

## **BOOK**

*Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don't Know*

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## **PUBLISHER**

Little, Brown and Company

## **PUBLICATION DATE**

September 2019

## **SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]**

All Something is very wrong, Gladwell argues, with the tools and strategies we use to make sense of people we don't know. And because we don't know how to talk to strangers, we are inviting conflict and misunderstanding in ways that have a profound effect on our lives and our world.

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If there is a Hollywood celebrity reading this who remembers chatting with a bearded Englishman long ago in the lobby of the Mercer Hotel, please contact me. For everyone else, consider the lesson. Sometimes the best conversations between strangers allow the stranger to remain a stranger.

Throughout the majority of human history, encounters – hostile or otherwise – were rarely between strangers. The people you met and fought often believed in the same God as you, built their buildings and organized their cities in the same way you did, fought their wars with the same weapons according to the same rules. But the sixteenth century's bloodiest conflict fit none of those patterns. When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés met the Aztec ruler Montezuma II, neither side knew anything about the other at all.

Is it any wonder why the meeting between Cortés and Montezuma has fascinated historians for so many centuries? That moment – 500 years ago – when explorers began traveling across oceans and undertaking bold expeditions in previously unknown territory, an entirely new kind of encounter emerged. Cortés and Montezuma wanted to have a conversation, even though they knew nothing about the other. When Cortés asked Montezuma, “Art thou he?,” he didn't say those words directly. Cortés spoke only Spanish. He had to bring two translators with him.

When a ruler such as Montezuma spoke of himself as small and weak, in other words, he was actually subtly drawing attention to the fact that he was esteemed and powerful.

Today we are now thrown into contact all the time with people whose assumptions, perspectives, and backgrounds are different from our own. The modern world is not two brothers feuding for control of the Ottoman Empire. It is Cortés and Montezuma struggling to understand each other through multiple layers of translators. Talking to Strangers is about why we are so bad at that act of translation.

Puzzle Number One: Why can't we tell when the stranger in front of us is lying to our face?

You would never hire a babysitter for your children without meeting that person first. Companies don't hire employees blind. They call them in and interview them closely, sometimes for hours at a stretch, on more than one occasion. They do what Chamberlain did: they look people in the eye, observe their demeanor and behavior, and draw conclusions. He gave me the double handshake. Yet all that extra information Chamberlain gathered from his personal interactions with Hitler didn't help him see Hitler more clearly. It did the opposite.

Only one person in the upper reaches of the British diplomatic service – Anthony Eden, who preceded Halifax as foreign secretary – had both met Hitler and saw the truth of him. But for everyone else? The people who were right

about Hitler were those who knew the least about him personally. The people who were wrong about Hitler were the ones who had talked with him for hours.

When judges make their bail decisions, they have access to three sources of information. They have the defendant's record – his age, previous offenses, what happened the last time he was granted bail, where he lives, where he works. They have the testimony of the district attorney and the defendant's lawyer: whatever information is communicated in the courtroom. And they have the evidence of their own eyes. What is my feeling about this man before me?

Puzzle Number Two: How is it that meeting a stranger can sometimes make us worse at making sense of that person than not meeting them?

The conviction that we know others better than they know us – and that we may have insights about them they lack (but not vice versa) – leads us to talk when we would do well to listen and to be less patient than we ought to be when others express the conviction that they are the ones who are being misunderstood or judged unfairly.

We think we can easily see into the hearts of others based on the flimsiest of clues. We jump at the chance to judge strangers. We would never do that to ourselves, of course. We are nuanced and complex and enigmatic. But the stranger is easy. If I can convince you of one thing in this book, let it be this: Strangers are not easy.

The issue with spies is not that there is something brilliant about them. It is that there is something wrong with us.

We have a default to truth: our operating assumption is that the people we are dealing with are honest.

To snap out of truth-default mode requires what Levine calls a "trigger." A trigger is not the same as a suspicion, or the first sliver of doubt. We fall out of truth-default mode only when the case against our initial assumption becomes definitive. We do not behave, in other words, like sober-minded scientists, slowly gathering evidence of the truth or falsity of something before reaching a conclusion. We do the opposite. We start by believing. And we stop believing only when our doubts and misgivings rise to the point where we can no longer explain them away.

