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INTRODUCTION

The ultimate aim of this book is to present a picture of the inner life, heart, and soul of New York City, to apprehend its spirit and make it come alive for the reader. I set out to do this by learning how the residents of the city experience their lives as people and as New Yorkers. The essence of the city is its people. By their actions and interactions they determine the shape it assumes, the flow of its daily life, and the aspirations and dreams it has. The relationships between those who live here, the joys and disappointments they experience and share, as well as the work they do and how they spend their leisure time, all constitute the lifeblood of the city itself.

But a city is not a static unit. It's a dynamic and constantly changing environment, adapting to the needs of its residents. And when that city has more than eight million inhabitants who come from every part of the globe, understanding how it works is a daunting challenge. New York City's immense size and scope and the tremendous variety of its people make it impossible to reduce it to a set of empirically verifiable observations and conclusions as one would do with a clearly defined neighborhood—any attempt to do so cannot succeed. Rather, New York must be viewed as a broad portrait in which the sum is indeed far greater than its parts. And the stories of the city's people and how they negotiate their lives are the vehicles that make it possible for us to enter and begin to comprehend this amazing world.

Walking New York City, block by block, brought into sharp focus a reality that I always knew was there but had never really articulated, because it was so much a part of me that I never felt a need to express it. It emerged time and time again as I spoke and interacted with people from every walk of life. To sum it up, *New York is a city with a dynamic, diverse, and amazingly rich collection of people and villages whose members display both small-town values and a high degree of sophistication. This stems from living in a very modern, technologically advanced, and world-class city that is the epitome of the twenty-first century.* That is both the major theme and conclusion of this intense and detailed journey to every corner of the five boroughs that constitute the city.

While these qualities reach a high level of expression here, they are by no means unique to New York City. They characterize people in other major cities too—Paris, London, Shanghai, New Delhi, and, in this country, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Boston. While these cities each have their own unique identity, all of them are places infused by new arrivals from everywhere who blend in with longtime residents, who are in turn energized and reshaped by the churning mix resulting from such contacts. This outlook on life and the patterns of behavior that emerge from such exposure are not expressed or realized to the same extent by all New Yorkers, yet they are present in varying degrees among the vast majority of its inhabitants. And this book is devoted to an exploration of that reality—how it reaches its full potential and how it informs the city as a whole.

Other important findings arose from this project, all of which are summarized in the concluding chapter. These include the critical ways in which gentrification and immigration have changed New York; the permanent impact of 9/11 on the city; the long-term trend toward ethnic assimilation as well as the creation of hybrid identities; and the broad sympathy toward undocumented immigrants.

New York City has never been scientifically studied as a whole by sociologists. In fact, none of the city's boroughs has even been investigated as a unit. What we have are many fine studies of communities.¹ I once mused aloud about this to a colleague. His

response was, “Well, it’s a huge topic. Maybe no one was crazy enough before you did it to walk the whole city.” Perhaps he’s right. You do have to be a little crazy to explore the city as I did, though not so much if you see it as healthy, fun, interesting, and as a challenge. It’s also a matter of context. No one thinks of runners in New York City’s marathon as crazy, because it’s an accepted concept. They run about forty miles a week when training for the marathon, and as Abigail Meisel reports in the *New York Times*, growing numbers of cyclists are commuting from twenty to forty miles daily from the suburbs. But at least walking in Gotham is seen as an accepted form of activity. When I walked in Los Angeles, I almost never met anyone doing the same. For Angelinos, exercise meant only going to the gym, jogging, or swimming.

But the experience of walking the city is far more than that. Walking is critical to the task because it gets you out there and lets you get to know the city up close. However, you cannot merely walk *through* a city to know it. You have to stop long enough to absorb what’s going on around you. And the only way to do that is to immerse yourself in it—spending as much time as possible in the streets; hanging out where others gather; attending meetings, concerts, sporting events, and the like; in short, doing what those who live there do. That is why the ethnographic method—direct observation, and sometimes even participation in whatever was going on—became the primary approach of this project.

My initial plan was to walk twenty representative streets of the city from end to end and use them as a basis for the book. But I soon realized that there was no way any particular twenty or even one hundred streets could claim to represent a city as large as New York. To do it right I would simply have to walk the entire city, a daunting but eminently worthwhile project. If nothing else, it would be great exercise!

