

*Excerpt from Chapter 1: “The Ascendance of Consequential Strangers”*

Studs Terkel has always appreciated consequential strangers. One of the most respected chroniclers of our time, his insights about people were honed in his mother’s boarding house on the near west side of Chicago where an assortment of characters held forth in the lobby, talking, arguing, and revealing aspects of their histories.<sup>13</sup> Terkel took it all in and, in his own words, later “earned a living as a listener,” culling ideas from lives of everyday people. In the preface to his first oral history—*Division Street: America*, a compendium of life in Chicago—he explained how he found his subjects:

“A tip from an acquaintance. A friend of a friend telling me of a friend or non-friend. A nursed drink at a tavern where a high rolling bartender held forth. A chance encounter with a bright-eyed boyhood companion. An indignant phone call from a radio listener. A face, vaguely familiar, on the morning bus. A stentorian voice, outside City Hall, calling out my name.”

Perhaps it’s obvious that to create an in-depth study of how urban life affects people, Terkel had to step outside of his inner circle. But all of us do. The challenges of modern life require more than our loved one can give. Whether it’s cutting through a maze of information about a particular disease, figuring out how to best invest the funds in our 401K, or deciding whether a hybrid car makes sense, we need what consequential strangers offer: a fresh perspective, different ideas, and connections and know-how that extend beyond our familiar.