

## STRANGERS IN THE PLACE

### Learning to Be

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#### SELF-HELP AND MUTUALITY

Inculturation happens when faith and culture discover mutual relevance through life-enhancing dialogue. But *faith* cannot encounter *culture*: abstractions cannot communicate. Inculturation requires people of faith and people of culture for mutual encounter and transformation. Missionaries must encourage and support local communities to grow in response to grace. Believers cannot simply imitate other people or other churches: they must honor their own integrity. The universal church ex-ists *in* and *from* every local church. It is not the church of universal uniformity but of communion and diversity.

We are impelled away from familiar worlds and comfort zones, precisely in search of people's worlds. Those worlds existed before and independently of us, yet we can also discover meaning there. We leave our own center but do not actually reach another's; we move only as far as our mutual margins. Margins are where encounters happen. The margins are the true center for God's mission and our discipleship. We cannot completely leave our own world of meanings and values, and we are never completely assimilated into another world; to think so would be presumptuous or aggressive. Individually, we are simply not that relevant. But neither do we fall into a void; we encounter others.

We want to be accessible and relevant even though we are only marginal to others people's cultures. We are not completely irrelevant: we may be strangers in the place, but they may be a place for strangers.

#### FOREIGN AND STRANGE

To feel foreign or strange is never comfortable: we wriggle or fidget as we resist the discomfort. Perhaps we keep still, look inconspicuous, and minimize whatever would mark us as outsiders. When all else fails, we look for a familiar face, a familiar anything.

Curiously, some of us (typically those from self-styled First World countries or English speakers) tend to regard other people as strangers even when we are in their country. So who is a stranger, what makes someone a stranger, and what attitudes are associated with strangers? To see other through our eyes is to adopt a perspective; to see ourselves through others' eyes is more difficult but a corrective to our myopia; to see ourselves as others see us may be a gift of God.

Some people enjoy the unfamiliar, others do not. Almost everyone tries to gain control by making sense or creating order. Some people in unfamiliar situations ask questions, look for assistance, and expect the best. Others strike a pose, act independently, and fear the worst. They tend to be pessimistic and to

take a negative view of the people they meet. This can produce the poisoned fruit of xenophobia or racism.

The dictionary may be a refuge for tired minds, but it is also an Aladdin's cave of treasures. Under the entry of foreign we find words like *not pertinent, abnormal, alien, and strange*. Under *strange*, we note *peculiar, odd, and extraordinary*. Under *strange* we discover "a person not easily explained, an unfamiliar person, and any person one does not know." It is possible to consider *ourselves not pertinent, abnormal, not easily explained?* We may attach such labels to others; can we apply them to ourselves? This is important because, however we may appear to some others, there are times when, by definition, we are *strange* ourselves. Only when we acknowledge this we begin to glimpse the impression our behaviour creates. But we may never have been really vulnerable before others. We may always have found refuge in the security of a group of like-minded people. We may have been socialized to consider our values and attitudes as normative for everyone. We may never have sought the gift immortalized by Robert Burns. If so, we may be unable to find an appropriate relationship to those we encounter.

### DEFINITIONS AND BOUNDARIES

People position themselves and each other. They define their space and what it encloses. A definition is (by definition) a boundary. It marks the physical world or identifies the moral contours of virtues; thus the truth, beauty, duty and right become defines.

Those who disregard safety or who are impervious to pain might appear very courageous. People who do not distinguish friend from foe might seem very open-minded. But if such attitude persists, those who hold them may soon cease to exist: societies, cannot survive long unless they define or mark their own boundaries. People beyond our boundaries must be identified and labelled: they are *foreigners or strangers*. As such, they will be treated in culturally determined ways. Thus does the human species remake the world.

No two societies live in precisely the same relationship to the environment or to their neighbours. No two societies define their world in exactly the same way. Every society learns and takes for granted that its own definitions are valid and that its reality is really real. This is no problematic—until people step across the edge of their familiar world and find their definitions threatened and their reality judged idiosyncratic or false.

It is normal to find other cultures odd or unusual: compared to one's own, they often are. The opposite is just as true, but others may enter our world less frequently than we enter theirs. Unless we are careful, we may judge what is different or unusual to be inferior or bad, and what is familiar and our own to be good, even superior. Ethnocentrism is like a shadow: we cannot entirely shake it off. But those who leave their own world and enter the world of others must be careful that ethnocentrism does not become a stumbling block.

To abandon one's reference points completely is to throw away one's compass and walk on quicksand. It may seem trusting, but is so risky as to become imprudent and foolish. Yet if the compass swings widely and swimming is more appropriate than walking, to cling to compass and footwear would be both stupid and conceited.

It is normal to find other cultures confusing. That is because one who enters the world of another becomes the stranger. No society can afford to be unconditionally open to strangers. They do not belong. They are unfamiliar. They do not share the group's history; perhaps they do not share its values. People unwary of strangers have not always lived to tell the tale. There are not indigenous Uruguayans or Tasmanians today. For every forty Brazilian Indians before the arrival of the Europeans, thirty-nine were exterminated (from 1.2 million to 30,000). Native American Indians in the present United States were largely outflanked and crushed by strangers or poisoned by their dubious gifts. Relations between Hutu and Tutsi, Irish Catholic and Northern Irish Protestant, Serb and Croat, Palestinian and Israeli can deteriorate rapidly and shockingly. Trusting strangers can be very dangerous.