This decision was crucial, for I now had hundreds of examples from what I observed to write about. The many stories and vignettes presented in this book were selected either because they were typical of phenomena I saw over and over again in many parts of the city or because their uniqueness enables us to learn something interesting about the city. When there is so much to

choose from, you can pick the very best examples to make your points. Obtaining a general understanding of the entire city ultimately means you won't be able to present in-depth portraits of every neighborhood, but the benefits of getting a broader picture are well worth that limitation.

I ended up walking about 6,000 miles, the distance between New York City and Los Angeles and back to New York (4,998 miles), and then from New York City to St. Louis. I covered almost every block in Queens, Manhattan, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, including seldom-traversed industrial sections of the city. At the end of each walk I wrote down the number of miles I had traveled, as measured by my Omron pedometer. I averaged about 32 miles a week over four years, starting with Little Neck, Queens, in June 2008 and ending with Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in June 2012. This came to a grand total of 6,048 miles, an average of 1,512 miles a year, 126 miles a month, or 120,960 city blocks (twenty blocks equals one mile). I wore out nine pairs of San Antonio Shoes (SAS), the most comfortable and durable shoes I've ever owned. And all of the outer boroughs turned out to be much more interesting than I'd anticipated.

As I walked, I interviewed—you could also call them conversations because of their largely spontaneous nature—hundreds of people whom I met, and this too was critical to my efforts. Speaking directly with the city's residents was the second critical approach to my undertaking. Hardly anyone refused to talk with me. I asked no one their full names, so as not to invade their privacy, but quite a few people volunteered them anyway, and when they appear in this book, it's with their permission. Although I have changed a few minor details, most names and places are accurate.

Most of the time I did not tell anyone what I was doing unless they asked, because I wanted their answers to be spontaneous and relaxed. In keeping with that goal, I never began an interview with a standard: "Excuse me, could I ask you some questions about this community?" Instead I would say something like: "How come you're dressed like this?" or "Is this neighborhood safe?" or "What's a horse doing in that guy's backyard?" (That really

happened, in Gerritsen Beach, Brooklyn.) Before they knew it (and most of them never did), they were being interviewed.²

I used a tape recorder whenever possible, and when asked why, I told people I wanted to remember what they were saying. Most of them didn't mind, and some were flattered that their words were worth recording. In situations when I thought taping wasn't a good idea, I summarized the conversation by speaking into my recorder as soon it was over. Many of these casual interviews yielded insights on a number of levels. Here's a good example of one. I approached a stocky, youngish Honduran man who was waving a plastic orange flag outside a Lower Manhattan garage, signaling drivers that the garage had space for their cars.

"Do you find this job boring?" I asked.

"This is not my main job."

"What's your main job?"

"Menten," he said in his limited English.

"What's that?"

"Menten."

Figuring I would understand what he meant if I asked him to describe his work, I countered with, "What do you do when you do menten?"

"I clean the garage, throw the garbage away, sweep up."

"You mean maintenance?"

"Yeah, menten."

Suddenly seized by inspiration, I asked, "Can I wave your flag for a minute? I wanna see what it feels like."

"Are you okay?" he asked, a worried tone creeping into his voice.

"It's all right. I'm a professor."

Of course, my line of work had nothing to do with my qualifications for this task, but I had learned that many people don't pay close attention to what you say as long as you say *something*. I would ask someone if I could use their bathroom because I was going to a wedding immediately after our interview, or I would ask if I could make a copy of something because I was leaving for a vacation. It made no sense, but the answer was often yes anyway.

Sure enough, the Honduran man said, "Okay."

And then a weird thing happened. After waving it for a minute, the flag curled up tightly around the stick and I could no longer wave it. Feeling sheepish, I handed it back to him. I learned from this that the simplest task can be difficult for those who don't know how to execute it.

My reverie was abruptly interrupted when he exclaimed, "I know who you are! You're the boss!"

I don't know whether he'd seen the CBS reality program *Undercover Boss*, where a boss goes among his workers incognito to see how they're doing their jobs, but I did take note that he wasn't in the least bit bothered by this possibility. In fact, after I responded enigmatically with, "You never know," he simply laughed and said, "Be good, my friend."

