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R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Some people get it, some don't. It's not fair...but is it inevitable? Is bullying—between men and women, young and old, higher-ups and lower-downs—wired into us? **ELAINA RICHARDSON** sits down with a man who insists that "dignity is not negotiable."

HOW DO YOU CHANGE THE WORLD? How do you release an idea into the air, an idea so potent that it alters the way we all behave, rewrites laws, makes us see that imbalance, whether personal or geopolitical, stems from one fundamental cause? When it comes to social revolutions, there doesn't seem to be a eureka moment, except maybe in our own personal narratives. Think of racism, and Rosa Parks saying no in a moment of monumental bravery that echoed through the entire nation. And once our conscience is awakened, there's no going back. Can you imagine, for example, walking into a bar and being told you wouldn't be served a drink unless a man accompanied you? Outlandish, right?

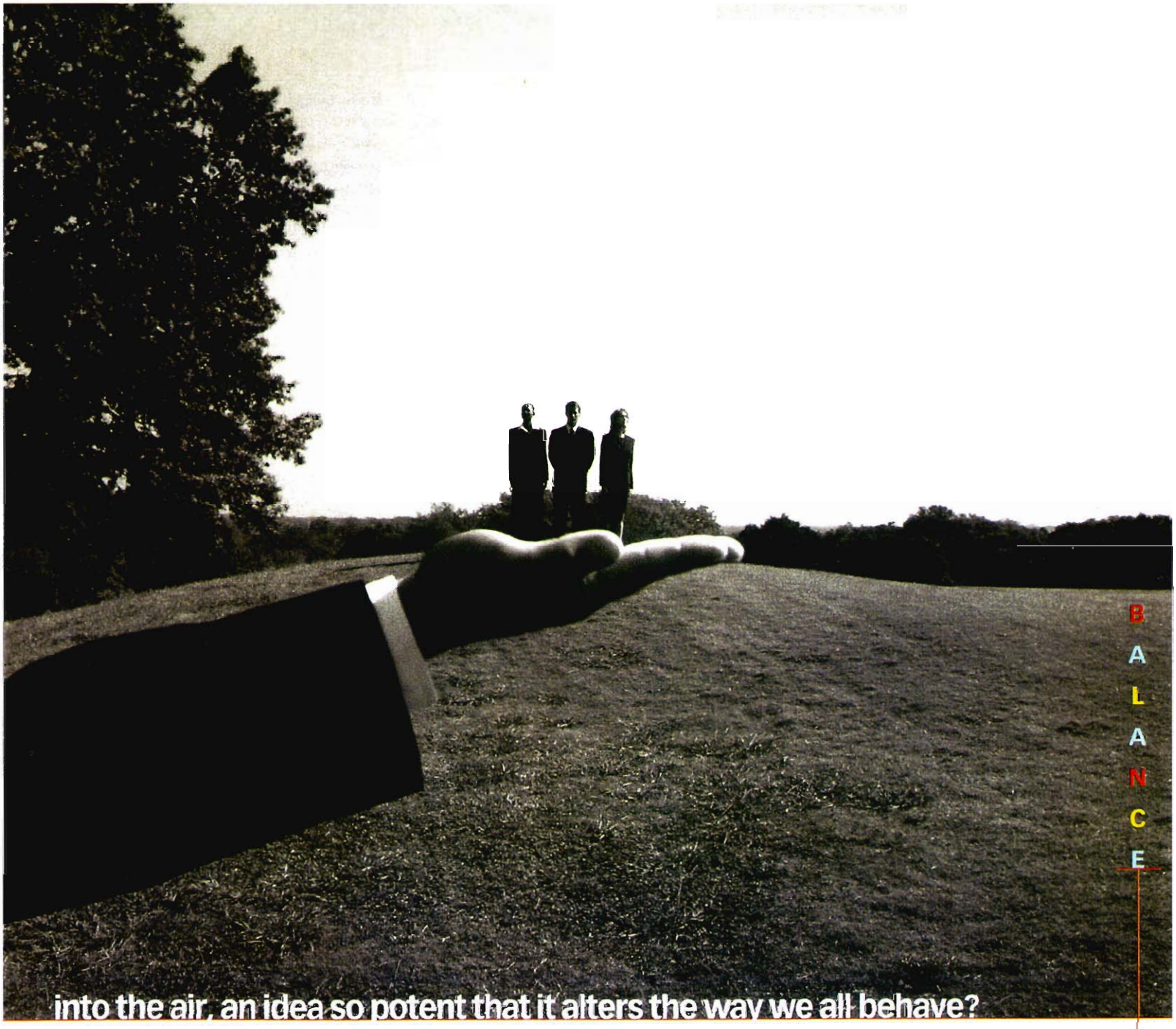
While it would be dangerously naive to imagine that we've overcome racism or sexism, we have dragged them into the light of discussion, they have been legislated against, and they have been given a name. Back in the 1960s, if a boss had patted my mother on the rump by way of "Good morning" (as I'm sure more than one did), she wouldn't have known what to call the behavior. She might even have been confused about whether it constituted an insult or a compliment. Flash-forward four decades, and you have my 11-year-old daughter's generation, ready to say "Hey, that's sexist!" faster than you or I can say "Whoa." If something pernicious has a name, it's easier to draw lines around it.

