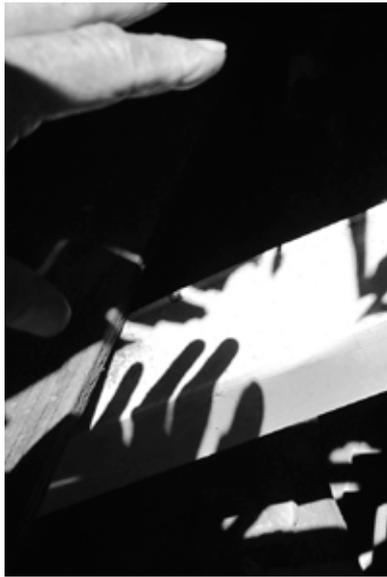


*READING FOR RELATION: WRITING FOR INSIGHT
DISCUSSION GUIDE*

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS



A Wising Up Anthology

Wising Up Press
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What can we discuss through the mysterious mediation of a book that we cannot do directly? Sometimes identifying with the multiple authors in a book, in all their variety, may open up new perspectives, allowing us to understand and explore something about ourselves and our own lives more fluidly and thoroughly than we would be able to in any other way. Hearing someone else do the same opens up fresh possibility of relation in the here and now and also with our past.

We also encourage readers to explore writing for insight, as the contributors to the anthology have done themselves. Using some of the essential dynamics and craft of creative story-making to reconsider our own lives and relationships can help us move safely from rigid scripts and roles to more complex and generous understandings that are unique to our own circumstances and temperament.

We also include some action prompts, since our imaginations are fed and our worlds expanded by our direct experiences, our own actions done mindfully, in a spirit of curiosity and hope.

INTRODUCTION

1. What themes in Heather Tosteson's introduction—*Why now?*, *Kindness and Kin*, *Strangers and Kindness*, *Estrangement: Stories about Them*, *Remembering Kindness*, and *Reciprocity*—speak most to you personally right now? Why?

Action Prompt:

Ask one person you know well and one person you don't know well to remember a moment of kindness given or received and then take their photograph. Ask them about what they are remembering.

Ask someone to take your photo remembering an act of kindness given or received. Thank them.

I. RE-EVALUATION/REVELATION

1. In Lowell Jaeger's essay, *Getting Where We Need to Go*, he comes to the conclusion that the essence of kindness is most crucially an attitude rather than a specific action. Do you think the teenage girl in his story would have understood the caring attitude of the man who gave her money for gas without the action?

Have you had an experience where someone did something that seemed kind but the attitude Jaeger describes was missing? What was the impact of the action on you without that attitude?

2. In *Sole Man*, Katie Bush describes how she gained a completely new perspective on her father by seeing how he interacted with a mentally ill woman who came to his office. From her description of her father, were you surprised to learn this side of his character?

Have you watched a family member you thought you knew well interacting with people outside the family in a way that showed a very different side of them? Did seeing this change the way you understood them? Interacted with them? Interacted with the outside world?

3. In Susan Austin's poem, *The Sweet and the Dark*, what is it that shifts Austin's attitude toward the drunk man?

Have you had a revelatory or re-evaluative moment like that in relation to someone you did not want to get near—when something was said or done that opened up a feeling of sympathy or empathy, making room for kindness? What was it that allowed that shift in your own attitude?

4. In *Omega*, Rebecca Taksel looks back at a time in her young adulthood when she was befriended by a stranger and his family, an act of generosity and kindness whose extent she fails to recognize at the time. Would you have been able to do what her chicano hosts did with such apparent ease? Would you have felt disappointed at her lack of awareness of what you were doing for her?

Have you had an experience in your own life where you received a great kindness that you did not recognize at the time? When you did recognize it, what did you do? Give belated thanks? Pay it forward?

Writing Prompt:

Describe an act of kindness that you received that you only recognized years later. Describe what led to your re-evaluation/revelation and what has followed it.

Imagine that what you have written is a letter. Who are you writing it to? As you change your audience, what do you leave in and out?

Action Prompt:

Notice when someone is being kind to you. Name the act as kindness and name its effects on you (e.g., "I feel supported, more confident, more accepted, freer, and have a desire to reciprocate . . ." or "I feel at a disadvantage, need to rebalance the relationship, distrust the motives . . ."). When it is appropriate, acknowledge the kindness. Notice when you feel it isn't appropriate to acknowledge the kindness. Why?

II. CROSS-IDENTIFICATION

1. In all the pieces in this section, the narrator identifies with someone who from the outside might appear very different. Did some of the cross-identifications surprise you? With which of these individuals would you personally find it easiest to identify—and why?

In your own life, have you been surprised at strong positive cross-identifications you have felt for strangers? Would other people who know you have been surprised you felt that way?

