The Kindness of Strangers
by Robert Levine

Two images: First, as a 6-year-old boy growing up in New York City, I am walking with my father on a crowded midtown street. The rush of pedestrians suddenly backs up before me as people narrow into a single lane to avoid a large object on the sidewalk. To my astonishment, the object turns out to be a human being lying unconscious against a building. My father quickly points to a bottle in a paper bag next to him. Not one of the passing herd seems to actually notice the man -- certainly, none make eye contact -- as they robotically follow the makeshift detour. My father, who I look up to as a model loving, caring man, explains that the poor soul on the sidewalk "just needs to sleep it off." When the prone man suddenly begins to ramble senselessly, my father stops me. "You never know how he'll react." I later came to see these two teachings -- "there's nothing you can do" and "try not to get involved" -- as my anthems of urban survival.

Next, fast forward several years to a market in Rangoon, Burma (now Myanmar). I had spent the previous 12 months travelling in poor Asian cities, but even by those standards this was a scene of misery. Besides the inconceivable poverty, it is sweltering hot, ridiculously crowded and the wind is blowing dust everywhere. Suddenly, a man carrying a huge bag of peanuts calls out in pain and falls to the ground. I then witness an astonishing piece of choreography. Appearing to have rehearsed the scene many times, a half dozen sellers run from their stalls to help, leaving unattended what may be the totality of their possessions. One puts a blanket under the man's head, another opens his shirt, a third questions him carefully about the pain, a fourth gets water, a fifth keeps onlookers from crowding too close, a sixth runs for a doctor. Within minutes, the doctor arrives, and two other locals join in to assist. The performance could have passed for a final exam at paramedic school.

Rousseau once wrote that "cities are the sink of the human race." But as my experiences in New York and Rangoon made clear, no two cities are the same. Places, like individuals, have their own personalities.

In what cities is a needy stranger more likely to receive help? What sort of community teaches a citizen to withhold compassion toward strangers? As a grown-up social psychologist, I have spent much of the past two decades systematically exploring these questions.

My students and I have traveled across the United States and much of the world to observe where passersby are most likely to help a stranger. In each city, we have conducted variations on five different field experiments. Our studies have focused on simple acts of assistance as opposed to Schindler-like acts of heroism: Is an "unnoticed" dropped pen retrieved by a passing pedestrian? Does a man with a hurt leg receive assistance picking up a dropped magazine? Will a blind person be helped across a busy
intersection? Will a stranger try to make change for a quarter (or its foreign equivalent)? Do people take the time to mail a stamped and addressed "lost" letter?

We’ve found vast differences between places. In our most recent experiments in 24 U.S. cities, for example, Stephen Reysen and I found the highest helping rates in Knoxville, Tenn. and the lowest in New York City. In earlier experiments conducted in cities in 23 countries, the people of Rio de Janeiro were the most helpful and those in Kuala Lumpur were the lowest (though New York wasn’t far behind). The differences were often considerable. In the blind person experiment, for example, five cities (Rio de Janeiro, San Jose, Lilongwe, Madrid and Prague) helped the pedestrian across the street on every occasion, while in Kuala Lumpur, Kiev and Bangkok help was offered less than one-half the time. If you have a hurt leg in downtown San Jose (Costa Rica), Calcutta or Shanghai, our results show that you are more than three times as likely to receive help picking up a dropped magazine than if you are on the streets of New York City, Kiev or Sofia. And if you drop your pen behind you in New York City, you have less than one-third the chance of seeing it again than if you dropped it in Rio de Janeiro.

Our most important finding, however, is that the helpfulness of a city is systematically related to specific social, economic and demographic characteristics. In our U.S. study, for example, we found that more helpful cities had smaller population sizes, populations densities, more vital economies and slower paces of life. (For more details of these studies, see: "The Kindness of Strangers," published in American Scientist.)

Last July the first-ever conference on "The Science of Compassion" was held in Telluride, Colo. The notion of studying compassion scientifically may rub some people the wrong way. Is there anything to be gained by reducing humanism to numbers? Our studies indicate there very well might be. By understanding the conditions that bring out the best in people, we may be able to create more compassionate environments.

For more on mindfulness, visit this link. For more by Project Compassion Stanford, click here.