Sexist, racist, elitist—just ask any politician if these epithets sting. Now, according to the author Robert W. Fuller, we all have a new one to learn: *rankist.* This is the term he's coined for what he says is the mother of all social injustice. He has just published a book, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank* (New Society), the goal of which is to make it "okay to discuss the uses of power with those holding positions of authority, with an eye toward distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate uses of power."

His bottom line is not that rank itself is bad. He makes it very clear from the start that he thinks humans differ greatly in talent and skill levels and that hierarchical arrangements are the best way we've found to manage our lives. What he means by *rankism* is a sort of worldwide epidemic of kicking the dog, a perpetual habit of abusing those we perceive as being lower on the ladder and of being abused by those above. A soccer mom yelling at her kid on the sideline, an executive telling his assistant to skip lunch and go pick up his dry cleaning, a tenured professor taking credit for research done by a grad student—all of this is rankist and has to stop.

Rankist behavior can be found at every stage in an organization; it's not always the CEO who's the culprit. One of the most cringe-making examples I've heard of took place at the lowest rung: A magazine intern arrived for her first day on the job as chicly put together as she could be. She had agonized about her outfit all weekend, trying things on and pulling them off again, before finally settling on a black suit with a cream T-shirt and a long silk scarf draped around her neck. When she reported for duty, she was assigned to an assistant editor, just a year or two older than herself, who'd only been employed for a few months. The assistant's workspace was crowded, with papers, books, and CDs everywhere. It was clear they would be busy. What wasn't clear was why the assistant took a cold look at the intern in her smart new clothes and then ordered her to go under the desk

How do you release an idea



into the air, an idea so potent that it alters the way we all behave?

BALANCE

and organize the morass of papers stored there. She was not to pull the material out and sort it elsewhere, she was to *stay* under the desk until it was all done. Apparently, in the hours it took, the assistant sat at the desk talking on the phone, swinging her legs back and forth, occasionally kicking the intern as she spun. When I was first told this story, I was so shocked I laughed. But my revulsion was nothing compared to what the former intern must feel every time she recalls that morning. Fuller believes we've allowed this kind of discrimination to flourish because it seems disconnected from race or age or sexual orientation—seems, in fact, just the way things are. His goal is to have us identify such humiliations so that they can be ended. Put simply, his thesis is that none of us will live balanced lives until we fully embrace the principle that "dignity is not negotiable."

Rankism allows us to crush those lower on the ladder.