2. The various narrators in these pieces serve as our guides into these unfamiliar worlds, for example, the narrator in Jessica Naab's *Sinners on Sixty-Six*, who so ingenuously describes her own responses and inner questions about the men from the halfway house. To what extent did you cross-identify with the narrators? Where did you find their responses similar to your own? Where were their responses very different from yours?

In your own life, have you been able to serve as this kind of guide, helping people see similar characteristics in strangers who they at first feel are very dissimilar to themselves? Has someone served as a guide for you in this way?

3. Through this cross-identification, often with someone who is in a marginalized or stigmatized position in society, the narrator begins to define himself or herself differently. For example, Father Kus may appear to be showing beneficence to Marcelino, but Marcelino is also meeting some deep, perhaps unacknowledged needs of Father Kus. What might those needs be? How is Father Kus himself richer for the relationship? Can you see a similar dynamic playing out in Hostovsky's *Staring at the Blind* and in Naab's *Sinners on Sixty-Six*?

Have you ever been kind to a stranger who, you realize later, may actually be doing you a great kindness by allowing you to see a hidden side of yourself differently or more clearly?

4. In Laurie Klein's memoir, she is the subject of the cross-identification by Yai, while in Murali Kamma's story, Narayan ends up identifying with Steve, whose homosexuality at first creates a barrier between them. What inner re-evaluation has to take place for Klein to accept Yai's attentions as positive? What happens to Narayan as he makes a space in his values for Steve's own

acceptance of his homosexuality? *Have you ever had a stranger cross-identify with you in a way that made you uncomfortable at first? What was the reason for the discomfort? What insights did you gain from the experience?*

Writing Prompt:

Describe someone with whom you felt a strong cross-identification, in particular describe those qualities of presence, speech, action, sensibility, and appearance that made them so attractive to you.

Take the point of view of someone who feels a cross-identification with you that you at first found uncomfortable and try to describe yourself as they might see you.

Action Prompt:

When someone you know shows discomfort with a stranger with whom you can identify, take the opportunity to share what you find attractive and trustworthy in that stranger in a way that acknowledges the honest reservations of the person you know but also uses their familiarity and comfort with you as a bridge to that stranger.

III. HELP WHEN WE NEED IT MOST: ILLNESS & ACCIDENT

1. Which stories in this section resonated most with your own experience as either a giver or receiver of kindness? How? Which ones resonated least? Why?

2. Shireen Day's description of her daughter's accident forces her to re-evaluate what she has been taught about where and from whom she can expect to receive kindness and broadens her assumptions. Did the responses of the people at the accident or in the emergency room surprise you?

Have you had a personal experience of receiving kindness from strangers during an accident when you didn't expect it? Not receiving it when you did expect it? How have your expectations changed because of this experience?

3. The kindness shown in Norman Klein's *Vets* is primarily non-verbal, a gift of steady presence, a place to stay. How essential do you think this non-verbal quality of presence is essential to any act of kindness? *What are occasions when you have expressed or received kindness of this kind?*

4. In Patti See and Dorothy Pirovano's essays, we see a scale to kindness to strangers, both given and received, that is much larger than we are used to. *Would you be comfortable donating a kidney anonymously—or building a life that depends on the assumption that strangers are willing to pick you up every time you fall? Why or why not?*

5. The differences in Joel Wachman's memoir and Ken Staley's story give us a good way to explore how we as family members and communities respond to the greater need for interdependence that unavoidably accompanies aging. How do these structural differences affect how the interdependence involved with aging is understood, expressed, and responded to?

Which community, Staley's small, rural cohesive one, or Wachman's diffuse urban one feel most similar to your own? Which family structure, a small nuclear family like Wachman's or Staley's more diffuse, neighbor-as-family one, feels more similar to your own?

6. Wachman struggles especially with how to define his appropriate role as his mother ages. He disparages what he sees as his own failings of attention to his mother, resents her demands, and is in equal parts admiring and jealous of the more expansive compassion and acceptance the ER and nursing home staff, who feel like strangers to him, seem to provide her. Do you see him as he sees himself? Which of his behaviors meet your definition of a good son in his situation?

Have you had similar feelings, experiences when trying to take care of aging parents? How did your sense of your role as son or daughter change as your parents aged? If you yourself are aging, how has your role as a parent with your adult children changed as dependency begins to shift in the opposite direction? In either case, to adjust to these changes have you needed to expand your sense of essential community to include familiar strangers?

Writing Prompt:

Describe a time when you helped or were helped by someone during an illness or emergency from the other person's point of view. What did they see, what did they do, what motivated them? What did they take from that experience into other more mundane situations?

Write an inner monologue from the point of view of a hired or volunteer caregiver, nurse or aide, observing the dynamics of an unfamiliar family when one of the more difficult members of that family is sick or disabled. Write a dialogue of the caretaker's interactions with her own family that same day.

Action Prompt:

Change your habitual responses to emergencies and illness on one occasion. Either go to someone's assistance (if you usually stand aside) or don't go (if you usually do). What difference does your action make to the other person? To you? What do you have to tell yourself to assume and maintain the uncustomary role?