Someone he trusted, he wrote in the group email, "told us in confidence that he believes that Madoff will have a serious problem within a year." He went on: "Throw in that his brother-in-law is his auditor and his son is also high up in the organization, and you have the risk of some nasty allegations, the freezing of accounts, etc."

"None of it seems to add up," he concluded. The three of them decided to conduct their own in-house investigation. Their suspicions deepened. "I came to the conclusion that we didn't understand what he was doing," Broder would say later. "We had no idea how he was making his money.

"I never, as the manager, entertained the thought that it was truly fraudulent," Simons said. He was willing to admit that he didn't understand what Madoff was up to, and that Madoff smelled a little funny. But he wasn't willing to believe that he was an out-and-out liar. Simons had doubts, but not enough doubts. He defaulted to truth.

"For me, math is truth," he says. When he analyzes an investment opportunity or a company, he prefers not to meet any of the principals personally; he doesn't want to make the Neville Chamberlain error.

The standard immigrant-entrepreneur story is about the redemptive power of grit and ingenuity. To hear Markopolos tell it, his early experiences in the family business taught him instead how dark and dangerous the world was: I saw a lot of theft in the Arthur Treacher's. And so I became fraud-aware at a formative age, in my teens and early twenties. And I saw what people are capable of doing, because when you run a business, five to six percent of your revenues are going to be lost to theft.

I called the people that I knew on the trading desks: "Are you trading with Madoff?" They all said no. Well, if you are trading derivatives, you pretty much have to go to the largest five banks to trade the size that he was trading. If the largest five banks don't know your trades and are not seeing your business, then you have to be a Ponzi scheme. It's that easy. It was not a hard case. All I had to do was pick up the phone, really.

dishonesty and stupidity are everywhere. “People have too much faith in large organizations,” he said. “They trust the accounting firms, which you should never trust because they’re incompetent. On a best day they’re incompetent, on a bad day they’re crooked, and aiding and abetting the fraud, looking the other way.”

In Russian folklore there is an archetype called yurodivy, or the “Holy Fool.” The Holy Fool is a social misfit – eccentric, off-putting, sometimes even crazy – who nonetheless has access to the truth. Nonetheless is actually the wrong word. The Holy Fool is a truth-teller because he is an outcast. Those who are not part of existing social hierarchies are free to blurt out inconvenient truths or question things the rest of us take for granted. In one Russian fable, a Holy Fool looks at a famous icon of the Virgin Mary and declares it the work of the devil. It’s an outrageous, heretical claim. But then someone throws a stone at the image and the facade cracks, revealing the face of Satan.

No one says a word except a small boy, who cries out, “Look at the king! He’s not wearing anything at all!” The little boy is a Holy Fool.

The closest we have to Holy Fools in modern life are whistleblowers. They are willing to sacrifice loyalty to their institution – and, in many cases, the support of their peers – in the service of exposing fraud and deceit.

We need Holy Fools in our society, from time to time. They perform a valuable role. That’s why we romanticize them. Harry Markopolos was the hero of the Madoff saga. Whistleblowers have movies made about them. But the second, crucial part of Levine’s argument is that we can’t all be Holy Fools. That would be a disaster.

Markopolos learned that Spitzer was going to be in Boston giving a speech at the John F. Kennedy Library. He printed out his documents on clean sheets of paper, removing all references to himself, and put them in a plain brown 9x12 envelope. Then, to be safe, he put that envelope inside a larger plain brown envelope. He wore a pair of gloves, so he left no fingerprints on the documents. He put on extra-heavy clothing, and over that the biggest coat he owned. He did not want to be recognized. He made his way to the JFK Library and sat unobtrusively to one side. Then, at the end of the speech, he went up to try to give the documents to Spitzer personally. But he couldn’t get close enough – so instead he handed them to a woman in Spitzer’s party, with instructions to pass them along to her boss.

He’s heading out the back door to get in a limo to the airport to catch the last shuttle flight to New York... Eliot never got my package.

Sandusky was a goofball and a cutup. Much of Sandusky’s autobiography – titled, incredibly, *Touched* – is devoted to stories of his antics: the time he smeared charcoal over the handset of his chemistry teacher’s phone, the time he ran afoul of a lifeguard for horseplay with his children in a public pool. Four and a half pages alone are devoted to water-balloon fights that he orchestrated while in college. “Wherever I went, it seemed like trouble was sure to follow,” Sandusky wrote. “I live a good part of my life in a make-believe world,” he continues. “I enjoyed pretending as a kid, and I love doing the same as an adult with these kids. Pretending has always been part of me.”

