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PREFACE

HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

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If we really think about it, our very survival, even today, depends upon the acts and kindness of so many people. Right from the moment of our birth, we are under the care and kindness of our parents; later in life, when facing the sufferings of disease and old age, we are again dependent on the kindness of others. If at the beginning and end of our lives we depend upon others’ kindness, why then in the middle should we not act kindly towards others?

Anyone who considers himself or herself, above all, a member of the human family should develop a kind heart. It is a powerful feeling that we should consciously develop and apply. Instead we often neglect it, particularly in our prime years when we experience a false sense of security.

Kindness and compassion are among the principal values that make our lives meaningful. They are a source of lasting happiness and joy. They are the foundation of a good heart, the heart of one who acts out of a desire to help others.

Through kindness, through affection, through honesty, through truth and justice towards all others, we benefit ourselves as well. This is a matter of common sense. There is no denying that consideration of others is worthwhile. Our own happiness is inextricably bound up with the happiness of others. Similarly, if society suffers, we ourselves suffer.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Nor is there any denying that the more our hearts and minds are afflicted with ill will, the more miserable we become.

I believe that we are all to some extent moved by an inability to bear the sight of another's suffering. It is this that, when we see someone in trouble, stirs some feeling in us to go and see if there is anything we can do to help. Moreover, I believe that alongside our natural ability to empathise with others, we also have a need for others' kindness, which runs like a thread throughout our whole life.

At any given moment there must be hundreds of millions of acts of kindness taking place around the world. Although there will undoubtedly be many acts of violence in progress at the same time, these will surely be far fewer. Perhaps this kind of good news is not remarked upon precisely because there is so much of it. Nevertheless, I greatly appreciate the theme of this book that gathers stories of kindness received when it was most needed and perhaps least expected. I am sure they will inspire everyone who reads them, encouraging each of us to take whatever opportunities arise to be kind to others in turn. And in so doing we will contribute actively to creating a more peaceful, harmonious and friendly world.

HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

INTRODUCTION

DON GEORGE

In twenty-five years of wandering the world, I have learned two things: the first is that when you travel, at some point you will find yourself in a dire predicament – out of money, out of food, unable to find a hotel room, lost in a big city or on a remote trail, stranded in the middle of nowhere. The second is that someone will miraculously emerge to take care of you – to lend you money, feed you, put you up for the night, lead you to where you want to go. Whatever the situation, dramatic or mundane, some stranger will save you.

The moral of this is simple and clear: human beings care about each other. Whatever their background, religion, culture and condition, on a person-to-person level, just about everyone everywhere wants to be good to others.

This message, which we all know in our hearts, periodically gets beaten down or drowned out by world affairs. Then ignorance, greed and divisiveness take hold. Despair and distrust abound. Stereotypes are sown and spread. Threats are brandished; missiles are primed. Fearful spectres are invoked and dispatched. The global rifts grow.

This book is meant to bridge those rifts, to remind us that we are all members of one grand, globe-encircling family.

The Kindness of Strangers itself is a product of many kindnesses. When I began to compile this book, I asked some of my favourite writers if they had their own examples of kindness on the road. Everyone did, and many interrupted all-consuming projects to compose pieces. At the same time, Lonely Planet sponsored a competition on its website, inviting readers to send in their tales; we received hundreds more entries than we expected. Encouraged, I dared to dream and wrote to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, asking if he might be willing to write a preface for the book. Over the ensuing months, I and a team of other Lonely Planet editors steeped ourselves in the more than four hundred stories we received – our dispositions growing brighter and brighter as we read – until we narrowed the selection to the twenty-six pieces in this collection. Wonderfully, and fittingly, the resulting book presents world-renowned authors side by side with writers who have never been published before. And as a final blessing, His Holiness the Dalai Lama contributed an eloquent and inspiring preface.

This anthology is a celebration of kindness and of the connections that kindness creates: those unexpected encounters that transfigure and transform us and forge living links with the larger world. For Pico Iyer, this connection comes in the form of a trishaw driver in Mandalay; for Alice Waters, it is a meagre meal with a boy in rural Turkey. It strikes Dave Eggers on a simple stroll along Havana's Malecón, and Tim Cahill when he tracks a rare tiger on the Turkish border with Iraq. For Simon Winchester, kindness is personified in an English vicar and his wife on a remote Atlantic island; for Sarah Levin, it is a bony bicyclist in Tanzania. For Beth Kephart, it appears as a bowl of soup in Seville; for James D. Houston, it's the gift of a coat hanger on Hawaii's Big Island.