## **STRANGER AND HOST**

No giver can thrive without a recipient. No stranger can live truly alone. Giver and receiver constitute a pair. A stranger, too, is half of a human pair: a dyad. But who is the other half? No stranger actually exists in total isolation, for that would be an asocial existence; the stranger is a social category. A stranger exists as such by virtue of the host: to be a stranger is, curiously perhaps, to be in relationship to another. Here is our first ambiguity: host can mean one who offers *hospitality* but also one who is *hostile*. The Latin root *host-* ("stranger, enemy") and the root *hosp-* ( receiver of strangers, host ) are inextricable.

## **THE HOST**

### ***The rights of hosts***

Strangers are *other people*, we do not normally define ourselves as strangers, much less as strange. This is because most of us stand within our own familiar world, comfortable with ourselves and our idiosyncrasies. Only when we wander into an unfamiliar world of meaning do we discover that *the other*, occupying a comfortable vantage point in a familiar world of meaning, labels us as stranger. Strangers are defined by others: the latter are at home, in place; the stranger is away, out of place. We know about "home team advantage": home team *is host team*.

The person who holds the initiative is the host. The stranger, out of place, needing food, hospitality and safe passage, is immediately in debt to the host. It is appropriate and necessary that the stranger feel unsure, ill-at-ease, vulnerable: the stranger is not in control. Quick-witted strangers define to their hosts, allowing them to take control. Such vulnerability attests to the power of boundaries: within a familiar world we are at ease; beyond, we are literally out of place. Dislocated. As strangers should be sensitive to hosts' concern for their own safety, so host should take the fundamental human virtue of hospitality very seriously. But history records over trusting host and unscrupulous strangers; so host must try to retain the initiative and dictate the rules of encounter.

Assuming the stranger accepts a position of defence and courtesy, this allowing the host to be in control, stranger and host begin to communicate culturally, and interactions build on their developing understandings. The stranger, intruder-in-need, is subordinate; the host, potential benefactor, is superordinate. Stated differently, the host is one up, the stranger, one down. Here is a potential relationship, but one built on unequal reciprocity.

### ***The duties of hosts***

Much people are just not used to being strangers and resist being dependent or vulnerable; the initial interaction will feel stifling and unacceptable. Some people bridle at the idea of putting themselves in the hands of another; perhaps they feel they might be exploited. This may be due to individualism and self-sufficiency. But sadly it misses an essential point about the host in relation to the stranger: the host must remain—both literally and figuratively – the host.

Even before any stranger arrives, hosts already have a sense of responsibility. Their responsibility as *hosts* may be among their most sacred duties.<sup>4</sup> Despite the risks, the human species wants to make friends. The very language of strangers is informative.

In English the dyadic term *host* can be paired with stranger, but equally well with *guest*. But in English stranger and guest are not equivalent. They sometimes denote two very separate categories with very different sets of expectations. We may think of a stranger as someone with no real identity, and certainly not as a friend. A guest may be much more familiar, someone we know and entertain freely. The fact that we categorize strangers differently from guests indicates that we also treat them differently. Language categorizes our world, and our categories assume an almost objective status.

In many languages the word for stranger is the word for guest: the lexicon does not have two different words. A “stranger” therefore should be treated as a “guest”. A guest is simply someone one knows but may be someone one does not (yet) know—but who nevertheless warrants preferential treatment. The dyad or relational pair in such societies as these is *host: guest/stranger*.

Treating a stranger as a guest confers social status on the stranger. It gives the stranger an identity, transforming anonymous outsider into named participant. The stranger does not become an outsider but is brought across the boundary that previously separated stranger and host: the rules may be unwritten and even unformulated, but people do not treat others in a random or ad hoc fashion. If strangers are well treated, the society has developed this behaviour pattern and maintained it over time through socialization patterns. Where hospitality is taken seriously, every host bears the weight of responsibility. It takes a host to make a guest, but it takes a stranger to make a host.

### ***The expectations of hosts***

As people move in and out of each other's worlds, several questions arise. Do strangers show adequate and genuine deference to their hosts? Do they willingly acknowledge their host's authority? Do strangers allow themselves to be appropriately positioned as strangers according to the legitimate rights of

hosts? Or do they try to seize initiatives, to make their own expectations clear, even to make demands? If so, they are refusing the role of stranger. They are impeding their hosts from claiming their own rights, undertaking their duties, and offering hospitality. Strangers may rationalize their own behaviour, claiming virtuous independence or respectful self-sufficiency. They may show ostentatious humility or naively protest that they do not want to impose. But if they fail to allow the other to be host, they give offence and show great disrespect; worse, they sow seeds of confusion wherever they pass.

Being a stranger is not easy; but is necessary if people are to succeed in crossing boundaries and discovering new relationships. To be strangers willingly is to respect the cultural rules, to defer to our hosts and allow them the common courtesy of moving us between categories. It is impossible to move ourselves across the threshold of another culture, except by aggression. That is the responsibility and the right of those into whose worlds we hope to enter.

A stranger must be sensitive to the context, discovering what is appropriate. In principle, that is whatever meets local conventions, whatever makes sense within this particular world of meaning. Strangers have no right to dictate what is appropriate: they are outsiders, perhaps guests, certainly strangers. They must learn how to behave rather than jump to unwarranted conclusions and behave as barbarians. Conventions in the host culture may be as different from one's own as the local language is different. But cross-cultural communication is possible if both parties respect and commit to the process.