I believed in you always until I couldn’t anymore. Isn’t that an almost perfect statement of default to truth?

This is a much more perplexing example than Trinea Gonczar in the Nassar case. Gonczar never denied that something happened in her sessions with Nassar. She chose to interpret his actions as benign – for entirely understandable reasons – up until the point when she listened to the testimony of her fellow gymnasts at Nassar’s trial. Sandusky, by contrast, wasn’t practicing some ambiguous medical procedure. He is supposed to have engaged in repeated acts of sexual violence. And his alleged victims didn’t misinterpret what he was doing to them. They acted as if nothing had ever happened. They didn’t confide in their friends. They didn’t write anguished accounts in their journals. They dropped by, years later, to show off their babies to the man who raped them. They invited their rapist to their weddings. One victim showered with Sandusky and called himself the “luckiest boy in the world.” Another boy emerged with a story, after months of prodding by a therapist, that couldn’t convince a grand jury.

defaulting to truth is not a crime. It is a fundamentally human tendency. Spanier behaved no differently from the Mountain Climber and Scott Carmichael and Nat Simons and Trinea Gonczar and virtually every one of the parents of the gymnasts treated by Larry Nassar.

If every coach is assumed to be a pedophile, then no parent would let their child leave the house, and no sane person would ever volunteer to be a coach. We default to truth—even when that decision carries terrible risks—because we have no choice. Society cannot function otherwise. And in those rare instances where trust ends in betrayal, those victimized by default to truth deserve our sympathy, not our censure.

We think we want our guardians to be alert to every suspicion. We blame them when they default to truth. When we try to send people like Graham Spanier to jail, we send a message to all of those in positions of authority about the way we want them to make sense of strangers—without stopping to consider the consequences of sending that message.

A standard Friends season had so many twists and turns of plot—and variations of narrative and emotion—that it seems as though viewers would need a flowchart to make sure they didn't lose their way. In reality, however, nothing could be further from the truth. If you've ever watched an episode of Friends, you'll know that it is almost impossible to get confused. The show is crystal clear. How clear? I think you can probably follow along even if you turn off the sound.

The words are what make us laugh, or what explain particular nuances of narrative. But the facial displays of the actors are what carry the plot. The actors' performances in Friends are transparent.

Transparency is the idea that people's behavior and demeanor—the way they represent themselves on the outside—provides an authentic and reliable window into the way they feel on the inside. It is the second of the crucial tools we use to make sense of strangers. When we don't know someone, or can't communicate with them, or don't have the time to understand them properly, we believe we can make sense of them through their behavior and demeanor.

In 1872, thirteen years after first presenting his famous treatise on evolution, Charles Darwin published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Smiling and frowning and wrinkling our noses in disgust, he argued, were things that every human being did as part of evolutionary adaptation. Accurately and quickly communicating our emotions to one another was of such crucial importance to the survival of the human species, he argued, that the face had developed into a kind of billboard for the heart.

We tend to judge people's honesty based on their demeanor. Well-spoken, confident people with a firm handshake who are friendly and engaging are seen as believable. Nervous, shifty, stammering, uncomfortable people who give windy, convoluted explanations aren't.

Liars don't look away. But Levine's point is that our stubborn belief in some set of nonverbal behaviors associated with deception explains the pattern he finds with his lying tapes.

There is a second, complicating element in many of these encounters, however. When you read through the details of the campus sexual-assault cases that have become so depressingly common, the remarkable fact is how many involve an almost identical scenario. A young woman and a young man meet at a party, then proceed to tragically misunderstand each other's intentions—and they're drunk.

As the ancient saying goes, *In vino veritas*: "In wine there is truth."

Alcohol isn't an agent of revelation. It is an agent of transformation.

