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MY DAY JUST GOT NICER

Why British people should learn to love shop assistants

HERE'S SOMETHING THAT never happened to me in London. I'm at the checkout of Ralphs - the Tesco of Los Angeles - with a mountain of shopping, but no loyalty card, and Sherelle, the checkout girl is incredulous. "What's the matter, you don't want to save \$50?" But instead of shrugging and ringing up the bill, as is *de rigueur* in London, Sherelle hands me a form and buzzes her boss to authorise an immediate discount. Her boss is busy so she borrows a card from the middle-aged couple behind me. By the time I leave, we've had a pleasant chat - Sherelle, the couple and I - that went from store cards, through Dubya's tax cut (Sherelle was a big Democrat) and eventually the books of Ralph Waldo Emerson, on which, it was decided, I should spend my savings.

All of which confirms the following crass and sweeping generalisation: Americans are more sociable than the British.

Whether they pip the Australians, I can't say, but Londoners in particular are well out of the running. In LA, we natter. Strangers ask how you're doing as you pass them in the street, names are abbreviated from the get-go and smiles are returned, even by beautiful women with husbands. Admittedly kids in Compton are shooting each other for wearing blue hats on a red street, which isn't very friendly, and the LAPD is yet to win any prizes for bonhomie. But in west LA, where Johnny Punchclock and Jo Schmo park, shop and raise families, sociability is a habit.

When I first got here, the "have a nice day" tic that America seems to implant in its young sounded so superfluous, so lobotomised and insincere that I would rise righteously to the bait. "Hi! How you doing today?" turned into an examination of our goals in life and the key to happiness. Within two weeks, the

girl at Fatburger and the SKY bar valet actually refrained from asking the deadly question because they realised that their lives were too short. Of course, they don't care how you're doing. Try telling the boy at McDonald's, the one with no stars and a skin complaint, how you are: "How am I? So nice of you to ask. Well, my wife left me yesterday on account of my heroin problem, my dog's got a gammy knee, and I've got a splitting headache..."

There's something tragic and bodysnatchery about millions of cheerful service-culture lemmings chirping Pavlovian pleasantries, but on balance "have a nice day" beats a scowl or a shrug. And Americans will say it anyway. Life is certainly too short to fight small talk, just as it's too short to insist on tomato, instead of "tomayto". Which is why, after a month or so, I fell in with the world of American chat. It's much more fun.

For example, in shops, don't wait for an introduction, go ahead and use their names on the badges. In the USA, the likes of Sherelle live by these accoutrements of benign Sovietism: Ralphs, Sherelle, We Welcome Your Business. Not so in London. It's invasive to wander into Dixons and, without an introduction, say "Hey Bob, like the red jacket, that's really working for you. Why dontcha get me some of those good Duracell double As?" But if Bob were American, he'd love it, you could address him like an old pal. Go back the next day and he'll recognise you, probably remember your name, shake your hand and, if he's popping out for a second, he'll tell his fellow salesman: "I gotta run, but this is my friend, helluva guy from London, take good care of him now".

Once you get through the motor reflex of the initial greeting, the American penchant for telling their life story to complete strangers kicks in. But why? Well, in LA - and in the spirit of small talk - the weather no doubt plays its part. The puddles and a sharp breeze of Hackney makes you huddle and zip up, while Californian sunshine lends itself to an easier, open mien. But there's so much else. Britain's cramped island mentality, shot through with class and a long history of invasion, has led to more defensive, private manners. On the other hand, America is immense, full of new frontiers and hope, permeated by the great existential equaliser of the fabled American dream, the feeling that we're all ultimately chasing the same thing. We're all in this thing together.

Leaving Ralphs, 50 bucks up, I actually said: "Have a nice day", and meant it. It's hard, coming from London, to say stuff like that with a straight face, it felt like a red letter day of my naturalisation. No matter what Jim Morrison said, people aren't that strange when you're a stranger. Not at Ralphs anyway.