One important lesson from this episode was the realization that we have become a surveillance society. People accept with equanimity, it seems, the idea that others may be spying on them. Independent confirmation of this view came from many other interviews. Another lesson was that New Yorkers from every walk of life are, by and large, a friendly and open lot. That too was substantiated many times over.

I also conducted a number of formal interviews with key leaders in the city, those who headed community boards, religious organizations, and the like. The goal here was to address issues that my walking and impromptu conversations did not fully explain. Of particular interest were my interviews with former mayors Ed Koch, David Dinkins, Rudy Giuliani, and the current mayor, Michael Bloomberg. All were open and forthcoming and spoke about their role in the city and their thoughts about its needs and challenges from the perspectives of both history and hindsight. All of these people are identified by name in the narrative.

Normally sociologists take a more removed view of their work, even though they clearly have feelings and thoughts about it. However, since the research for this book consisted mostly of walking and engaging people personally, I felt it was important to tell what I was thinking as I did so. Thus, at many points I try to explain how I felt as I strolled through the streets. Maybe it would be good

if researchers did more of that in general, but that's obviously not for me to decide.

This is an exploratory study, a first effort to understand the city. It does not pretend to be exhaustive or comprehensive. My hope is that other researchers will use it as a basis for doing more detailed work on the many aspects and topics introduced here. When you're the first one on the block, you have to be careful not to assume too much. This is especially true of ethnography, which is a qualitative, often intuitive approach that is most fruitful in providing insights and deeper understanding as opposed to statistical conclusions.

There are many ways to analyze the city of New York. One approach is to use its *geographical* division into boroughs and neighborhoods and carefully examine each of them. Another approach is to think of the city in terms of *categories*—Asians, whites, New Yorkers, Brooklynites, organizations, small stores, sports, seniors, children. The city can also be evaluated in terms of *issues*—immigration, gentrification, crime, and education. Yet another method is to look at New York City as a patchwork of physical *spaces*. These include streets, buildings, walls, statues, playgrounds, and memorials. All of these lines of inquiry are employed in this book, because each one helps us to better comprehend this complex metropolis.

The chapter topics were chosen because of their importance and because they were particularly suitable for observation. Immigrants have long been central to New York's history, as well as that of the United States, and walking gave me many opportunities to meet and engage them. Since the city is made up of many different communities, examining each of them from up close was a natural choice, as was looking at how New Yorkers spend their free time. It was also important to look at the city as a space, because how city dwellers use it speaks volumes for what the city means to them. Understanding the gentrification process was critical because it is the single most effective vehicle for learning about how New York City has been transformed over the last four decades into a vibrant and exciting place, both residentially and commercially.

Finally, how people do or do not identify ethnically tells us much about issues that go to the core of who they are and where they're heading, both personally and collectively. Throughout the book an effort has been made to consider how the city has changed since it hit rock bottom financially in 1975.

This was clearly a highly labor-intensive project, involving thousands of hours of hard, even grueling, work. Most of the time I walked by myself, with no research assistants to help me. There were times when I was willing to travel one and a half hours by public transportation in order to walk a neighborhood for two hours. You have to grab time whenever you have it. In the fall and the spring, summer and winter, weather permitting, you walk the streets. Then you listen to the tapes and transcribe what you need on rainy or very cold days. You also use that time to read, interview, write, and think. No time can be wasted. Otherwise, you can spend ten years doing a book of this size and still not be finished.

The end game—namely, writing the book—requires an ability and willingness to sit in a chair and work for twelve to fourteen hours straight, day in and day out. Single-minded focus is essential, so there's no checking your email five times a day. And if you're sick, you must do everything in your power to get well quickly. My body held up surprisingly well, and I suffered almost no health problems. I daresay that because of the steady exercise I'm in even better shape than when I began. My foot became inflamed just as I was walking Canarsie one early December day. In the interest of time, I went for a cortisone shot rather than taking a slower approach of ice and rest. Knowing that the snow season was fast approaching also influenced my decision, since you can't easily walk or interview in the cold months. The shot worked. Another time, after suffering a stomach virus, I went out as soon as I felt even a little better. Time can be a real enemy, for the longer the lag between the fieldwork and the writing of the book, the less alive it is and the more likely you are to forget things. Of course, you need time to reflect, so it's a trade-off.

