

# ~ From One Inquiring Mind to Another ~

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“Example has more followers than reason.” Christian Nevell Bovee , #8, September 22, 2011

## HOW DAD DEALT WITH STRANGERS TAUGHT ME A LIFE-LONG LESSON

As a young boy I noticed how my father would greet other people he encountered on a trail or on a not-too-crowded street. He'd look at them, give a sincere smile or a simple nod, and maybe offer a brief non-obtrusive greeting. These were not people he knew, for then a conversation might ensue, but just individuals sharing a common path.

What impressed me at the time and forever after was how much respect my dad had for complete strangers, and in acknowledging their presence he elevated the both of them to a higher plane of existence.



Later in college, when I was taking one of many philosophy classes, I came across a phrase that really jumped out at me. It was that which my father had done naturally all his life. It came from one of the positive aspects of existentialism, and was called *intersubjective validation*. This basically means that when we relate to another as a subject (to be defined) we bestow humanity on both of us.

What does it mean to be a subject? We all have subjective knowledge: we know ourselves, our thoughts, our experiences, our feelings, our point of view, etc. Some philosophers refer to this as our subjectivity. Unfortunately, we often view the other, particularly a stranger or the unknown person, as an *object*, someone who's just there but whose subjectivity is hidden from us. Sometimes we are not even aware of another's objective presence at all.

Intersubjective validation is the acknowledgement of the presence of others in our environment as subjects: real people with thoughts, feelings,

families, etc., not just “objects” taking up space.

## EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE

Validating another as a subject is the acknowledgement of another's presence as a person, not just as some object to pass. And doing such may open up a whole new range of possibilities. For example, the late Father Bob Giguere once told me at a restaurant to never treat a waiter as a functionary. “She will love waiting on you, and both of you will be happy.” Moreover, this happiness is food for the soul, and, as we know, soul food has a longer staying power.

Other examples which touch home to me deal with friends who have become as if strangers when using email on the internet. I feel like an object (a mailbox, actually) when all I get are Forwards with no personal note or any introduction. Others seem to talk at me without ever using my name. (Salutations do not have to be passé.) The first time I received an email from Fr. Sean which was addressed as “Dear Joe” I almost fell off my computer swivel chair in shock that someone would honor me with such a preface on an email! Even though the email medium tends to be very impersonal, and we are often in a machine mode (when the person is not before us in person or in voice), I will try to keep the correspondence as personal as possible.

Now that I am riding my bike more, I like to wave a hand of gratitude and acknowledgement to the driver in a car who allows me to pass in front of him/her at a crosswalk or intersection. Such recognition of *the other* validates him/her as a subject just like myself with good qualities, agendas, and a life apart from, but equally important as mine, etc. It also predisposes her or him to look kindly upon me and maybe treat others as I have just done and not just functionaries in this too-often-objectified world.

*Intersubjective validation* is a fancy way of saying and practicing awareness, kindness, and respect. Jesus broke with tradition and spoke with the gentile women at the well, validating her personhood both as a woman and a gentile. My dad did it when he nodded to a stranger. My son-in-law John tells me that when he walks down some tough streets in San Francisco, individuals he passes would be angry if they were not acknowledged. Other cultures may differ as to what is respectful or not, but we all have our opportunities to help make this planet as human as possible by whatever way works for each of us.

## SWEET LAND IS OUR FAVORITE FLICK OF THE FORTNIGHT

“Set in 1920, Inge travels from Germany to rural Minnesota meet the man destined to be her husband. Bureaucracy and social morality cause major complications.” Restraint must be the height of sensuality because this was the most sensuous non-sexual film I have ever seen. I also liked the struggle between unbridled capitalism and socialism prescient of the 2008 financial meltdown. A tad overdone in parts, this is still a memorable movie.



## OTHER FAV INSPIRATIONS

- [My son's essay on gratitude](#)
- [Roth's powerful 9/11 tribute](#)
- Reading about [Feynman's life](#)
- [a little poem/bookmark](#)
- Rediscovering [TED](#)
- [Daily Meditations](#) by Fr. Richard Rohr (thanks to June Mastrocola)

MEANWHILE Thanks for the supportive words and/or emails of encouragement with this little muse-letter project. I will strive to meet your expectations. -Joe