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Sharing respect with everyone

The kind cab driver who drove me from the airport into Washington, D.C., last week is used to being treated like a nobody.

"People have bad flights, or they are late, or their day just didn't start out so good, I'm the one they blame," he said, his careful English tinted with the slightest Brazilian accent. "Ninety percent of the time, people are not so nice. They yell at me. They are rude. Why not? I'm just a cab driver. To them, I am someone to blame."

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, well. This — this is life. What are you going to do?"

Actually, we can do plenty if we heed author Robert Fuller's call to action.

For starters, we can recognize such rampant bad behavior toward subordinates for what it is: rankism.

"Rankism insults the dignity of subordinates by treating them as invisible, as nobodies," said Fuller, who was in Cleveland recently to promote his new book, "Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank."

"Nobodies are insulted, disrespected, exploited, ignored. In contrast, somebodies are sought after, given preference, lionized."

Once you have a name for it, said Fuller, rankism can be spotted everywhere. His list includes: corrupt executives, sexual abuse by clergy, elder abuse in nursing homes, scientists taking credit for their assistants' research.

We can easily add to the list of rankism from our own daily lives: Fast-food patrons who leave their trash on the table. Bosses who scream at their staffs. Physicians who call patients by their first name but insist they be called "doctor." Office employees who never acknowledge the woman serving up their soup in the company cafeteria.

What most abusers of rank don't realize is that their day is coming. Sooner or later, we all get taken for a nobody.

Fuller has been both a somebody and a nobody, and the latter experience nearly 30 years ago was the genesis for the book he finally wrote. A world-renowned physicist, he taught at Columbia University before becoming president of Oberlin College in the early 1970s. During his tenure at Oberlin, he was the go-to man in the country on issues of educational reform.

Then he left. Overnight, his life changed.

"I became a nobody," said Fuller, who now devotes much of his time to bringing independent media to other countries. "No one ever called me back. People could cancel on me and not keep their promises."

He hesitated. Then, just like the cab driver, he shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "I've had a lot of time to think about this over the years. I just want people to treat each other better."

If they aren't willing to do so voluntarily, Fuller is all for coercion. Democracy, he said, prides itself on staring power down. "The civil rights movement never would have happened if blacks had not insisted on better treatment. The same with the women's movement. I see this as the next revolution, the revolution to overcome rankism."

And so Fuller, now 66, dreams of a Dignitarian Movement.

"I'm too old to lead it," he said, his long arms folded against his chest. "I'm looking for someone who's 35 who can lead the movement. I need a Susan B. Anthony, who took Elizabeth Cady Stanton's idea of women's suffrage and turned it into a national movement."

Movements gain speed with a thousand small steps, and there are countless ways to rebuke rankism and stake a claim in personal dignity. I witnessed one of them last week when another cab driver returned to the airport from Washington.

A native Moroccan, he was dressed in a business suit when he picked me up at the airport.

I had to ask.

"This suit, ma'am?" he said, smiling. "Well, back in my country I was a businessman. I could not make enough money to support my four children, so we moved here. But I don't ever want anyone to think I am just someone they can push around."

He smiled when I asked him how most people treat him.

"Ninety percent of the time, ma'am, people treat me very well. And when they don't, I tell them: 'Not in my cab.'"

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