When I came home I listened to and transcribed the tapes I'd made. Rather than use a transcription service, I did it myself. Listening to them helped me catch the inflections and nuances in the

conversations and allowed me to decide on the spot what I needed to include and what I could exclude. I also read the scholarly and popular literature about New York, focusing heavily on the most recent writings, since I was familiar with older ones from having taught my course for so long.³ Thus the information in this book represents both my own findings and the research of others. I ended up with 750 pages of single-spaced typed notes that were, in essence, the raw material for this book.

When doing ethnography it's important to remember that observations should be taken with a grain of salt if you're looking at something for the first time. For example, I see a number of beautiful vintage Corvettes parked in a lot near the Staten Island beach. The cars shimmer as they catch the waves of heat from the hot asphalt, baking in the sun. "How nice that these Corvette owners have a hobby and an affinity group through which to express themselves," I think. After talking with them I discover that they are not here just to socialize and show off their cars. Pointing to a box of toys, one of them says, "We're here because we're giving these toys to disadvantaged children. And that's what we decided to do as a club." Of course, many clubs may not do any good works as part of their activities, so it's best not to generalize or make assumptions about people.

In a similar vein, when was the last, or even first, time you saw a bar with a Jewish name? Well, I did. It was on Manhattan's Lower East Side, on the corner of Allen and Stanton Streets, and was called Epstein's Bar. It struck me as a possible sign that the idea that Jews don't drink was dying out, that a younger generation of Jewish yuppies was changing that stereotype, and that they were no longer the least bit embarrassed about it. But it really shows why it's important to ask and not assume.

Inside, I approached a non-Jewish bartender, a young woman with long, blonde hair who was polishing shot glasses with a damp cloth. Smiling at my question, she provided a clarification. "It's taken from the Juan Epstein who starred in *Welcome Back, Kotter*," she said. "In the show his mom was Puerto Rican and his dad was Jewish. So the new owners named it that way. And it's also because the Lower East Side was once Jewish and then became

Puerto Rican too.” Hanging on the wall was an advertising poster for Levy’s Jewish Rye bread, reading, “You Don’t Have to Be Jewish to Love Levy’s.” This particular variation of the ad featured a Hispanic-looking kid eating a pastrami-on-rye sandwich.

Many people asked me why I didn’t save time and just drive through the city. I’ll start by saying that driving via the highways that go through New York City is practically worthless. From that vantage point, you’ll focus mostly on the tall buildings, like the public housing projects, and miss the gardens, trees, and smaller buildings that make up 80 percent of the area, and the storefront churches that often tell a story in their very names. From the Bruckner Expressway you’ll see five-story walk-ups in the Bronx that remind you of *Bonfire of the Vanities*, but you’ll miss the teeming life that is actually happening in front of them, on the stoops, and in the streets filled with playing children. Driving through the streets slowly is a little better, but not much.

You need to walk slowly through an area to capture its essence, to appreciate the buildings, to observe how the people function in the space, and to talk with them. Driving gives you nothing more than a snapshot. More to the point, it creates a physical wall between you and the neighborhood. By the very fact that you’re *driving through*, you are making it clear that you are not from the area and are an outsider. When you walk through a neighborhood, although people may see that you’re from the outside, the mere fact that you’re walking suggests that you’re at least visiting. More likely it lends plausibility to the appearance that you have some business there—you work in the area, or you’re meeting a local resident who might be a friend, a business contact, drug dealer, whatever. You might be a cop. Or notwithstanding the fact that you don’t resemble a native, you might be just too poor to live elsewhere. None of these thoughts (except for the cop scenario) are likely to occur to others when you drive through. Walking is infinitely more difficult, it is more time-consuming by far, but it is indispensable for anyone who is seriously interested in comprehending the city and gaining the rapport with the locals that’s necessary for it. And that’s why I chose to walk.