Hosts have obligations and legitimate expectations. One reason strangers may feel ambivalent about their host's responses is that the host are testing their responses. There is an element of cat-and-mouse behaviour as a host seeks to control the situation and determine whether the stranger acquiesces. Unless the host's expectations are met, the stranger may never move beyond the most preliminary stage of encounter.

### ***The ambivalence of hosts***

Hosts will somewhat be apprehensive of strangers, even when treating them like guests. Treating them like guests may mitigate any possible aggression, but the issue goes beyond potential aggression. From the perspective of those who define them, strangers are not like us. In short term at least, because their behaviour is not fully understood, they are not always seen as consistent or totally comprehensible.

It makes good sense for host to treat strangers rather formally as they try to get their measure. Initially, host may be ambivalent about strangers, the more so if they are several. Strangers are unknown. They may bring gifts and have access to resources, yet their motives are hidden. They may be dangerously powerful. Interaction is likely to demonstrate some of this ambivalence, which is entirely understandable. In due course, ambivalence will resolve itself into acceptance unless it hardens into rejection.

Every missionary is a stranger. Some of us are familiar with being "homecomers" --- returning to familiar loved ones who welcome us warmly and treat us with unconditional acceptance. But strangers are not homecomers and cannot expect to be treated as such. We must be prepared to be strangers; we go into unfamiliar places to be among unfamiliar people. Strangers are

welcomed with formality rather than unbounded warmth. This is the price for hospitality, which is itself the basis of relationship. Without relationship there will be no new communities. Without trust there will be no relationship. Without hospitality there will be no trust. But unless we approach as strangers, there will be no hospitality, for hospitality is the welcome appropriate for a host to extend to a stranger.

## **THE STRANGER**

To become a stranger effectively and with dignity entails two unfamiliar processes. First, the learning process that transforms us as we encounter a new reality. This involves both *understanding* and *standing under*: the former, the familia absorption of external information; the latter, the willingness to be absorbed into another world, even if one does not fully understand it. The second process required of us as strangers is the suffering process that allows us to grow as we negotiate the necessary discomfort and distress. This involves both risk and trust.

Failure to learn and to be open to new experiences will mark us all as stubborn, ill-mannered, and therefore untrustworthy. Yet overeagerness may mark us as gullible and imprudent. True respect for the host culture- and willingness to risk and to trust- is always likely to make us comfortable and may require compromise. We face the paradox and the pain of cross-culture encounter. We want to help people, yet we are infants in many ways. We want to be vulnerable and trusting, yet we must not compromise our integrity. As we guard ours, we must respect theirs; to do any less is to fail at a basic level.

### ***The stranger as receiver***

If stranger can be prepared to be unprepared (unsure, unfamiliar), they will have less reason to worry about hiding their ignorance. They must gradually learn to accept hospitality: it may not come easy, and it takes place as life goes on. Hospitality is culturally determined and shaped; strangers cannot anticipate it. They will be caught unawares by the expectations and habits of the hosts. Unless they are willing to change some attitudes (to personal hygiene, privacy, eating and drinking, and so on), their host will be unable to classify them, they will remain anomalous.

Strangers need a strong sense of personal identity; they must be rooted yet resilient. Otherwise they will do one of two things. They may compromise totally, which their host certainly do not expect, since part of stangers' attraction is precisely their quaintness and otherness; their strangeness. Or they will remain slaves to their own Western habits—of dress and demeanour, food and friendship, housing and hospitality.

A stranger cannot *demand* legitimation (community approval). It is the hosts' right to accord this when appropriate. It depends on the stranger's credibility, which likewise cannot be foisted on the community. Yet without legitimation and credibility the stranger remains peripheral, distant, and not socially significant.

Neither legitimation nor credibility is automatically conferred. Time must pass; privacy may be invaded; vulnerability may be probed; some confusion

and isolation will be felt. In the end it still does not depend on the stranger alone but on the progress of relationships. Somehow the stranger must be grafted onto native stock. But before this can happen, the surrender of control, the experience of cognitive dissonance,<sup>8</sup> and the exposure to the scrutiny of the community (“culture shock”)<sup>9</sup> must take place.

### ***The stranger as resource***

Highly individualistic people believe that independence, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency are cardinal virtues. To avoid owing anything to anyone, they acquire every imaginable machine and gadget. Some may trumpet their willingness to lend. But other people, no less individualistic, are just as determined not to borrow or to become indebted; thus, generosity is not actually tested. Such attitudes actually create barriers, cognitive or ideological if not actual, because they nurtured by an ethos of competition rather than collaboration. Individualism and competitiveness are not benign and can easily turn into xenophobia. Strictly, xenophobia indicates fear of strangers (or the other), but may express itself in distrust or disregard. Our capacity to distinguish and define, to stereotype and to stratify may be understandable; but however we rationalize negative attitudes to outsiders or to the other, they run contrary to cultural, not to mention evangelical, imperatives.

Societies need outsiders, and the gospel need to embrace everyone. Otherwise culture stagnates or collapses under the weight of their own hubris (or are destroyed by outsiders), and Christians become complacent and selfish, betraying the very gospel they preach. At the very least, every group needs to find mates beyond its own members. Apart from so-called marriage by capture, this produces some self-interested alliances with strangers. Strangers may always be ambiguous but are never totally irrelevant. Potentially, they are a vital resource. Strangers may need to be turned into allies, but if a group's interests warrant it, the necessary process can and will be undertaken.

