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# The Kindness of Strangers

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*The Kindness of Strangers*

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I believe in the kindness of strangers. And I believe we are all strangers at some point.

Tennessee Williams ends his Pulitzer-prize winning play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with Blanche DuBois' assertion: "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers. "

My own life is proof of that kindness. I started out in a Catholic orphanage in New Orleans, St. Vincent De Paul's. A baker in New Orleans started that orphanage in 1858, because she thought that orphans should be cared for. Almost a century later, the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul were still providing care when I came along. And I was lucky to have their care for my first six months of life.

My adoptive parents were the next set of strangers who provided me kindnesses beyond measure. They each had grown up in big families--one in Texas, one in Florida. Unable to have their own children, they adopted two from St. Vincent's. As a parent, I now understand how generous those decisions were.

A few years ago, I saw the movie version of John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*. Homer Wells, the main character, grows up in an orphanage in rural Maine and, although he leaves, eventually returns to the orphanage. At the end of the movie, I was in tears because it reminded me of what my life could have been like if those nuns and my adoptive parents hadn't been so loving and giving.

Throughout school, I continued to rely on the kindness of strangers--usually in the form of scholarships. I went to Yale for what it would have cost me to go to Louisiana State University. There was only one way that could have happened: the generosity of previous generations of Yale alumni. I went to Duke for graduate school, again with scholarship support--this time in the form of federally

funded graduate fellowships. Individually and collectively, strangers provided my education, gave me the tools to make my way in the world.

Of course, the kindness of strangers is not solely a Southern tradition or even solely a tradition in the United States. Around the world and across millennia, religious traditions have framed the importance of kindness to strangers. Whether it's the *Golden Rule* in Christian teaching or *Tikkun Olam* in the Jewish tradition or the Quran's call for practicing regular charity for the needy—all acknowledge the need to show kindness to others, especially the unfamiliar.

And that's the interesting part: we are all strangers at some times and in some places. We are all dependent upon others. At a recent reunion, a Bucknell alumna reflected on what she called Bucknell's "invisible nurturance". More than a half century later, she recalled simple acts of kindness from faculty, staff, and fellow students--acts that still have ripple effects in her life and in the lives she touches.

I believe in the kindness of strangers, and in the wisdom of both giving and receiving that kindness.