What about bicycling through the city? This method of exploring an area is no doubt better than motoring, but it's still a bit too quick for serious reflection. At the same time, it's an excellent way to take the pulse of the city if you lack the time to walk and want to cover ground quickly and with some degree of intimacy. And you're more likely to be seen as a possible local if you bike. In fact, if you want to engage people, you can stop and do so more easily than in an automobile, which is seen as far more intrusive.⁴

And then there are those who say, "Why do you have to walk through an area for four hours, especially one that's dangerous? Wouldn't an hour or so be enough to get the flavor?" I wish I could say that this is the case. It would certainly make my work easier. The problem is that you never know when you are going to see something really interesting or meet someone with a fascinating story or persona. It could be in the first hour, but it could just as well be in the fourth hour. I can't emphasize enough how many times I have had the encounter or insight that made the whole day worthwhile near the end of my walk—those twenty preschoolers listening to a story about Jesus; seeing a man walking four pit bulls in Bushwick, Brooklyn, with two boa constrictors wrapped loosely around his neck; and a black-and-white mural in the South Bronx telling a tale of life and death there. Had I not walked the eight or ten miles that day, I would have never seen such sights. Hard work is hard, but the results are usually well worth the effort. How do you know when you've walked enough? It's probably when the buildings, community centers, noises, smells, and, most of all, conversations, start becoming repetitious.

I walked the city mostly during the daytime, but I also traveled through its streets at night. Things change when the sun sets. The avenues throb with far more activity. People are out and about, standing, talking, and joking in front of the buildings, on street corners, and also enjoying the entertainments available after dark—the theaters, restaurants, and various squares where citizens congregate. Walking on weekends or holidays, as well as on weekdays, which I did, also makes a difference in what you see, as do the different seasons.

In my back pocket I carried little street maps of whatever neighborhood I was visiting. That's how I made sure that I walked all the blocks. Generally I traveled to the neighborhoods by subway, where I would often use the opportunity to read a book. I would travel by car only when the area I planned to explore was an outlying one. Not wanting anything in my hand while I walked, I used what I called the "Tic-Tac method." I'd buy a box of Tic-Tac mints in a small grocery store, pay for them, and then ask the clerk to hold the book I'd been reading on the subway until I returned, leaving both the book and the Tic-Tacs with him and saying jokingly (I hoped), "If I don't come back, you can keep both." They almost always agreed. On one or two occasions store owners even said to me, "You don't have to buy something for me to hold on to your book. I'll do it anyway." As for the tape recorder, it was in my pocket.

Until you do it, it's impossible to realize what walking six thousand miles really entails. If you walk west to east, just from the Hudson to the East River, down Fifty-sixth Street, it takes about forty minutes (including waiting for lights to change) and runs about two miles. Then if you go on to walk from Fifty-fifth to Fifty-first Streets, it comes to a total of ten miles. This gives you an idea of how big the city is. I walked anywhere from five to thirteen miles each trip, depending on the length of my conversations with people and the points of interest I discovered.

There are times when you just lose your "research voice." Maybe instead of writer's block you have "walker's block." You're not in the mood to talk to people, you can't think of any interesting questions to raise, what you see doesn't inspire any original thoughts. You start thinking, "Maybe I've just been doing this for too long." I do think that when ideas, themes, and so on start repeating themselves, it may mean that it's time to stop walking and write some more, but on the other hand, when you're in new territory, a part of the city where you've never walked, that isn't necessarily the case. You may simply need a temporary break. And if so, you should take it and fill up the time with more reading, or take a brief vacation. Fortunately, walker's block didn't happen to me too often, probably because New York City is just so interesting.⁵

Eating or drinking something while walking is a good idea if you want to blend in, especially if an area doesn't seem to be particularly safe. To others, the normal activity of eating or drinking shows you're a local. Who but a local would be eating while walking outside? Also it makes you look like you're not afraid or nervous. You're holding food and a bottle in your hands, which means you're not on guard in a "ready for anything" mode. I suspect middle-class people are less apt to eat while walking in the street regardless of where they are. Talking on a cell phone also works. It suggests that you're relaxed and that you don't feel a need to pay such close attention to your surroundings. Sitting down on a stoop or porch is also good, because that's what many residents do anyway. Just be careful where you sit. Try to choose a house that looks as though no one's home.

The most frequent question posed to me when I mentioned my research was, "How were you as a white man able to walk through the dangerous neighborhoods without getting hurt?" This is worth an extended discussion. To begin with, I dressed innocuously, no bright colors to call attention to myself. I wanted to blend in as much as possible, no matter where I was. I followed this rule even more carefully in poor ghetto areas, being especially careful to not wear bright red or blue, which are sometimes seen as gang colors.⁶ People in these areas typically wear T-shirts and shorts, which often don't match at all. I followed suit. I would wear white socks and black SAS shoes. Generally speaking, I got no second looks, not even first ones.