### ***The stranger as alien***

Given the human capacity for setting boundaries and limitations, a total stranger may be perceived *initially* and *primarily* as an alien. If a group lives within a strong, bounded microcosm, what is outside is also unknown, unfamiliar, and therefore alien; and the stranger comes from the outside. The less known about strangers or their origin, the more likely will bizarre properties and habits be projected onto them. This convention underscores the divide between *us* and *them*.

Whatever a group may do to accommodate and transform unfamiliar strangers, they first perceive them as alien: strange and unfamiliar. Historically, some strangers have never been transformed because the potential hosts have not really engaged in relationships with them: hosts have thus *not* transformed strangers. At other times strangers may be kept at the edges of society and hounded – or perhaps tolerated or used in some contractual ways; yet they are treated as objects *because* perceived as alien and by definition *not-one-of-us*. Unless people acknowledge others to be like themselves, they will be unable to treat them as such. Low-caste, and particularly no-caste or *outcast*, people of India are a case in point. The lower

their status, the more powerless they are to become acceptable to higher castes. Like nonindentured slaves, they are used and abused by others. They are not treated as human beings (*us*) but as aliens (*them*).

In Pakistan I was taken by a group of missionaries to meet some of the local people called the Marwari Bhil. They are of Hindu stock, living in a Muslim state. They are not even part of an official caste: socially the lowest of the low. There are some Punjabis, also originally from India but members of the lowest caste, the sweepers. A few of these have become Christian. Yet they look frown on their Bhil neighbours and cannot yet see how un-Christian this is. When we visited the Marwaris, they were delighted and very hospitable. They put us at our ease and fed us with their simple food. They said that we (the missionaries) treated them as human beings, unlike everyone else in Pakistan. For me this was a profound encounter that left an indelible impression of how *us* and *them* can become *we* and how *we* can become fractured into *us* and *them*.

If we who consider ourselves benign, compassionate and non-threatening have suffered as strangers, who should understand victims of xenophobia, people categorized as aliens and stripped of their identity and human dignity. But we might also feel for those who are xenophobic: it is not always realistic for strangers to expect to be welcomed unequivocally and magnanimously. Those who treat others as alien and strange often do so because they cannot relate to them or feel threatened by them. Until such a situation is changed, their alien status will continue to work against them. Missionaries are sometimes in unenviable positions, but they also may have great potential.

Some missionaries, treated as alien, might be able to withdraw and return home. Those determined to stay may be reduced to frustration, anger or depression. Better, in many ways, for the host to take the initiative (to assimilate or expel) than to leave a stranger in a liminal state, indefinitely marginal. This would lead to stagnation and social and spiritual death. Fortunately, because stranger is a social category and part of a dyad, the passage of a stranger can be charted, and strangers can take heart. But a word of warning: when considering the stranger as an alien some might respond, "Not me!" Some strangers resist the categorization and refuse to be seen as problematical. If they are also missionaries, they have some serious work to do. They need to learn to live in the transitional status of alien, and they certainly need to become alerted to the plight of others who live permanently in that condition.

### ***The stranger as guest***

Finally we are on more comfortable ground: most of us respond well enough to be treated as guests. But there are serious implications here: when a stranger is being treated as a guest, some in the local community is probably being deprived. The guest's convenience is the community's inconvenience. This is no bad thing: it is the cost of openhanded hospitality. But hospitality is not limitless; the smiles on the faces of the hosts will be strained after a relatively short time. Guest need to be able to read the signs.

Because the guest is a stranger, it is not upto the guest/stranger to refuse hospitality that betrays the desire to control. The guest must be gracious but sensitive to the possibility of overstaying the welcome. To approach the role of guest with a self-important attitude is to insult the host and to demean the process. This is no basis upon which to announce a gospel of service, ministry and respect for persons.

An exception to prove the rule: I had been living in West Africa for several months. The paramount chief had welcomed me warmly, though I knew him to have no intrinsic interest in Christianity. The paramount chief has a house or hut in each village of the chieftaincy, or else a room will be prepared when he arrives. Each village traditionally gave a woman as a wife to the chief. But if the chieftom was large or the chief past his prime, the designated woman might remain in her own village.

Once, when I was in a remote village, the hut designated as the paramount chief's was provided for my accommodation. But so, too, I discovered, was the chief's wife in that place. The chief's hospitality was evidently quite extensive. When I came back to my room after a service, a smiling, toothless, and somewhat self-conscious woman offered her personal hospitality. It seemed appropriate for me to decline, so I thanked her for the thought and bade her good night in a rather loud stage whisper for everyone's benefit.

Strangers, even guests, have no absolute rights; the initiative belongs to the host. To be a guest can be delightful, affirming, and the preamble to developing relationships and mutuality; but it is also delicate. Every authentic stranger *must* learn to be a guest, and not simply as a means to an end. An acceptable guest can be converted or transformed by hosts into an appropriate long-term stranger. But whoever does not learn to be a guest will never become relevant and worthy of trust.

### **ASSIMILATION OF STRANGERS**

To be a host is demanding. A host must modify certain attitudes and expectations in order to treat the stranger graciously while retaining control. To be a stranger is no less demanding: a stranger must modify certain attitudes and expectations in order to treat the host deferentially while not becoming servile. Every stranger must construct a world of meaning from a world of puzzlement.

