

TEXT 2

David Sax is the author of the book *The Future Is Analog: How to Create a More Human World* (2022).

David Sax

Why Strangers Are Good for Us



Credit David Huang

One Saturday morning, I took my 5-year-old son to the playground. A few minutes into his “ninja training” regimen¹, he attracted a fan. The other boy was younger, but the plastic glint of my son’s dollar-store sword slicing evil from the air proved irresistible. He edged closer and mimicked his moves, until they began to play together, shouting “Ya!” in unison, kicking with the verve² of Rockettes³. I smiled at the child’s father on the next bench and made an effort at playground banter⁴, asking the boy’s age and whether they lived nearby. But after a few half-answers he pointed to the AirPods in his ears.

What could I do?

I picked up my phone and scrolled through the news. A fast-casual restaurant chain was experimenting with replacing its cashiers⁵ with “virtual cashiers” connected by video link from Nicaragua and paid around \$3 an hour. As I sat there, willingly ignoring and being ignored by the only other adult nearby, the story struck me as just another example of how modern life keeps us insulated⁶ from strangers.

Not so long ago, it was impossible to go through life without speaking, in some way, to a variety of strangers in your life: The bus driver, barista, security guard, receptionist, butcher, government

¹ routine

² begeistring

³ *the Rockettes*: dansekompani

⁴ (her) small talk

⁵ personale, som tager imod betaling

⁶ isoleret

clerk, store cashier and restaurant server were all humans who required at least the bare minimum of conversation. If you were at a playground a generation ago, halfheartedly watching some swing-set⁷ drama, ignoring the casual greetings of another parent would be extremely rude.

20 When I lived in New York City a decade ago, I couldn't spend 10 minutes outside without speaking to someone. That's the thing I loved about the place: how New Yorkers will kibitz⁸ and comment and carry on a conversation in line for pizza, on the sidewalk or in the subway; ask for directions or compliment a particularly awesome hat of someone they have never met, without any awkwardness. Today, you can spend a week in New York, shopping, traveling, eating and working, and never utter a sound to another human being, or even take your headphones off.

25 It shouldn't be this way. Engagement with strangers is at the core of our social contract. Most religious faiths instruct us to welcome the strangers we encounter, and there's good reason for this. If we engaged only with the people we knew, our world would be small. [...] Everyone you converse with who is not a biological relative – your best friend, neighbor, lover, spouse or even that chatty taxi driver from last weekend – was a stranger before you spoke to that person. [...]

30 Far from random human inconveniences, strangers are actually one of the richest and most important resources we have. They connect us to the community, teach us empathy, build civility⁹ and are full of surprise and, potentially, wonder.

"I've spent many years studying the people who are the furthest out¹⁰ of our social networks, and they really do add a richness to our life that we miss when we're not there," said Gillian Sandstrom, a senior lecturer at the University of Essex, whose research has demonstrated how the small, transactional¹¹ relationships we create by talking to strangers are important pillars¹² of our social and emotional well-being.

40 "We have all these kinds of people who populate our lives, who we aren't that close to and we don't share our deepest, darkest secrets with," said Dr. Sandstrom, who forces herself to speak to strangers every day, despite identifying as an introvert. "But they form this tapestry¹³ that when we're not there, our life feels kind of empty."

In some ways, our recent aversion¹⁴ to strangers is a byproduct of technological evolution. Sure, newspapers and magazines, cassette players and televisions were all potential distractions, but none of them fully normalized ignoring other people in the way that smartphones have. [...]

45 Then came the pandemic, and suddenly, each physical encounter with a stranger carried the potential of death. We were ordered to stay home, avoid public spaces and speak only within our trusted bubbles. We sought refuge¹⁵ in the distance that digital technology allowed us, watching movies, attending exercise classes and having meetings all without entering a theater, gym or office. The longer we hid inside, the fewer strangers we encountered. Our world grew inward and suspicious. [...] 'Stranger danger' [...] seemed to creep back into our present.

⁷ gyngestativ

⁸ småsnakke

⁹ høflighed

¹⁰ *the furthest out*: yderkredsen

¹¹ (her) kommunikative

¹² (her) fundament

¹³ (her) bagtæppe

¹⁴ modvilje

¹⁵ tilflugt

Strangers are intimidating for a reason. Even when they are not physically threatening, they can make us feel uneasy, inhabiting¹⁶ awkward silences. Digital technology promises to fill those silences with more hardware and software to insulate us from those we do not know [...].

55 But a future where coffee is served by robots is not an improvement on the coffee shop. It ignores a central purpose of the neighborhood cafe, a place for hot drinks *and* human interaction.

At the playground, I glanced up from my phone and saw my son and the other boy yammering away¹⁷ as if they'd known each other for years. The other father looked up too and seemed genuinely surprised at this instant relationship. He walked over, knelt and asked his son who he was playing with.

60 "I don't know his name," the boy said, as his tiny fingers clutched one of my son's Lego figures, "but he's my friend."

(2022)

¹⁶ føre til

¹⁷ yammering away: snakke løs