Of course, people couldn't help notice that I am white, but I was far from the only white person walking around. There were cops, teachers, social workers, auto repair shop owners. Plus, many Hispanics could easily pass as non-Hispanic whites. Age worked against me (I'm in my sixties) in that I could have seemed physically vulnerable, fit as I might be for my age. But in my view the benefit outweighed the downside. I was seen as harmless, not a threat to the residents or their manhood. I wasn't worth challenging or attacking. Still, there were people who saw me as a cop. When I protested that definition once, a black man informed me that "a cop can easily dye his hair gray, so it doesn't mean anything." Still

others may have thought it would be risky to harm a white person. As one put it, “If I did something to a white person, the cops would come down on me. It would interfere with my business.” I did not inquire what that business was, since it was most likely illegal.

All too often, people who regard themselves as savvy New Yorkers think it’s necessary to put up a tough front to show they’re not afraid by projecting a no-nonsense demeanor that can include a tough-guy, unsmiling look accompanied by a purposeful stride. That is exactly the wrong thing for a visitor to do. It is often seen as a challenge and a sign of inner fear, not to mention proof that you don’t belong, that you are ill at ease in the area.

Whenever I walked toward young, well-muscled people who looked tough, possibly gang members or drug dealers, I would wait until I was close to them, and if they made eye contact, I would immediately smile and say, “Hey, how ya doin’?” or some variation of that. The effect of that counterintuitive comment was immediate and almost always the same: “Fine. How you doin’?” Sometimes they added “Pops” in a gently joking, almost affectionate way. After all, I had been friendly, had shown no “attitude,” nor any fear. In many cases my greeting wasn’t even necessary, since people in the ghetto often avoid eye contact because a wrongly interpreted glance can lead to big trouble.⁷ Another suggestion is to never quicken your pace if you see people ahead who make you nervous. You are conveying fear when you do that and therefore inviting problems. You can’t run anyway, because those whom you fear are almost always going to catch you if they really want to.

Paradoxically, perhaps, you are safer deep inside a rough area than on the edge of one. Deep inside signifies that you are part of the neighborhood. On the edge you are seen as wandering in from the outside or moving about on the border. This is why City College students in West Harlem, for example, are in less danger than those who live near Columbia University, with its beautiful streets like Claremont Avenue and Morningside Drive, right next door to the dangerous Manhattanville and Grant public housing projects. The poor resent the wealth that the Columbia students represent. The City College students, on the other hand, are not perceived as,

nor are they likely to be, middle or upper class. In fact, many are themselves local or from other poor communities.

Does this mean that walking through bad neighborhoods isn't that dangerous? Absolutely not! It is, and whoever does so is taking a chance. However, knowing what you're doing can definitely reduce the risk. Here's an example of something that could have gone either way. In Brownsville, Brooklyn, still one of the most dangerous parts of the city, three people—two black males and one black female—were walking ahead of me. In the ghetto, people turn around every so often to make sure they're not being followed or that someone isn't about to jump them. It's a quick, over-the-shoulder glance that is never aimed directly at whoever's behind them. A direct look might provoke a confrontation. I happened to be walking a third of a block behind this trio, and I accidentally kicked a bottle cap. As it skittered noisily up the sidewalk, they gave a quick look behind them, but without even pretending not to look at me directly. Why? Because the noise gave them a justification for checking me out. I knew it and they knew it.

These and a myriad of other responses are examples of street engagements that sociologist Elijah Anderson so insightfully portrays in his classic work, *Code of the Street*. The book describes an elaborate system of nonverbal communication that is a constant presence in the ghetto. Knowing what to do based on past experience is critical, but you can't really prepare for everything that might occur. When you encounter someone, certainly a stranger, you have less than a minute to size up the situation. How they look at you, the inflection in their voice when they talk to you, how they're standing, how they're dressed, the time of day, how you appear to them—all of these and more must be taken into account. And each case is unique. You just have to think on your feet and hope you handled it right. In my meeting with the trio described above, I paid no attention, didn't look directly at them, and just kept walking forward while they turned around, apparently satisfied that, given my appearance, demeanor, and the distance between me and them, I posed no threat.