HERE'S WHAT I'VE READ ABOUT BOB Fuller before we meet: He's tall (which he figures is the main reason he was appointed president of Oberlin College when he was just 33 years old). He's married, the father of four grown children, and lives in Berkeley. He has had a varied work life, moving from professor of physics at Columbia University to the Oberlin presidency to advocate for justice. And he's messianic on the topic of somebodies versus nobodies, a subject that I realize I've hitherto not really thought about and that is making me strangely uneasy. It sparks memories of Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront,* mumbling out those great loser lines: "I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is ›

PHOTOGRAPH BY FREDRIK BRODEN

what I am...." It makes me recall a story my mother loved to tell about her father's great ability to socialize up or down the chain of class. He was a milkman, doing his rounds in a horse-drawn cart, able to curse with porters and say, "Lovely day, ma'am" to ladies. This fact invariably makes me ache—his chameleon charm sounding undignified to me, as if he was always false, always a flatterer, afraid to be simply himself.

When I do meet Fuller, I'm struck by how easy he is in his own skin, the way spiritual people often are. He's a speed runner and has the lean frame the sport demands, making him appear younger than his 66 years. He also has enormous curiosity, asking questions that are honed to find out how you got to be whoever it is you are. He conveys trust, confidence, and the quiet assurance that comes from many years clearing a path through one's own prejudices and assumptions.

Somebodies and Nobodies (which Fuller first titled *The Nobody Manifesto,* until one publisher too many turned it down on the grounds that "nobodies don't buy books") was many years in the making. As Fuller explains it, "In the early '90s I found myself studying the arc of my own identity and its periodic crystallization into something specific and marketable, and those much larger times when it was diffuse and unmarketable." He began to see that issues of rank, of where he stood in the social order, not only governed whether or not he could get his phone calls returned, but went to the heart of the social advocacy that had come to dominate his life.

"It started off very small," Fuller notes, "but I finally realized that rank issues are everywhere—from my own treatment of my children to the medical office." He suggests asking yourself these questions: Why is it that we "learn the names of our doctors, but not those of their assistants who schedule our appointments"? Why do we "expect our employer to pay our benefits and contribute to our social security, yet we do not provide the same for those who do household labor for us"? Taken to their inevitable conclusions, these are not small-potato questions.

The attitudes behind our personal behavior—this sort of sucking up to those we perceive to have authority and brushing off of those without—have a part to play in corporate corruption, school dropout rates, even in terrorism. This might seem far-fetched, but what Fuller argues is that "the notion of rankism is the bridge that links two revolutions of the 20th century—civil rights and human rights." At the macro level, equal dignity translates into social policy. "The nonnegotiable demands of a dignitarian movement are likely to include," Fuller writes, "a living wage, universal healthcare, and quality education for all." At the level of daily life, what Fuller is promoting is shockingly simple: "The fact that life isn't fair doesn't mean we have to be unfair to each other.... We don't want authority over others half so much as we want to avoid subservience ourselves. Equal dignity both suffices and satisfies."

"If life isn't fair, it doesn't mean we have to be unfair to each other."

THE PRISM THAT I'VE ALWAYS seen life through is radically challenged by what Fuller says. I believed the ills of the world sprang from deep sources, with poverty, class, and race leading the list of demons. But I'd always presumed that one of the indicators that these forms of discrimination were being overcome was the fact that some of us had climbed the social ladder, broken through the glass ceiling, trailblazed. I was the first in my family to go to college, the first to have a major job in one of the glamour industries (publishing) that granted endless perks, from hobnobbing with celebrities to a clothing allowance. I had made it past the velvet rope. I thought I was chasing what Brando gave up on—I was a contender, a somebody. According to Fuller, I am simply in thrall to the "somebody mystique," and have fallen for the notion that there's something superhuman about those who have high rank, whether they're celebrities, politicians, old-fashioned aristocrats, or new-fashioned technocrats. In short, I've mythologized my own specialness in being the "one who made it." As Fuller teases out this idea, I become defensive about my character, a bit like J.Lo—*Used to have a little, now I have a lot.... I'm still Jenny from the block.* So that's one element of the unease he's stirred up—I've sometimes feared in my life that I might be a fake, that I might not deserve the good fortune that's come my way.