Anthropologists caution us: a vulnerable stranger may adopt a rigid attitude to the hosts and become too serious and withdrawn. However understandable this may be, it marks the stranger as inflexible, formal and difficult to assimilate. Stranger and host both aspire to some measure of assimilation, but this is delicate because each is wary of the other's expectations and likely to transmit ambiguous signals.

We previously noted that three obligations are key to unlocking cultural meetings. Now we discover three stages of assimilation. These stages are not totally separable and may not clearly follow in sequence. It may not be easy to

specify them in advance as to interpret them in retrospect. But they can be named: a preliminary stage, a transitional stage, and a stage of incorporation.

### ***Preliminary***

Initial contact is characterized by formality, hesitation, and tentativeness. The intruder wants to be accepted and the host does not want to be outflanked. Certain markers indicate to everyone the preliminary nature of the interaction. Conventionally there is an introduction, preceded by the announcement of the stranger. The ritual scrutiny of the stranger follows, probably with pointing, touching, stroking, poking, searching, observing and commenting. There may be laughter and some embarrassing moments as the stranger is assessed and compared with more familiar points of reference. But the clearest indication of the preliminary nature of the interaction relates to time: the stranger is kept waiting or hanging around, and there seems to be a great deal of time wasting: this helps establish that the host is in charge. The more the stranger tolerates and even encourages this, the more likely he or she is to be gradually assimilated. But it is not always easy, and often very tedious for efficient, time-based people.

Anyone new to a cross-cultural situation knows that time can hang very heavily and it is not easy to keep frustration at bay. One must learn to relax and not become agitated. Agitation is contagious, and we should not make our host ill at ease. Fortunately, relaxation can be just as contagious: if we take our cue from our relaxed hosts, we contribute greatly to the well being of all. If we cultivate a relaxed air, we help our hosts relax, too. But this can be a real test of our resilience.

### ***Transitional***

Time passes; this is as necessary as it is inevitable. Gradually, and assuming the stranger is not despised or ejected, attitudes will change. Formal acts of hospitality and kindness begin to diminish. The stranger may sense some cooling off on the part of the hosts. What was relatively structured behaviour now becomes frustratingly unpredictable, changeable, and even random.

As the transitional or liminal (limen, "threshold") stage is reached, the stranger may be treated very casually or even left to manage alone. But the casualness or randomness is only apparent; the transitional period is by definition inconsistent and necessarily confusing. The stranger is being brought across a threshold and is no longer completely outside (stranger) nor completely within (host). The threshold is neither in nor out and therefore a powerful symbol of betwixt-and-betweenness. Crossing the threshold marks the beginning, waiting at the threshold allows for more mature decision making or reminds people that a boundary is about to be crossed, a new encounter about to take place.

It is important that the stranger have the flexibility, trust, and perseverance to remain committed to the process, instead of allowing frustration or anger to have full expression. This may be very confusing.

Characteristics of the transitional phase may include some proffering and acceptance of gifts, some reciprocity but no firm commitment, some mutual modification of attitude and status between the parties. Neither stranger nor

host is entirely happy or comfortable, but neither wishes to abort the process and each is questioning some basic assumptions about self and about the other.

In a sense, the whole of any meeting between two persons or two groups, from the same or different cultures, is transitional, since there is always call for personal and mutual reappraisal. Circumstances may warrant the indefinite delaying of commitments. But human associations may also mature and pass beyond the liminal, as people settle into a committed relationship. Insofar as they do so, we can identify the third phase of a social interaction: incorporation.

It had been months. Months of knowing whether I was really welcome or merely tolerated. Months of oscillating between receiving wonderful hospitality and effective abandonment. I did not know where I was with the local people. Sometimes I felt certain that I had made the initial transition, only to fall back to a feeling of alienation from the people I had come so far to serve.

One day an old lady walked into my modest house at the edge of the village. She knocked on the door and I answered. I beckoned her to come inside, and she crossed the threshold. Opening a cloth she held in her hand, she revealed three fresh eggs. I thought she wanted to sell them, and I remember thinking that I really did not want them. I also knew she could not afford to give them to me. But that was what she had come for: to make me a gift.

I was deeply touched by her simple yet profound kindness. Something told me that this was more than a token gift; it was a sign that I was acceptable to the community. Months of uncertainty seemed to melt as I received her gift.

### ***Incorporation***

If some level of incorporation is achieved, the relationship will be modified. Now there is spontaneity and trust, very different from the previous ambivalence and inconsistency. But the transition is not inevitable.

Sometimes the incipient relationship simply crumbles. Incorporation always depends on mutuality, but even an incorporated person is not structurally equal to the host. The host is always superordinate. Unless the stranger/guest acknowledges this by appropriate attitudes, incorporation cannot occur. The incorporated stranger *remains a stranger*, at least for a long time. In Europe a person who moves into a rural village continues to be referred as a stranger after thirty years or more. Sometimes even their grandchildren--- who, like their parents, have been born and raised there—have been known to be called strangers. What expectations can a stranger reasonably entertain? Acceptance by the host is not *carte blanche*: the stranger is still subject to the rules of hospitality as mediated by the host. The stranger/guest is not strictly free and must remember the rules of precedence and the respect due the host. Another paradox: if the stranger wants to remain free and not become beholden, incorporation is actually not desirable. If the stranger wants to remain indebted and perhaps move to a gift-exchange relationship, mutual indebtedness must actually be sought.

