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Sydney can learn a thing or two about friendliness from New York

David Leser

I am standing in a hotel doorway on New York's Upper East Side and a perfect stranger asks me what I am doing in the city. I tell her I am here for my father's memorial and, without so much as a blush, she pulls me into an embrace and says: "I'm so sorry for your loss."

The following night I am in a bar in Midtown and as I stand to leave the man next to me beckons me to stop. "Your collar is all crooked," he says. "You can't go out like that." And for a minute or so he straightens my collar and fixes my jacket while his bemused girlfriend looks on.



New York City is very big and busy - but its people can also be surprisingly friendly. Photo: Matjaz Boncina

Two nights later my brother and I walk into a hamburger joint and as we make our way through the dim yellow lighting to the bar, a preppy-looking guy asks us who our favourite band is.

"The Stones," my brother replies.

"Oh come on man," he retorts. "The Beatles were much better."

And from that hoary contest the conversation quickly jumps to "What are you guys doing here? How long will you stay? Come meet my sister and her boyfriend". And as the night grows long six other groups rearrange themselves around the bar, regaling us with questions,

inviting us into their respective circles, wishing us well, and in the space of two hours my brother and I have received more good will from complete strangers than either of us can remember receiving from strangers in our own city.

OK, so New York is the great meeting place of the world, and perhaps we should get out more in Sydney. Except we do and it's never quite like this. Never so solicitous, nor open-hearted. Never such a combination of warmth, respect and courtesy from people we've never met before. On sidewalks, in elevators, shops, cafes, bars, restaurants, department stores.

Outside the traffic is roaring, the wind biting and the sky a battleship grey, but in the face of all this din and damp and surface toughness there is a remarkable kindliness.

"You are a beautiful man," says the homeless guy down in the East Village after he's asked me for money and received, to his utter amazement, more than a few dollars for his trouble. "Oh man you've made my Christmas. You have a good life, you hear me." And then he wraps me in his vagrant arms and blesses me, right there on Bleecker Street.

Bob Dylan once said that New York was "a city where you could be frozen to death in the midst of a busy street and nobody would notice". No doubt that's still true. Life is tenuous for many. But in New York you can feel a sense of belonging within minutes of arriving, whereas in Sydney it might take years to realise your rightful place. (Just ask Melburnians.)

Perhaps it's the physicality of a large urban space. The more naturally beautiful, the more prone its people to a certain brittleness or remoteness. Or, perhaps, it's the sense of kinship that comes only from terrible collective loss. Suddenly, there is an appreciation that life is instantly perishable, that all connections have a sacred potential.

That's what it felt like here in those brief, flower-filled days in Martin Place after the Lindt cafe siege. A pale facsimile of 9/11 to be sure, but bonds forged in the anvil of destruction.

I suspect, though, there's something else at play, something to do with the spirit of a place and the way we attune ourselves to each other and invite – or fail to invite – outsiders in.

When we travel we feel this contrast more clearly because we experience the world anew. We witness a rising moon on the other side of the planet and we see ourselves, and our own country, differently. We see wild promises, new possibilities, in each moment. We are more open to random acts of kindness.

The day after my return to Sydney I am driving through heavy traffic and see another driver about to pull out in front of me. I honk lightly and the driver gives me the royal finger, then tells me to "f--- off."

That's when I know I'm home.

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