

Everyday Altruism on the Williamsburg Bridge

September 10, 2010

He was unresponsive and wide-eyed when we reached him, spread over both bike lanes. The blood from his head had already formed a thick stream that was spilling onto the subway tracks below; his bike, the handlebars turned 90° from the impact, was still tangled in his legs. None of us had any medical background, so we did what we could: those with phones called 911; two people used their bikes as barriers to make sure people slowed down; others spoke to him in Spanish, offering comfort and trying to keep him awake; my shirt, the only useful item I had on me, became a makeshift bandage to stop the blood.

Twenty-five minutes later, the paramedics finally arrived, and though the man was frightened about his immigration status*, the EMT's assured him that "no es importante." His head was bandaged, his neck put in a brace, and he was wheeled down on a gurney. Three of us stayed with him, walking his bike down, acting as traffic control to those speeding down the hill, and—once she arrived—reassuring his new wife. About forty-five minutes after the accident, the ambulance doors closed, and the three of us said good night. I biked home minus a shirt, reflecting on how a bunch of strangers calmly banded together to help another stranger...and how it's not all that surprising.

I don't know if I've told anyone this before: six years ago, my cat was hit by a car. While I was fretting over how I was going to pay for the operation, a stranger quietly paid the bill and left before I could thank him. This is obviously an extreme case of generosity, but in some ways it, too, is not all that surprising.

It's so easy to focus on instances of human callousness because they're so easy to remember. If I think hard enough, I could probably name the dozen or so times in this city strangers have been mean to me; but I couldn't begin to count the hundreds of times I've seen people holding the door open or giving up their seats or helping carry a stroller up the stairs—all for strangers. The negative stands out so much not because it's the norm but because it's the exception. Our natural altruism toward each other is the rule.

On Saturday on the Williamsburg Bridge, that rule definitely stood out.

**Frightened enough to stagger up against our pleas, stumble around for a minute, and try walking down the bridge on his own.*