Some incorporation without total absorption or assimilation is the most any outsider can hope for. But unless long-term strangers are working through the

transitional phase and toward deeper incorporation, they will not receive credibility and will fail to become relevant to the group. Any long-term plans the stranger may have, based on the assumption that they are relevant, will come to nothing.

### **AMBIVALENCE OF STRANGERS**

The role and status of stranger are inherently ambiguous, and every stranger will feel somewhat confused and unclear. Since some people seem congenitally indisposed to confusion and unclarity, some strangers instinctively try to manipulate situations and restore some order and control. The more they struggle, the less gracious they appear. The less gracious they appear, the more difficult life becomes for everyone. The stranger's ideas of courtesy, etiquette and graciousness may have to be revised.

What should stranger/guest do when offered excessive hospitality? What should they do when cast in the role of receivers? What should they do when cast in the role of honoured person?

Trekking from village to village, I found it necessary to travel in a group: there were books, bedding, a camp bed, and toiletries to be carried, sometimes food. I rarely knew the way. Schoolboys or youths were usually happy to accompany me even though it meant a long walk with a load on their head. But they were wise: they knew that when I arrive at a village, I would receive hospitality. They knew I could not eat nearly as much as I would receive. They knew there would be plenty for them.

Sometimes the trek meant a day off from school. Sometimes they would have relatives in the village. Some of them were just good-hearted companions. But all of them knew there would be food. One thing a receiver or guest can do is to be a medium for redistribution. Redistribution can go a long way to making friends and building community.

Hosts may be imprisoned by their own hospitality. A host's behaviour is not spontaneous but governed by convention. The host expects the guest's response to be constrained by the same conventional rules. Initially, the guest will be indulged; this is a mark of hospitality. But generosity is also a language: it says that the host can afford to be lavish, wishes to be excessive, and will impoverish the host community as a visible sign of respect. The first obligation of the guest is to learn to relax and let this happen. The guest's discomfort is no reason for a protest or attempt to turn the tables. The host is in charge; the guest is not.

But conventional rule of hospitality do not operate indefinitely. This will bring some relief for the guest, and certainly for the host. If an insensitive guest continues to drain the community's resources, early welcome will quickly turn sour. The guest must be learning to read the signs: the formal and indulgent phase is coming to an end, and the guest is now being moved from the initial phase into liminal or transitional phase.

We emphasize that the host needs to be in control. The host has a great deal to lose if a guest seizes the initiative. A stranger may be treated with generosity

and preferential treatment, but such openhanded hospitality may leave hosts vulnerable to exploitation. On the other hand, it may be the host who has an eye for the main chance: if a guest is treated well, the host community may benefit from the host's gratitude. The relationship between the two may be unclear as each seeks to show respect yet exploit the situation. Thus, a diligent stranger may find an opportunity for advancement. There are many examples of host treating strangers with conscious indulgence, and strangers in turn moving rapidly from the periphery towards the center of power and influence.

Thousand of Chinese were brought into Hawaii as indentured slaves and labourers in the early nineteenth century. By dint of industry, quite ambition, support from the extended family, and opportunity, some achieved the status of entrepreneurs and politically powerful figures in a couple of generations.

Many Pakistani people who moved to England in the past couple of generations become shopkeepers and worked long hours and everyday; and some became millionaires. Such upward mobility, while admirable in many ways, may give pause to hosts when faced in the future by apparently helpless strangers. They may fear that if they are too welcoming, they may live to regret it.

### POSSIBILITIES OF STRANGERS

Reflecting on the social identity of the stranger, we notice that it is not always negative. What advantages might there be? Here there are seven possibilities to conclude these reflections.

#### *Sharing Histories*

What do strangers and host know of each other? They may desire to bond and commit themselves to each other, but they are ignorant of each other's pasts. True stranger has no common experiences. They do not understand each other's socialization processes. They do not know about the social function of *significant others, legitimators, or peers*. Nor do they understand the distribution of power and authority. Initially they do not even know experientially whether they share a common humanity. But they must determine this if cooperation is to be built up.

The history of human contact between indigenous groups and strangers is uneven. Travelers' tales (especially after the Middle Ages and into the era of European discovery in the sixteenth century) sometimes narrated encounters with fantastical beings who walked upside down or appeared grotesque. Sometimes the visitors attributed subhuman features to the local people. One recalls stories of cannibals: the word comes from Arawak in the West Indies, and cannibalism was alleged by the Spanish to characterize the local people. But there are stories from an earlier age, when people were more prone to assume that strangers were human like themselves. If people think of others as fundamentally different, they tend to demean or even demonize them. One party's air of social superiority may metastasize into an air of moral superiority, spreading the cancer of xenophobia.

From stranger's perspective, it is important to know something about the host and their lives: the stranger is dependent, vulnerable, outnumbered. Yet if the host knows virtually nothing about the stranger, significant problems also arise. It becomes almost impossible to interpret all of the stranger's reactions. It also becomes difficult to locate the stranger appropriately within the world of the host. But unless the host community succeeds in fitting the stranger into the existing social framework, the latter will be unable to establish a credible identity.

Despite such dangers, host and stranger can, given the opportunity, share their respective history and experience. Each can illustrate and explain their behaviour and perhaps belief. Such sharing presents an opportunity for forging a common agenda. At least it allows a host community to place the stranger on its agenda, however peripherally.