IV. WEAVING A NEW FABRIC

1. In many of the selections in this section, for example in Margaret Hasse and Linda Maxwell's poems and Jennifer Thornburg and Rick Krizman's stories, the kindness of strangers helps a young person develop positive expectations of the larger world, broadening their sense of themselves and of their place in the larger world. What are some of those changes in expectation and possibility?

Can you think of a consequential stranger in your own life who through a similar kindness expanded your own expectations of yourself and of the world around you?

2. In some of these stories the person showing kindness is taking a risk, for example the narrator in Alethea Eason's *Holiday Cove* and the women in Frank Haberle's *Road to Haines*. Why do they take that risk?

Have you ever put yourself out in that way? What encouraged you to take that risk? Did you see something in that person that others might not, which made that risk worth taking? Can you think of a time when someone did the same for you?

3. Through repeated small acts of kindness to relative strangers, over time and often without our noticing, strangers become communities, as Pauline Kaldas describes in *Among Neighbors*. Can you see similar processes at work in the stories of Krizman, Haberle, Eason, and Koppman and in Lowell Jaeger's poems? What sets this process in motion? What keeps it going? Is the ability to receive kindness as important as the ability to give it?

Have you had the experience of being surprised, over time, into a sense of community? What were some of the acts of kindness—on your part and on the part of others—that helped create this?

Writing Prompt:

If you have lived in your current neighborhood for a long time, describe some of the recurrent activities of your neighbors as if you were seeing them for the first time—when they get up or go to bed, what you hear them talking about, whether they work in their yards, greet their neighbors, greet you—and explore the ideas about the individuals and the community you might develop just from observing these habitual actions.

If you have recently moved somewhere, describe the unfamiliar activities of your neighbors as if you had known them for years, as if they create a reassuring, dependable refrain for your own song of life. Describe your own activities in the same way.

Action Prompt:

- Introduce yourself to a new neighbor. Repeat several times.
- Greet an old neighbor as if they were a new one. Repeat several times.
- Does your sense of community shift as you do both of these? How?

V. HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

1. In their poems, Jennifer Kanke and Wilderness Sarchild specifically take on the discomfort we feel at having limits to our kindness and a certain indefensible arbitrariness to its expression. In *Forgive Me Kenjanea*, Kanke also brings up impulsive unkindness. Where do these poems ring uncomfortably true to you? What are some of the expectations about kindness the poets have for themselves that they feel unable to meet?

Are there times in your own life when you have found yourself refusing to meet your own expectations for kindness, not experiencing or not acting on a kind impulse? Acting on an unkind one? How did you explain this to yourself? Did your expectations change or your self-estimation?

2. Indeed, how much is too much? In which stories did you feel too much was given? Why? At what point do you think the person giving should have stopped?

Even if you feel the giver went too far, can you imagine going just as far yourself? Have you had experiences in your own life where you gave more than other people thought was right? More than you yourself thought was right?

3. The stories in this section deal with scale. To some extent we resent a scale that dwarfs our own best intentions, so we say that this level of generosity is unnecessary, perhaps even detrimental. We ask ourselves what justifies it. The narrators in Johnny Townsend's *The Girl from Treponema* and Jason Ney's *Until It Hurts* are both extremely generous. Why do you think they each need to be this generous? Ney provides a religious grounding for his choices, but Townsend's narrator doesn't explicitly have this. Does he have some other inner imperative?

Without a philosophical, religious, or experiential imperative, would you be able to be generous at such a large scale yourself? Where does your own belief in the importance of kindness to strangers come from? Does that belief have a built in scale to it?

4. Often we feel that life is treating us unkindly, asking too much or failing us in ways that turn our natural instincts inwards, towards survival, and make us resist any external demands. Paradoxically, at times like this, finding we do have something we can give others can make us feel richer and more in charge

of our lives. The narrator in John Timm's *A Good Day at the Office* experiences this paradox. In his situation, would your response have been the same?

Have you ever had a point in your life when you felt you were on a downward spiral and found yourself spontaneously making a small generous gesture that returned a sense of optimism, inner resource and control to you?

Writing Prompt:

First, write a dialogue where someone is making an extreme, improbable request of someone else and the other person is meeting it. Include just the conversation, no description or stage directions.

Now, include the inner thoughts of both characters, also some stage directions. First, make the motivations, and consequences, exuberant and humorous, like Jana Zvibleman. Then make the characters thoughts more poignant, entitled and compelled, as in Jason Ney's memoir.

Action Prompt:

Overall, which of the selections in this book most affected your understanding of the importance of kindness between strangers at personal and broader social levels? Choose a stranger to share this insight with—in words or in actions (like gifting them with a copy of this book!).

<http://www.universaltable.org/libraryanthologiesiz/kindnessofstrangers.html>

