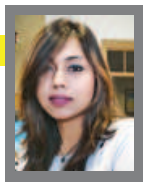
LIFE AS IT IS

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Hello, stranger! Why talking to unknown people makes my heart full



Although an ambivert, I fall more on the introvert side. I tend to lose energy when I socialise and gain energy when I spend time alone. However, there is one kind of social interaction that always uplifts me: talking to strangers! After talking to unfamiliar people, I almost always walk away with a smile and a wealth of information about a person whom I will likely never meet again, or who might one day become an acquaintance, who knows.

I have met strangers from different walks of life, and I think the conversations that I have had with them enriched me as a person. Because strangers do not belong to our family or social circles, they may have backgrounds and lifestyles very different from our own, and it is these differences that allow us to see the world through a different lens.

On the third weekend of October, I met and conversed with three people at a community farmers' market, where local farmers and small-business owners come together every Saturday for three hours to sell their goods and services.

Although I met Tanya, a beautiful woman from Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), on previous occasions while purchasing herbal teas, I never had a real conversation with her. That day, however, I asked her about her teas, how she sources the ingredients, and eventually, her personal life. When my husband and I mentioned that we were from Bangladesh, she smiled and said that her husband speaks Bengali.

We were taken aback.

"How? Is he from Bangladesh?" I asked.

"No, my husband worked as a translator for the United Nations," Tanya said.

In Ivory Coast, her husband worked as a translator for the Bangladesh Armed Forces peacekeepers. Tanya, too, worked for the UN when she lived there.

I always learn something new when I talk to unfamiliar people! Had I not started a conversation with Tanya that day, could I have ever learnt that a man from Ivory Coast lived in my city and spoke my mother tongue?

"If he were here, he would have spoken to you in Bengali," Tanya said.

At the same farmers' market, I had long conversations with two other women. One of them was very young, in her mid-twenties or less. Her name was Kay. She was born in Guangzhou, China, but moved to the US when she was a child. When I told her that I had family in China, she asked me where they lived and worked and if I had photographs of them. I opened my Instagram and showed her photos of my family. As she showed interest in my writing, I also shared with her my author profile on The Daily Star's website. In return, she shared with me her sister's blog, which writes on fashion and healthy living. When we bid goodbye, each of us carried a piece of the other's world.

The other woman I met at the market was Athena. She is half-Filipino, although I felt that she could easily pass for Italian or Latina.

Athena looks after the outreach side of her husband's chiropractic practice. She did a free assessment of my spine to show how stress affects different areas of the backbone. After exchanging a few sentences about spine health, we began to talk about our lives.

I learned from Athena that her parents met in Saudi Arabia, where her Filipino mother was a veterinarian, and her father served in the US military. They fell in love, and her mother eventually moved to the US, where she had family. They married and raised two daughters, one of whom is Athena.

I believe that every conversation with a stranger enriches me as a person. However, most of us hesitate to strike up a conversation with a person we do not know because we are either too shy or afraid of rejection.

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