Yet even for the savvy, danger lurks. You might walk an area 100 times and nothing will happen, but it might the 101st time.

And it could happen the very *first* time you walk it. In poverty-stricken areas, where opportunities are slim and serious problems are common, there's a greater chance that someone, especially a teenager, will act irrationally. Risk or fear of apprehension are not in the calculations made by such individuals.

Sometimes after walking through yet another poor section of the city, I felt that I was losing my normal sense of cautiousness. After walking thousands of blocks I was becoming habituated to my surroundings. Letting one's guard down like this can be dangerous. One Sunday afternoon I passed at least twenty clusters of youths in the South Bronx without giving it any thought. The problem is that each cluster is a new possible threat to one's safety and must be properly approached. Fortunately, my reality check worked in time.

Although I was never attacked or robbed while walking through the neighborhoods of New York, I did have some close calls. Perhaps I had more but was unaware of them. I was walking down a street in the early evening in Cypress Hills, Brooklyn, and saw striding toward me three large men in their twenties wearing dark clothes and low-slung shorts. It was too late to cross the street, and as they came nearer I couldn't help but notice that they were not leaving me any room on the sidewalk to pass. The darkening twilight sky, accompanied by large gray clouds, made the men look blurry and somehow more menacing. I reluctantly walked between numbers one and two, thereby invading their space, but saying hello as I did so. They did not respond. Rather, they had mean looks on their faces. But nothing happened, and my hello, however tepidly received, may have done it. It probably signaled to them that I meant no disrespect. But who knows?

One incident in particular has remained vivid in my memory. A friend of mine had asked me to take him to a "tough part" of the city. I was reluctant, not wanting to put him in danger, but he insisted and I finally agreed. We were near 182nd Street, in the Fordham section of the Bronx, and I was looking at one of the many wall murals that are so pervasive in the poorer areas of the city. The mural featured the image of "Big Junior," a dark-skinned Hispanic man who had died a few years back at the age of forty-seven.

From the way the mural looked, I got the impression that he might have been a gang leader. I read the poems and the names and appraised the artwork. My friend began making critical comments about the mural's quality, laughing as well.

"Be careful what you say," I admonished him. "You never know who's watching."

"I don't see anyone," he responded. "Don't worry so much."

And then as we turned to leave, a burly young Hispanic man in a T-shirt and low-slung shorts approached us. By his rolling gait (sometimes called a "pimp walk") and the narrow set of his eyes, I sensed a challenge coming—and I was right.

"Yo, can I help you with something?" The words were neutral, but from the hard-edged tone the question was clearly "What are you looking at?" or "Why are you (whom I don't know) staring at this mural?" My response was deliberately nonchalant, designed to head off a confrontation.

"I was just admiring how beautiful the artwork was. How do they do that on such a big surface?" I said.

He then explained the technical details of how the mural was created, which was my goal. I had figured that once he began discussing it, his anger, whatever it was fueled by, would dissipate. And so it was. He calmed down.

"And who was Big Junior?" I asked when he finished.

"That was my father," he said, "and our family put up this up in his memory."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to see he passed away at such a young age," I replied. "What happened?"

"Oh, he had diabetes."

"Gee, that's really tough, but at least you found a really good way to remember him." And that was it. No conflict. No problem. But imagine if I had been laughing or smiling and he saw that.

Without belaboring the point, there's a stereotype of the average New Yorker as a person who can be cynical, hard, and distrustful. Moreover, he *must* act this way to protect himself from the sometimes unforgiving environment in which he functions. Some of the people I met were like that, but the overwhelming majority were friendly, engaging, open, and helpful. This was especially

noteworthy because they usually had no idea why I was even talking to them.