It is hard to disagree with the judge's fundamental complaint—that adding alcohol to the process of understanding another's intentions makes a hard problem downright impossible. Alcohol is a drug that reshapes the drinker according to the contours of his immediate environment. In the case of the Camba, that reshaping of personality and behavior was benign. Their immediate environment was carefully and deliberately constructed: they wanted to use alcohol to create a temporary—and, in their minds, better—version of themselves. But when young people today drink to excess, they aren't doing so in a ritualized, predictable environment carefully constructed to create a better version of themselves. They're doing so in the hypersexualized chaos of fraternity parties and bars.

What happens to us when we get drunk is a function of the particular path the alcohol takes as it seeps through our brain tissue. The effects begin in the frontal lobes, the part of our brain behind our forehead that governs attention, motivation, planning, and learning. The first drink "dampens" activity in that region. It makes us a little dumber,

less capable of handling competing complicated considerations. It hits the reward centers of the brain, the areas that govern euphoria, and gives them a little jolt. It finds its way into the amygdala. The amygdala's job is to tell us how to react to the world around us. Are we being threatened? Should we be afraid? Alcohol turns the amygdala down a notch. The combination of those three effects is where myopia comes from. We don't have the brainpower to handle more complex, long-term considerations. We're distracted by the unexpected pleasure of the alcohol. Our neurological burglar alarm is turned off. We become altered versions of ourselves, beholden to the moment. Alcohol also finds its way to your cerebellum, at the very back of the brain, which is involved in balance and coordination. That's why you start to stumble and stagger when intoxicated. These are the predictable effects of getting drunk.

For physiological reasons, this trend has put women at greatly increased risk for blackouts. If an American male of average weight has eight drinks over four hours – which would make him a moderate drinker at a typical frat party – he would end up with a blood-alcohol reading of 0.107. That's too drunk to drive, but well below the 0.15 level typically associated with blackouts. If a woman of average weight has eight drinks over four hours, by contrast, she's at a blood-alcohol level of 0.173. She's blacked out.<sup>6</sup>

It gets worse. Women are also increasingly drinking wine and spirits, which raise blood-alcohol levels much faster than beer. "Women are also more likely to skip meals when they drink than men,"

Show men how to respect women, not how to drink less. But that's not quite right, is it? That last line should be "Show men how to respect women and how to drink less," because the two things are connected. Brock Turner was asked to do something of crucial importance that night – to make sense of a stranger's desires and motivations. That is a hard task for all of us under the best circumstances, because the assumption of transparency we rely on in those encounters is so flawed. Asking a drunk and immature nineteen-year-old to do that, in the hypersexualized chaos of a frat party, is an invitation to disaster.

Morgan's point was that if the information they were sharing had been obtained under stress – if they had just been through some nightmare in Iraq or Afghanistan or Syria – what they said might be inaccurate or misleading, and the sources wouldn't know it. They would say, It's the doctor! I know it was the doctor, even though the doctor was a thousand miles away. "I said to the other analysts, 'You know, the implication of this is really alarming.'"

Trying to get information out of someone you are sleep-depriving is sort of like trying to get a better signal out of a radio that you are smashing with a sledgehammer....It makes no sense to me at all."

Poets die young. That is not just a cliché. The life expectancy of poets, as a group, trails playwrights, novelists, and nonfiction writers by a considerable margin.

Plath was obsessed with suicide. She wrote about it, thought about it. "She talked about suicide in much the same tone as she talked about any other risky, testing activity: urgently, even fiercely, but altogether without self-pity," Alvarez wrote. "She seemed to view death as a physical challenge she had, once again, overcome. It was an experience of much the same quality as...careering down a dangerous snow slope without properly knowing how to ski."

In 1962, the year before Sylvia Plath took her own life, 5,588 people in England and Wales committed suicide. Of those, 2,469 – 44.2 percent – did so as Sylvia Plath did. Carbon-monoxide poisoning was by then the leading cause of lethal self-harm in the United Kingdom. Nothing else – not overdosing on pills or jumping off a bridge – came close.

Every gas appliance in England had to be upgraded or replaced: meters, cookers, water heaters, refrigerators, portable heaters, boilers, washing machines, solid-fuel grates, and on and on. New refineries had to be built, new gas mains constructed. One official at the time, without exaggeration, called it "the greatest peacetime operation in this nation's history."

When a new and easy method such as town gas arrives on the scene, suicides should rise; when that method is taken away, they should fall. The suicide curve should look like a roller coaster. Take a look. It's a roller coaster. It goes way up when town gas first makes its way into British homes. And it comes plunging down as the changeover to natural gas begins in the late 1960s. In that ten-year window, as town gas was being slowly phased out, thousands of deaths were prevented.

