



## HEATHER TOSTESON

### *THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS IN AN ESTRANGED SOCIETY, AN ESTRANGING TIME*

*The point, though, is that we all go forward with the presumption of good faith in our fellow citizens because that presumption of good faith is essential to a vibrant and functioning democracy.*

*Barack Obama*

#### *Why Now?*

Pondering this introduction as we developed this anthology, I was often mentally connecting images and scenarios that demonstrate our keen current need for kindness as a society. There is no dearth of them. Once invited in, they kept coming faster and faster, indeed in no time at all it felt like I was treading roiling, treacherous water. But suddenly, for no reason I can point to, my spirits lifted and I began to feel almost giddy as words rose up from the depths: *We're all in the same boat.*

Paradoxically, another set of images began to flow, ones that genuinely lifted my spirit: Falling into an unexpectedly intimate conversation with a stranger on an airplane flight, both of us free to share in a way that we couldn't with our closest friends, feeling, as I said good-bye and walked away, like a treasure chest, their confidences and revelations stored deep inside. Going into a grocery store, the library or post-office and sharing that small comment that would let the person I saw, a recent refugee from Nepal or Ethiopia, the new pharmacy tech, the cashier, know that I saw them as a vivid and welcome addition to my real and my imagined community. The face of the young man in a wheelchair who spun around immediately when I asked to take his picture for our *Remembering Kindness* series, agreeing as soon as he knew I wouldn't show the cigarette he was smoking, the way his face opened into a beautiful smile as he said, "Oh yes, I have the memory right here in my mind." *Right here. Kindness.*

*We're all in the same boat.* I can see it. The deep blue paint of the hull