, or months.... It has lasted for years.

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And finally, I love stories of the kindness of strangers who will never see each other again, but who stepped up in the moment to do something extraordinary.

Leslie Wagner of Peel, Arkansas, writes, “When the supermarket clerk tallied up my groceries, I was \$12 over what I had on me. I began to remove items from the bags when another shopper handed me a \$20. [‘O, it’s okay,’ I said, embarrassed.]

“‘Let me tell you a story,’ he said. ‘My mother is in the hospital with cancer. I visit her every day and bring her flowers. [When] I went this morning, ... she got mad at me for spending ... money on more flowers. She [insisted] that I do something else with [my] money. So here, please accept this. It’s my mother’s flowers.’”

Donna Morrie of Goldsboro, North Carolina, writes, “One evening, I left a restaurant just ahead of a woman assisting her elderly mom. I approached the curb and paused to see if my arthritic knees could climb it. To my right appeared an arm to assist. It was that of the elderly mom.”

Stacy Lee of Columbia, Maryland, writes “I saw a dress in a consignment shop that I knew my granddaughter would love. But money was tight, so I asked the ... owner if she could hold it for me. ‘May I buy the dress for you?’ [a voice behind me said. I thanked her but said I just couldn’t accept her gift].

“‘I was homeless for three years,’ she said; [‘I would not have survived but for the kindness of strangers.]. I’m no longer homeless; [things are much better for me now. And] I promised myself that I would repay [that] kindness.’

“[So] she paid for the dress, and the only payment she would accept in return was a heartfelt hug.”²

And Marilyn Attebery of Spokane Valley, Washington, writes, “Driving home in a blizzard, I noticed a vehicle trailing close behind me. Suddenly, my tire blew! I pulled off the road, and so did the other car. A man jumped out from behind the wheel and without hesitation changed the flat. ‘I was going to get off two miles back,’ he said. ‘But I didn’t think that tire looked [so] good.’”

I like to imagine the moment these unlikely pairs met each other — the mix of surprise and gratitude as the course of their lives was altered.

There’s one more story I want to share — the story of one man changing the lives of thousands of people he never met.

This is the story of Chinue “Sempo” Sugihara — the so-called Japanese Schindler, named after Oskar Schindler, the German factory owner who saved 1,200 Jews in the Holocaust.

Nathan Lewin’s mother made his father promise that if Hitler crossed the border into Poland, we would immediately try to escape. In September of 1939, Nathan, then 3 years old, was carried in the night through the forest to Lithuania. There, a Dutch diplomat told the Lewins that they would need a visa to travel. In July of 1940, they heard of a Japanese diplomat named Sugihara living in the city of Kaunas, sent to monitor German and Soviet troop movements under the guise of handling consular affairs.

The Lewins hurried to the consulate. With a Japanese transit visa, they would be allowed to take a train across Siberia en route to Japan. “Mr. Sugihara

² Please see rd.com/article/kindness-strangers/

did not hesitate,” says Nathan Lewin, now 85 years old. Mr. Sugihara didn’t ask his superiors what he should do, and when they specifically told him not to give travel documents to Jews, he did it anyway.

When the Russians invaded Lithuania, all diplomats were ordered to leave the country. Over the next month, Mr. Sugihara spent 20 hours a day writing some 2,000 visas for every Jewish person who showed up at his office. Famously, he continued to write them on the train platform as he was evacuated and, as his train pulled away, continued to throw visas out the window.

“He didn’t care if they were citizens of Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, or Poland,” says Nathan Lewin. They were, quite simply, human beings whose lives were at stake and who had to be rescued. It is estimated that Mr. Sugihara saved as many as 10,000 people.

Years later, when asked why he did it, Mr. Sugihara said, “It is the kind of sentiments anyone would have when [they] actually [see] refugees face to face, begging with tears in their eyes. [One] just cannot help but sympathize with them.... I knew that somebody would surely complain about me in the future. But I ... thought this would be the right thing to do.”³

After spending more than a year as prisoners of war in Europe, the Sugihara family returned to Japan. In 1947, Mr. Sugihara was fired for his actions seven years earlier. For many years, he lived an anonymous life. But in 1968, one of his visa recipients tracked him down. And shortly before his death in 1986, Israel’s Holocaust Memorial, Yad Vashem, honored Chinue Sempo Sugihara with the title Righteous Among the Nations. Today, descendants of those with Sugihara visas number between 40,000 and 100,000.⁴

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Beloved spiritual companions,

It can happen
at the Department of Motor Vehicles.
It can happen in The Human Library.
It can happen on the train,

³ Chinue “Sempo” Sugihara quotes are from Hillel Levine, *In Search of Sugihara: the Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked His Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews from the Holocaust*

⁴ Please see [washingtonpost.com/history/2021/01/27/chiune-sugihara-jews-holocaust-japanese-schindler/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/01/27/chiune-sugihara-jews-holocaust-japanese-schindler/)

at church,
in a parking garage.

Who has crossed our path
and changed it forever?
And what if it's a complete stranger,
an unlikely hero who risks everything for us?

Who in our lives might we “unjudge?”

Everyone.

We really are all in this together.