Overall there's a spirit of helpfulness in the city that is, by most accounts, more prevalent than, say, thirty years ago, largely because of perceptions that the city is safer today than it used to be. Personal observation confirms that. Leaving the Fifty-ninth Street subway station in Manhattan, I spy an old man climbing the steps slowly. A woman of about thirty-five or so, with a long ponytail and wearing a red jacket, looks at him and asks, "Need help?" "No," he says. What's striking is that *she's* dragging along a heavy suitcase. A minute later a stranger helps *her* take the suitcase up the steps and then walks off into the night, a silent act full of meaning in a city of millions. And it's infectious, I soon discover. Several hours later I run across Third Avenue to help a woman secure a cab. Was I influenced by what I saw earlier? I'm not sure, but it's quite possible.⁸

I meet James Terry, a youngish-looking Parks Department employee at Harlem's Marcus Garvey Park, who originally hails from Georgia, and ask if I can use the park's bathroom. "Sure," he says, "but I'll have to take you in, because it's off-season." We enter a subterranean area beneath the pool. It's dark and gloomy with shiny brown and yellow bricks lining the walls. When his supervisor walks by, James suddenly puts his arm around me and says to the boss, "This is my cousin." He does this again with a broad smile to someone else a minute later. Seeing the look of skepticism that greets this claim (James is black and I'm white), he adds, "Adopted."

"Well, we're all brothers under the skin," I say, jokingly.

"Oh, you'd be amazed," James says. "When we have our annual get-togethers in Thomson, Georgia, I meet all these white people in the family—Italians, Scottish, you name it." James is a fount of information about the community. He tells me there's a seven-course, fifty-cent lunch available daily at the community center on 123rd Street and gives me tips about various local hangouts. The park is safe, he asserts, "except for nighttime, when you get the winos and the riffraff."

Yet there is an edge that residents have. It's a style of interaction that can be seen by outsiders as rude, rough, and "in your face." Natives take it in stride and usually give as good as they get. As I mentioned earlier, I've lived in other big cities, and you can't do that in most places without offending or confusing people. You make a sarcastic joke and they don't get it, largely because they have no experience with such humor.⁹ The following conversation initiated by a black woman in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, probably in her thirties, illustrates the point. I'm walking my dog, and she says, "That's a nice-lookin' dog you got there."

"Thank you," I reply, "and she's friendly."

"Oh, you're trying to give her away?" she counters.

"Never, not a dog like this," I say with a smile.

"Naw, you wouldn't ever do that, would you?"

The banter continues in this vein for a few more minutes. In essence, this is a form of self-entertainment, New York-style.

Walking around the city is like being on stage. You can't opt out and just leave when people begin talking to you. To do so can be risky. I was speaking on my cell phone with someone as I walked down a street in Red Hook, Brooklyn, when I was accosted by a tall man wearing a black bandanna who began kidding around with me. I went along with it, and he laughed loudly and pronounced me to be "cool." He then asked, "Have you got any money you can spare?"

I responded with an incredulous look and said, "Are you kidding? Do I look rich?"

He laughed hysterically, bid me a good day, and took his leave. Ignoring him might well have provoked him.

Sometimes, though, the tack taken can be much cruder, usually when something's at stake. It's Good Friday and a young black man is trying to sell candy in Central Park, but there aren't many takers. A white man in his twenties wearing a Harvard sweatshirt strolls by and pays no attention to the younger man's refrain, "Wanna buy some candy, cheap?"

Angered with being ignored, the younger man yells, "Hey, I'm trying to get to Harvard too, dickhead. Buy some candy. Gimme a break."

Well, anything is possible in America, so perhaps the idea is not so far-fetched. People from poor areas sometimes do get into schools like Harvard. No one else reacts either.

I learned to expect the unexpected, or at least to be ready for it. You start out with an objective, you achieve it, but along the way something else happens. I was able to get a man I was meeting for the first time to show me his apartment in the projects. When I entered, I could immediately see that he loved the color red. Everything in the apartment was red—dishes, microwave, silverware, or, if you will, “red-ware,” coat hangers, chairs, sofas, the very walls—all were in a bright red color.

“When did you fall in love with red?” I asked him.

“Ever since I was a child,” he replied.

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I just love the color.” And he didn’t appear at all embarrassed by it, treating it as a basic component of his persona.

Yet the way he had personalized his home was private until I walked in. Did he realize that to an outsider this color scheme might look weird? Perhaps he was proud of it. Maybe he wanted to see my reaction. What was the underlying meaning behind such a hobby? I can’t say.

Thus, we see that when you are allowed access to someone’s home turf, all sorts of things can emerge. And this is just another of the hundreds of examples I could give of why this was the most fascinating research project I’ve ever done.

And now we begin.