

A Complete Unknown: Strangers

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Pull Quote: “Through my own experiences, I have found that speaking my native language with strangers creates a distinct sense of tenderness and belonging, underlining the profound emotional and cultural connection language carries.”

Have you ever shared a brief moment with a stranger that stuck with you? I certainly have, and some of my most cherished moments come from speaking Spanish, my native language, with strangers. For example, once, after casually saying “*Gracias*” to a delivery driver, his surprised response—“Wow, you speak Spanish? I have not met many students who speak it”—caught me off guard and instantly delighted me. Moments like these remind me of Ross Gay’s reflections in *The Book of Delights*, where he finds meaning in everyday interactions, particularly in the unexpected ones. Gay shows that delight isn’t just about happiness—it’s about noticing and appreciating the little things that make life more fulfilling. Through my own experiences, I have found that speaking my native language with strangers creates a distinct sense of tenderness and belonging, underlining the profound emotional and cultural connection language carries.

To me, language is more than just communication. It’s a bridge to identity, comfort, and connection. There have been admittedly shameful moments when I’ve said something along the lines of: “Ugh, Spanish and English are boring; I wish I knew another language.” Looking back,

I realize how ungrateful that sounds—after all, knowing two languages is an incredible gift. Being bilingual is already an incredible advantage, but even more meaningful than that is the ability to connect with others in both English *and* Spanish. There’s an undeniable warmth in sharing Spanish with strangers. You might wonder, what exactly makes it feel so warm? Well, here’s an example: when I visit Mexican restaurants or Mexican establishments, I’m often greeted with “*mija*” or “*cariño*”—terms of endearment that translate to “sweetie” or “dear.” While it might seem odd to an outsider, in Spanish, these words carry a sense of familiarity and care, even between strangers. I have felt this same warmth since childhood. When visiting my dad’s small hometown in Mexico, I noticed he greeted almost everyone with “*primo*”—cousin. As a kid, I genuinely believed he was related to half the town. Only later did I realize “*primo*” wasn’t meant literally; it was a friendly, familiar way to acknowledge someone, a gesture that made even strangers feel like family. Just as my dad greeted almost everyone in his hometown of México with “*primo*”, Gay shares a similar experience in his own way. In “The Wave of Unfamiliar,” he recalls the way his grandfather, with just a subtle lift of his fingers, greeted passing drivers as if they were friends. As a child, he figured his grandpa knew everyone, just as I assumed my father was related to all the people he greeted with “*primo*.” But in both cases, these gestures weren’t about literal family connections—they were about a sense of community and recognition. Just like my dad’s casual “*primo*,” Gay’s grandpa’s raised fingers created a moment of connection, providing that warmth and familiarity, which can form in even the smallest of moments.

These greetings are more than just words. Speaking Spanish with strangers, whether they realize it or not, has often brightened my day. As someone who used to talk in Spanish every day, it makes me sad to now use it only occasionally. Ever since coming to college, I haven’t spoken Spanish as much as I’d like – having a singular Spanish-speaking friend doesn’t help my case.

Now, I only use it when talking to my parents on the phone or in Spanish class, and even then, we switch between English and Spanish rather than speaking solely in Spanish. Because of this, I constantly crave opportunities to use it, which is why I especially cherish interacting with strangers in Spanish here at UCSB. This craving to speak Spanish makes sense when considering how, as Keating and Egbert argue, “Conversation plays a vital role in establishing and maintaining cultural habits of individuals and communities—identities, subjectivities, ideas, categories, attitudes, values, and more” (169). This implies the idea that language isn’t just about communication. It’s about how language shapes our identity and how we connect with others. So, I suppose my feelings are valid. When I don’t get to speak Spanish as often, it feels like – as dramatic as this may sound – a piece of my identity is fading. Just the other day, my mom pointed out that my Spanish was getting choppy, and she’s right. I’ve noticed it too. I think this speaks for itself about why I especially cherish and am grateful for moments when I get to speak Spanish with strangers. These small interactions not only delight me but also make me feel more connected to my language.

Furthermore, anyone can find delight in even the smallest interactions with a stranger, such as a wave, smile, or compliment. While many studies on positive interactions with strangers are empirical¹, they consistently show that these exchanges can boost happiness. While I won’t be diving deeper into such studies – since there isn’t yet concrete research – I encourage everyone to be more social and engage with strangers. By actively participating in these small moments of connection, we can contribute to this area of research more concretely rather than just empirically. A simple “thank you” or a compliment can brighten someone’s day and, in return, maybe it can boost one’s own mood. Personally, I feel very strongly that Gay’s *The Book of Delights* serves as evidence that social interaction with strangers has a positive impact on

well-being. Gay is a prime example of this, from him finding delight in being called “baby” to him finding delight in receiving a high-five from a stranger. As he puts it, “For I love, I delight in, unequivocally pleasant public physical interactions with strangers” (Gay, 28). These small

¹Based on observation or experience, rather than theory or belief.

moments of connection, whether through a simple greeting or a gesture, demonstrate how human interaction – no matter how short – can bring delight. Gay’s experiences highlight the joy in these encounters, demonstrating that even the smallest of interactions can have meaning.

These moments may seem insignificant, but they leave lasting impressions, sometimes even lasting feelings, reinforcing the idea that it doesn’t take much to make someone’s day or maybe for someone to make *your* day. After all, you never know when a simple greeting can turn into something more. In my case, it led to friendship. Last year, while living in the dorms, every floor had a dedicated maintenance person to keep it clean. Every morning, as I waited for the elevator, I would hear someone in the supply closet, either moving around or talking on the phone in Spanish. Until one day, I finally met the voice that came from the supply closet every morning. Oscar, as I later learned, was stepping out as I stepped into the elevator. We made brief eye contact and exchanged polite smiles, which encouraged me to say “*Buenos días*”—good morning. He responded with “*Buenos días*,” and from that day forward, it became our daily routine. Over time, our greetings eventually turned into small conversations about school, his grandkids, my family, and life in general. He was beloved by everyone on my floor. This small but meaningful connection with Oscar reaffirmed what Gay captures so beautifully—how even brief interactions can create unexpected connections. Ultimately, our interactions with strangers not only bring delight in the moment but also remind us of the deep, human need for connection.

Works Cited

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