The history and experience of the host and stranger are different: each must resist the temptation to claim superiority. People with different histories approach problems from different perspectives, and this can prove, mutually beneficial. The possibility of sharing histories and perspectives is the possibility of reaching new levels of cooperation.

### ***Pooling resources***

Every local world yields local resources that can be harnessed to deal with local problems. A stranger comes from another world. The stranger's resources may not exist in the host's world. The stranger's resources, including explanations or approaches, may not always make sense to the host. But every local world subsists within the global world, and every global world has problems in common with every other local world. Resources from different world can be carried to new worlds, and new solutions to old problems can be found. The stranger's resources are not necessarily better than those in the local world, but they are different. Different approaches, solutions, and wisdom can be shared to mutual advantage.

Driving along a rock-strewn road in West Africa, I blew a tire for the second time in a few miles. There was no other spare. I was fifteen miles from my destination; fifteen miles from the opposite direction was the nearest garage. The car came to a stop, miles from anywhere. Yet within minutes a handful of men had congregated around the car. The problem was obvious to all, but I could see absolutely no solution. The men jacked up the car and without consulting started removing the flat tire. As I watched and wondered, they carried it into the bush. Since I could not travel anyway, this did not inconvenience me. In a very short time they came back, rolling the tire. They fixed it in place, tightened the nuts, and released the jack. Smiling, they told me to drive on. I was completely mystified and could not even believe their solution would work: they had packed the tire with grass.

I did drive on. I drove the fifteen miles to the mission, slowly yet in comfort and safety. A few days' later I drove all the way back down the road, thirty miles, to the gas station. The mechanic fixed the tire the way I would have if I had his tools.

But I did not have his tools, so even with theoretical knowledge and practical experience I would still have been unable to take the tire off the rim and patch it adequately. I could not even have imagined the solution proposed by the local community. Even when I saw it, I hardly believed it. But it worked.

The sharing of local resources, approaches, and solutions can be a real blessing.

### ***Opening microcosms***

People living within small, bounded worlds develop a strong or closed microcosm. Their world is largely focused on itself, often becoming highly self-sufficient. Other people live within microcosm that are open to the wider world. They, too, have boundaries, but these do not exclude outsiders. People who live within an open or weak microcosm are hunters, travellers, mariners, nomads, or conquerors. Those within strong microcosm tend to be farmers and settlers.

Because every local world exists within the wider world, we can correlate microcosm and macrocosm. Where the microcosm is strong and meaning is largely found within, the macrocosm will be correspondingly weak and largely irrelevant to people's lives. Those living within a strong microcosm may need to patrol its borders and maintain its integrity by carefully controlling the passage of strangers. Those living within a weak microcosm are correspondingly open to the macrocosm and less concerned to patrol boundaries and monitor the passage of strangers. Not that they dispense with boundaries or fail to discriminate among strangers: those without boundaries soon lose a sense of their own identity; those who are completely open may find others taking advantage. There is always need for balance, flexibility, and willingness to change.

Strangers may be a catalyst for opening up societies. But strangers are ambiguous. Where they are welcomed spontaneously and easily, the microcosm is probably already weakened and the community already open to the wider world. But where a community is closed, strangers may not be as warmly welcomed and the microcosm thus remains strong. So whether strangers are an advantage or not depends on many variables, not simply on the strangers' goodwill. Yet however self-sufficient they may be, strongly bounded societies will always be limited by their own experience and imagination. Not only does the stranger come from another world; in other worlds people do things differently. By opening up a local microcosm, the stranger offers alternatives: alternative ways of thinking and doing. This is potentially beneficial, since it helps extend the range of possible solutions to local problems. Yet it depends on the acceptability of the stranger in the first place, and strongly bounded societies tend to resist alternative ways of doing things unless and until they perceive new reasons and develop new needs.

A rural African community was decimated by high infant mortality rate. The medical missionary sisters discovered that the local midwives were cutting the umbilical cord with piece of sharpened bamboo, which they then wrapped in a

cloth until the next baby was born. Babies contracted septicaemia from the infected bamboo, and many died.

The sisters assembled the midwives, instructed them in sterile technique, and issued to each of them a packet of five razor blades to replace the bamboo. They were told to use and then discard the blade. They would receive more blades as necessary. After a while the infant mortality rate was high as ever. The sisters were perplexed, the midwives angry, the mothers increasingly afraid.

After some research and much prevarication from the midwives, the sisters discovered that the midwives were indeed using the razor blades instead of the bamboo. But in these poor rural communities, razor blades were hard to come by and nothing was wasted. So the midwives would wrap the used razor blade in a cloth, use it until it was dull—and sell the other razor blades in the community. Not only were the babies dying from the very same cause as initially; the community was now disenchanted with the sisters for promising a dramatic reduction, only to find the new solution was complete failure.

Alternative solutions can be helpful if translated into the local cultural idiom. But opening up closed microcosms is no unmitigated blessing. People must be helped to live with alternatives and to prosper within an expanding world, otherwise strangers' gifts will turn to poison and local hospitality will turn to hostility.

### ***Offering solidarity***

Initial reaction to a stranger may be ambivalent as insiders ask questions. Why has this person come here? Is the stranger seeking something or bringing something? Is the stranger a spy or bent on destruction? This possibility is sometimes enough to turn host communities very quickly against a stranger. Sometimes the conventions of hospitality break down in face of the perceived threat; even if they are observed, the stranger may be treated with coolness or suspicion.