Sometimes the kindness connection is fused with humour, as Rolf Potts discovers when he is 'adopted' by a gregarious businessman in Beirut, Douglas Cruickshank learns from a loquacious London cabbie – in whose cab he leaves all his money – and Carolyn Swindell finds when she tries to buy suitable Argentinean underwear.

And sometimes it arrives in a more threatening guise: Nicholas

Crane goes to Afghanistan to help the locals, but ends up needing their help to get out alive; Laurie McAndish King and her friend are enjoying the ride to their Tunisian hotel offered by a seemingly generous man they met at a bar, until two locals follow them and run his car off the road; Amanda Jones loses the trail back to camp on a midnight walk in the Sahara, and ends up relying on a Wodaabe tribesman with whom she cannot even speak; Anthony Sattin undertakes a Palestinian pilgrimage and finds himself facing a hostile crowd of rock-toting teenagers; and Jeff Greenwald embarks on a joyride through the US Southwest with an odd couple – who turn out to be much more dangerous than he ever dreamed.

And yet in all these instances, in every story in this book, kindness prevails.

As it has prevailed in all my own wanderings. My travels through the years have been graced by innumerable acts of kindness, great and small: the Greek family who spontaneously shared their Easter celebration with my family; the Japanese truck driver who detoured an hour to deliver me to a village doorstep; the American couple I met on a train who treated me to a five-course feast on our arrival in Vienna; the Kenyan craftsman who handed me an exquisite elephant he had just carved; the young boy in Cairo who appeared like an angel to take me by the hand and lead me out of a sinister neighbourhood. Time after time, I have been the grateful recipient of directions proffered, meals offered, lifts in taxis and trucks and *tuk-tuks*, futons on far-flung floors.

This accumulation has led me to believe that kindness is the planet's key – the impulse of our evolution, the end of our destiny.

The other evening I was buying milk at my local convenience store when I saw an Asian woman puzzling over a map. 'Can I help you?' I asked.

'Do you know where is?' she said in a Chinese accent, holding out a rain-spattered piece of paper with an address scrawled on it. We peered

Don George

at her map together, until I finally located the almost invisible cul-de-sac. ‘That’s going to be hard for you to find,’ I said. ‘Just follow me. I’ll take you there.’

Two days later, on a San Francisco cable car, a stout man in a thick sweater and a duffle cap was turning his pockets inside out. ‘I’ve left me wallet in the hotel room,’ he told the gripman. Suddenly I was dipping into my own pocket. ‘I’ve got it!’ I said and handed over the fare. ‘Thank you, sir!’ the man said, pumping my arm with a craggy, callused hand.

Before I began editing this book, I don’t know if I would have helped these people. But immersing myself in these stories has had a transformative effect: I find myself going out of my way to help people now – and feeling a fresh flush of energy, optimism and goodwill whenever I do. The kindness connection.

I hope this book inspires you in this way, too, for the truth is that kindness is ours to withhold or bestow. If we live every day, whether at home or away, with kindness, if we approach the world with a sense of wonder and curiosity and appreciation, if we encounter others with respect and openness, if we see our human differences as enriching rather than threatening, we will go a long way toward creating a world graced, interlaced, with peace and opportunity.

The Kindness of Strangers began as a simple collection of travellers’ tales around a common theme. But as it has come together, it has cohered into something more: a palpable parable of how we are all intricately interconnected on life’s journey, every day, everywhere. These richly individual tales all embody the same final truth: we are each other’s greatest gift. The kindness of strangers is ours to give and to take; we shape the world with each embrace.

DON GEORGE

THE MATTER OF KINDNESS

JAN MORRIS

A year or two ago, on a wet morning, I fell over in the filthily potholed Haymarket in St Petersburg, Russia (which had been Leningrad last time I was there). *What* a mess I was in! My jeans were torn, I was dripping with mud, my books, bag and papers were strewn all over the place, and for the life of me I couldn’t get up again. It was no consolation to me to remember that the murderer Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, had knelt and kissed the ground almost at the very same spot. I was most certainly not in a kissing mood, as I slithered, scrabbled and cursed impotently in the muck.

A citizen – I nearly said a Comrade – was there to save me. He helped me to my feet. He gathered my scattered possessions. He took me to his shabby neighbouring apartment, and while he brushed down my coat and scrubbed my shoes, allowed me to wash myself in his far from luxurious bathroom. Having found some antiseptic for my grazed knee, he made me coffee and saw me solicitously down to the street. I have never seen him again, but I have come to think of him since as half-mythical.

I suppose most travellers have experienced the kindness of strangers at one time or another, and I am not alone, I am sure, in thinking of it in allegorical terms. Good Samaritans are familiar figures of art and fable. They enter narratives sidelong, out of the mist, or they are