

Essay – The Connection Between Strangers

On June 23, 1970, I had just been released from the Army after completing my one-year tour of duty in Vietnam. I was a 23-year-old Army veteran on a plane from Oakland, California, returning home to Dallas, Texas.

I had been warned about the hostility many of our fellow countrymen felt toward returning ‘Nam vets at that time. There were no hometown parades for us when we came home from that unpopular war. Like tens of thousands of others, I was just trying to get home without incident.

I sat, in uniform, in a window seat, chain-smoking and avoiding eye contact with my fellow passengers. No one was sitting in the seat next to me, which added to my isolation. A young girl, not more than 10 years old, suddenly appeared in the aisle. She smiled and, without a word, timidly handed me a magazine. I accepted her offering, her quiet “welcome home.” All I could say was, “Thank you.” I do not know where she sat down or who she was with because right after accepting the magazine from her, I turned to the window and wept. Her small gesture of compassion was the first I had experienced in a long time.

I believe in the connection between strangers when they reach out to one another.

That young girl undoubtedly has no memory of what happened years ago. I like to think of her as having grown up, continuing to touch others and teaching her children to do the same. I know she might have been told to give me the “gift” by her mother. Her father might still have been in Vietnam at that point or maybe he had not survived the war. It doesn’t matter why she gave me the magazine. The important thing is she did.

Since then, I have followed her example and tried, in different ways for different people, to do the same for them. Like me on that long ago plane ride, they will never know why a stranger took the time to extend a hand. But I know that my attempts since then are all because of that little girl. Her offer of a magazine to a tired, scared, and lonely soldier has echoed throughout my life. I have to believe that my small gestures have the same effect on others. And to that little girl, who is now a woman, I would like to take this opportunity to say again, thank you.

For discussion and/or writing:

1. If you have seen the film, *Pay It Forward*, how is this essay similar?
2. You are often told about “stranger danger”. How is this NOT stranger danger, but a well-timed kindness?
3. Why do you think reaching out to strangers is really challenging, hard to do, for many people?
4. Where do you see an “attitude of gratitude” on the part of this soldier? Give example phrases.

