

## THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

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Through fieldwork and travel I became a geographer. Exploring the relationship between people and their environments, be they familiar settings or exotic ones, is a prime privilege of this profession. I think of fieldwork as the lifeblood of my academic career, the stuff that revs me up for another year of teaching, writing, and administration. In the field, theory is grounded; there, rigid theory becomes supple. Experiences in the field add legitimacy and relevance to work in the classroom.

On a personal level, fieldwork restores my deep sense of wonder at the diverse ways in which humans create their homes on earth, despite enormous obstacles. Granted, I've worked in beautiful places—the cays of Belize, the Mexican highlands, and the Andes of Venezuela and Bolivia. Save for one or two unpleasant episodes, I've been fortunate during my various field excursions. That said, much of what goes on in the field is not discussed, either formally or informally. This frustrated me as a graduate student, and it still frustrates me even though I've tallied twenty years of experience and I send my own students into the field. Most of what I've learned was through trial and error, beginning as a budget traveler hitchhiking in Europe and Africa and evolving into a more seasoned scholarship of transnational research in Virginia and Bolivia.

Most field geographers of my generation seem to have acquired field skills on their own, for courses on field methods are seldom offered in American geography departments. Once they may have been standard fare, but when I entered graduate school in the 1980s such topics were subsumed in the all-purpose and oft-dreaded research-methods courses that posed mainly theoretical and epistemological questions. Research design generally assumed an availability of large data sets and controlled environments. Qualitative methods were given short shrift: unscientific, soft. Occasional discussions might rate “insider” versus “outsider” perspectives or address the “objectifying” of our “subjects.” Though valid graduate-seminar topics, these tended to have a curare-like effect, paralyzing future field researchers. Underlying all was a message: Engaging real-world people is too messy and problematic, and it is generally much safer to theorize the perspectives of women, minorities, or subalterns than to talk with them.

Graduate students were encouraged to read the landscape and were given some guidance for doing so in the uplands and plains of central New York State. It takes little to convince geographers that much can be learned from careful observation of the human environment. With practice we became skilled at classifying landscape types, photographing them, and mining historical records and photographs to interpret landscape evolution. Oddly, these valuable and challenging field exercises

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