This simply isn't the way we talk about suicide. We act as if the method were irrelevant.

In 1981, the most comprehensive academic work on the subject, *A History of the British Gas Industry*, was published. It goes into extraordinary detail about every single aspect of the advent and growth of gas heating and gas stoves in English life. Does it mention suicide, even in passing? No. Or consider the inexplicable saga of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Since it opened in 1937, it has been the site of more than 1,500 suicides. No other place in the world has seen as many people take their lives in that period.<sup>4</sup>

So when did the municipal authority that runs the bridge finally decide to install a suicide barrier? In 2018, more than eighty years after the bridge opened. As John Bateson points out in his book *The Final Leap*, in the intervening period, the bridge authority spent millions of dollars building a traffic barrier to protect cyclists crossing the bridge, even though no cyclist has ever been killed by a motorist on the Golden Gate Bridge. It spent millions building a median to separate north- and southbound traffic, on the grounds of "public safety." On the southern end of the bridge, the authority put up an eight-foot cyclone fence to prevent garbage from being thrown onto Fort Baker, a former army installation on the ground below. A protective net was even installed during the initial construction of the bridge – at enormous cost – to prevent workers from falling to their deaths. The net saved nineteen lives. Then it was taken down. But for suicides? Nothing for more than eighty years.

why is this? Is it because the people managing the bridge are callous and unfeeling? Not at all. It's because it is really hard for us to accept the idea that a behavior can be so closely coupled to a place.

The first set of mistakes we make with strangers – the default to truth and the illusion of transparency – has to do with our inability to make sense of the stranger as an individual. But on top of those errors we add another, which pushes our problem with strangers into crisis. We do not understand the importance of the context in which the stranger is operating.

In the early 1960s, when Plath committed suicide, the suicide rate for women of her age in England reached a staggering 10 per 100,000 – driven by a tragically high number of deaths by gas poisoning. That is as high as the suicide rate for women in England has ever been. By 1977, when the natural-gas changeover was complete, the suicide rate for women of that age was roughly half that. Plath was really unlucky. Had she come along ten years later, there would have been no clouds like "carbon monoxide" for her to "sweetly, sweetly...breathe in."

Weisburd was most interested, though, in what happened in the lighter part of the map, just outside the triangle. When the police cracked down, did the sex workers simply move one or two streets over? Weisburd had trained observers stationed in the area, talking to the sex workers. Was there displacement? There was not. It turns out that most would rather try something else – leave the field entirely, change their behavior – than shift their location. They weren't just coupled to place. They were anchored to place.

The easiest way to make sense of a sex worker is to say that she is someone compelled to turn tricks – a prisoner of her economic and social circumstances. She's someone different from the rest of us. But what is the first thing the sex workers said, when asked to explain their behavior? That moving was really stressful – which is the same thing that everyone says about moving.

Beginning in 1975 – the year after her suicide – automobiles sold in the United States were required to have catalytic converters installed on their exhaust systems. A catalytic converter is a secondary combustion chamber that burns off carbon monoxide and other impurities before they leave the exhaust pipe. The fumes from Sexton's 1967 Cougar would have been thick with carbon monoxide. That's why she could sit in a closed garage with the engine running and be dead within fifteen minutes. The exhaust from the 1975 version of that car would have had half as much carbon monoxide – if that. Today's cars emit so little carbon monoxide that the gas barely registers in automobile exhaust. It is much more difficult to commit suicide today by turning on your car and closing the door of the garage.

This has been a book about a conundrum. We have no choice but to talk to strangers, especially in our modern, borderless world. We aren't living in villages anymore. Police officers have to stop people they do not know. Intelligence officers have to deal with deception and uncertainty. Young people want to go to parties explicitly to meet strangers: that's part of the thrill of romantic discovery. Yet at this most necessary of tasks we are inept. We think we can transform the stranger, without cost or sacrifice, into the familiar and the known, and we can't. What should we do?

We could start by no longer penalizing one another for defaulting to truth.

We should also accept the limits of our ability to decipher strangers.

Because we do not know how to talk to strangers, what do we do when things go awry with strangers? We blame the stranger.