

# Somebodies and Nobodies

## How We Abuse Each Other

John Steiner

■ *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank* by Robert W. Fuller. New Society Publishers, 2003.

When Bob Fuller was in grade school, he couldn't understand why a young classmate of his was made to stand out in the hall as punishment for coming to school with dirty fingernails. It was only in hindsight that he realized that she was perceived as "white trash" by a middle class teacher. Bob, the son of a man who invented the solar cell and a boy already on the college track himself, would never have been forced into such silent humiliation.

Years later, he found himself in a hallway of another sort, making phone calls from telephone booths to people whose secretaries put him on hold. Shortly before that, when he had been the president of Oberlin College, those same secretaries had been trying to call him, hoping to win an appointment with this young thirty-three-year-old college president for their bosses. Now, without a title, without a role, without rank (he was beginning to invent citizen diplomacy, but had no way to talk about it yet), ex-president Fuller too had become a nobody.

Neither he nor his young elementary school friend were treated the way all religions, in one form or another, enjoin their followers to behave. But

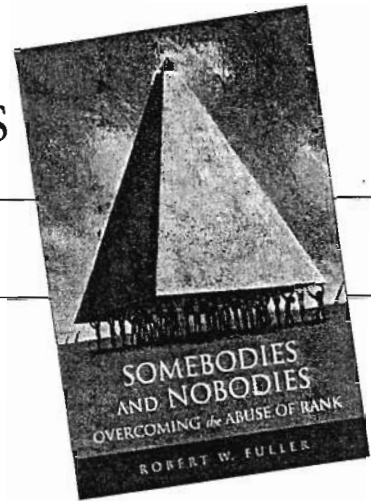
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why? Fuller explores this phenomenon in his new book, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, which is essentially a manual for implementing the golden rule.

One of Fuller's most surprising points—and one that Jesus understood well—is that it is actually useful to be a

nobody, at least for a time. To withdraw from glitz and glamour, from role and identity, from security and success and inhabit the land without rank or expectations is useful. In the fields of winter a new seed, temporarily dormant, can come to make use of the water and warmth that follows. Such a seedbed is a *sine qua non* for creativity and change. Whether via a time-out or a sabbatical, whether prepared for or suffered through, being a nobody allows us to become better somebodies the next time around.

In the tradition of two of America's greatest social commentators, Alexis de Tocqueville and Thorstein Veblen, Fuller points out that we are all somebodies and nobodies, that dignity is non-negotiable. We have all treated those of lesser station badly by pulling rank, and we all have suffered indignities from bullies and higher ups. Perhaps it is only by examining how rank and power is abused that we may finally come to learn how to treat each other well.



I remember breaking the rules at a resort by driving my car right up to my room, when it was clear that golf carts were the accepted transportation from parking lot to abode. I was in a hurry

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(I was on vacation!), so I used my rank as "the customer" to intimidate a bellhop and stop him from trying to tell me what I should do.

We all act like this in one way or another. In fact, *Somebodies and Nobodies* is full of examples of rank abuse in the workplace, in families, in education, in health care, and in foreign policy. A professor appropriates the research of a junior assistant. A doctor demeans a nurse. Wives are beaten; children are abused and bullied. The financial scandals of the dot.com boom and the priest scandals in the Catholic Church come to mind.

It is going to take a new movement to stop individuals, groups, and nations from abusing their power and privilege and treating others badly. To the nobodies of the world—to the poor and dispossessed, to patients struggling for a true bill of rights, to students fighting to have more control over their own education, to the elderly seeking more dignity—Bob Fuller offers what all nascent

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movements need, a name for their problem. "Rankism" expresses the principle that the abuse of all forms of power—physical, mental, social, and spiritual—is not only unacceptable, but, like racism or sexism, is ultimately not a viable practice either financially or socially.

The cure for rankism is not complete equality (rank based on merit and natural ability is healthy and necessary), but rather recognition. Rankism engenders "recognition disorders," another Fuller coinage. Sometimes those without recognition become terrorists, whether at Columbine or on 9/11; and sometimes they become our school dropouts, our mentally ill; our misfits, our unemployed.

As a mathematician and physicist (he received his Ph.D. under the tutelage of John Wheeler, who rebirthed Einstein's theory of gravitation), as an economist grappling with international disparities of wealth, as a teacher of high school dropouts and delinquents, as a college

teacher and administrator, and now as a writer of fiction and non-fiction, Fuller's genius is to cut through the shadows of the way things are and offer illumination for the way they could be.

Readers of this magazine will identify with the fact that the new bottom line is how we treat each other, not as instrumentalities and objects, but as caring, sharing, loving human beings. That said, we read this book at our own risk, because whatever rankist tendencies we secretly harbor will be revealed (no pain, no gain!). However, we will walk away with a new truth serum and a new tool kit. Not only will we be able to recognize these tendencies in ourselves, but we will now see them in our families, our communities, and our institutions, including our governments. Once we have discovered the root of these disorders, we are challenged to become radicals, working on the front lines for a more just and sustainable society, brought into being by what Robert Fuller calls "the dignitarian revolution." □