But what's new and startling to me is this: While I might not be prone to either bullying or toadyism, by coveting "high status for the perks and protections it offers," I've played my part in holding up the edifice of rankism. Here's Fuller's explanation: "We covet the rewards that come to the somebodies of the world, so we're willing to endure a lot for a shot at the life we see them leading—even if that shot is a long one. Should we, by hook or crook or sheer luck, acquire fame and fortune, then we too could insulate ourselves from the cruelties of life." What's so bad about wanting that? Well, while Fuller repeatedly makes the point that he's not against earned rank and appropriate use of authority, the problem is that nine times out of ten we try to freeze the cycle, to stay "somebody" forever (have you noticed how the most successful people cluster together at a party, bolstering each other's status?), and that makes us prone to flattery and isolated from the conditions that might have inspired our success and creativity in the first place. Tommie Smith, the superstar American sprinter who took the gold medal for the 200 meter race at the 1968 Olympic games and famously gave the black power salute at the awards ceremony, sees it this way: "Somebody, nobody—in my time I've been both. Most of us have." And if you don't agree that sooner or later in life each one of us will be taken for a nobody, then Fuller suggests you pay a visit to a nursing home.

Fuller's favorite example of the somebody-nobody paradigm is Einstein—whom he groups with Darwin and (this for me was a leap) Paul McCartney—because all of them had second acts to their lives and didn't coast on their first fame. According to Fuller, Einstein "knew that he was ordinary CONTINUED ON PAGE 243

but he knew his rank had been earned in physics and physics alone, and instinctively avoided the accompanying enticements of fame—declining, for example, the presidency of Israel."

The lack of such awareness, Fuller argues, leads to hero worship and abuse of rank, the "mortar," as he would have it, of the rankist world we inhabit.

Instilling respect up and down the chain of command so that we can rebalance our relationships in the workplace, at home, even in how we as a nation treat other nations, is an idea that is not new, of course; Fuller cites several pages worth of books to read that have touched on these ideas. But the prospect of a dignitarian movement that links all of these spheres *is* new. As we've seen, in everything from the anger over the abuse of power that Enron represents to the challenge to the Catholic Church's authority, this is a movement that started before it had a label. Now Fuller has given the target a name. "That's what victims of rankism need in order to protest it, that's what links it to the other great protest movements," he says.

What happens next? Fuller hopes that we've embarked on a decades-long conversation that will radically alter how we treat one another. "It's going to be as unpleasant and as uncomfortable as was the conversation about sexism, and it will reverberate in the family, the bedroom, the boardroom, internationally," Fuller says, smiling slightly to indicate that he's aware how grandiose he sounds. This man who has set out, quixotically perhaps but with great sincerity, to improve the world glows with the sort of visionary fervor that comes from having seen a better tomorrow. As he sees it, we're closing in on a time when we will view rankism "in the same way that most of us have now come to view racism and sexism—as behaviors no longer to be sanctioned. It is not hard to imagine a day when everyone's equal dignity will be as self-evident as everyone's equal right to own property or to free speech." In my own story, understanding what Bob Fuller has seen definitely qualifies as a eureka moment.

Elaina Richardson is a frequent contributor to O.

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and didn't fall for the somebody mystique about himself." While Einstein was certainly "asking the right scientific questions," Fuller emphasizes that Einstein was simply the first to make the right conclusions from the available data, not the only one equipped to do so. "Long after he'd ceased to hit any jackpots, Einstein kept trying to unify the laws of physics, but he was no more successful than others in the field. Similarly, after Darwin published his theory of evolution, his work did not stand out from that of the other researchers.... [Einstein] could easily have been seduced by celebritization,