Perhaps the stranger is worthy and well disposed. A host community must determine strangers' intentions, but it is not always easy. If a self-sufficient and ostentatious, strong, articulate stranger approaches a poor and needy community, the community may be ashamed of its impoverishment. Subsequent relations will be affected by the shame. If local people cannot act as hosts but feel worthless, "one down," an indebted, the consequences will be grave. Beggars can't be choosers; but those forced to beg and expected to be grateful can be deeply hostile to the benefactors they cannot refuse.

A priceless gift a stranger can bring to a needy community is the moral gift of solidarity. Today many communities feel abandoned by the wider world or victims of terrible violence within their own country. They suffer physical, moral, and spiritual deprivation. A stranger may be an agent of incalculable good. To convince such people that the stranger would not want to be anywhere else, or with anyone else, is to begin to rehabilitate those with crushed self-esteem or verging on despair. When the stranger becomes recognizable as a friend and the host is able to embrace and be embraced, stranger and host have been transformed into a community of friends.

### ***Enriching lives***

Every culture can benefit from strangers. But strangers are beneficiaries as well as benefactors, and the development of authentic relationships depends partly on the stranger's gracious willingness to learn and to receive. There will be some tension between the insider and the outsider, superordinate host and subordinate stranger. This is because, while each needs to acknowledge their respective structural positions, each is also capable of putting the other at ease and thus developing increasing mutuality. The tension, then, is between assertiveness and deference. But the encounter between two people and two communities with different backgrounds and capacities carries the potential for one of the most profound of human experiences. It is the experience of moving beyond differences to similarities, beyond strangerhood to friendship. It may be a long, hard road, but to reach its end is to celebrate unity at a profound level.

Every encounter with a stranger is a risk. A blood transfusion is potentially life giving to a patient, and a stranger is a potential life bringer to a depleted community. But blood transfusion can kill: contaminated blood may not be detected until too late. A stranger's goodwill cannot halt the spread of the measles he carries; a blood donor's generosity cannot make her rhesus-positive blood acceptable to a rhesus-negative person.

Encounters can be enriching. The assimilation of strangers into host communities can enrich the lives of both. The contribution of a stranger who freely engages with others out of genuine desire for mutual exchange may be beyond price. This is the summit of human encounter.

### ***Mediating hostilities***

Local communities carry the seeds of their own destruction. Villages, corporations, families or even spouses may experience a souring of relationships. This can produce hostility and antisocial behaviour. Sociologically, a faction is a fragment or group within a wider group; it is opposed to another faction on a particular issue. When institutionalized, factionalism can become utterly destructive and virtually unresolvable if communities become polarized. Then there is no arbitrator, and no possibility of reasoned discussion. Maybe not until one party is utterly exhausted will some semblance of normality return: the embers of factionalism may burn of generations.

The stranger may be an unlikely arbitrator or mediator. But the stranger may be the only person trusted by both sides. This assumes the stranger has been assimilated over a relatively longer period and is not still in the preliminary or early transitional stage. It also assumes that because the stranger is well into the transitional stage, the stranger has met the host group's expectations and acquiesced in being scrutinized, tested, and taught. This stranger is not authoritarian or disrespectful but vulnerable and supportive; this stranger is deemed to have the community's interest at heart.

If members of faction do not trust each other, they may then turn to the trusted stranger who may help resolve the impasse. Then the faction will dissolve, and enemies can begin to talk to each other without losing face.

Without the stranger's contribution, these things would have been unimaginable or taken forever. The stranger who helps to mediate lives offers a precious gift to the community. Perhaps even more important for those who wish to learn cross-cultural lessons, a stranger may acquire the moral authority of significant other and even find a place on the local agenda.

### *Sharing worlds*

The third stage of assimilation is incorporation; but the fully incorporated stranger is a contradiction in terms. Practically, incorporation is limited, and for good reason. The stranger has been socialized in a particular world, has acquired values and practical principles, and has developed an aesthetic and moral sense. Those things cannot be abandoned any more than human beings can slough their skin. We take our socialized selves with us wherever we go. Resocialisation can and should take place, but we remain largely who we have become as our cultural formation has stamped us. Likewise for those we encounter. The challenge is to communicate, to share, to experience mutual modifications consistent with our respective integrity.

A stranger cannot become an insider. But a stranger does not need to try. It is the quality of relationship between insider and outsider that matters. A fully assimilated stranger would cease to be a stranger and lose the voice and perspective of the stranger, so critical to mutually enriching dialogue.

The stranger may hope to become a participating rather than a non-participating member of the community. The participating outsider has great potential for contributing to, and benefiting from, a community. A non-participating outsider would have little relevance (a tourist, traveller, parasite) or be resented (an occupying army or colonial government). A stranger cannot be a participating insider because a stranger is an outsider. But a stranger should not be reduced to the status of non-participating insider. Those are the pariahs, the criminal or deviant classes, or the insignificant.

The stranger can aspire to being a participating outsider, so long as the stranger remains an outsider and yet participates. To remain an outsider means not to assume too much, Not to make inappropriate demands, to remain socially marginal (servant), to be disinterested (not clinging to status). To participate means to discover one's place on the agenda, to contribute to the felt needs of the community, to be a servant, yet to be able to challenge and support, to be spiritually and culturally life transmitting and life-propagating. These are the challenges for every missionary stranger. To them we turn next.