

By all that was decent and proper – by all rules of decorum and respectability – that conversation never should have happened. The bitterness between Jews and Samaritans made it unpatriotic. Worse yet, it would have been seen as lewd by any observer. Even for husbands and wives to converse in public was considered inappropriate. Unmarried men or women of any virtue would never strike up conversations with members of the opposite sex in public setting. It just wasn't done.

To a casual observer at the time, this would have been today's equivalent of a suspicious looking foreigner approaching a woman waiting alone for her clothes at a laundromat and asking, "How about you and me going across the street for a few drinks and getting to know each other?" That's why the woman was shocked and responded with distrust and irritation. Her initial reaction to him had all the cordiality of "Buzz off, fella; unless you want a face full of pepper spray!"

So again, amidst social prohibitions, cultural distance, major potential for misunderstanding, and not a single compelling reason for there to be any contact, the moment should have passed with the woman quietly getting her bucket filled and then hurrying away, while Jesus stared off in the opposite direction or studied his fingernails or pretended he was dozing. But no! Instead he seemed determined to make some kind of human contact with the woman, even at the risk of misunderstanding, rebuff, criticism and awkwardness.

Happily, we're no longer stuck with the restrictive social taboos of that time, but breaking through the real or imagined barriers to human contact is still a problem, isn't it? Had it been me instead of Jesus at that well, I would have commented on how hot and humid it was, thanks to last night's thunderstorm; or if necessary, I might have asked her if she knew if there were a men's room in the area. But it's doubtful that it would have gone any further than that. It certainly wouldn't have been written up and included in the Bible. Whether from cautiousness, timidity, shyness, or fear of making some kind of faux pas, my inclination would have been to remain silent. "What if when I speak I get only an icy, withering look in response. "What if she thinks I'm making a pass?" "What if I come across as some sort of a weirdo?" "What if he wants to be left alone?" These are only a few of the possibilities that haunt and restrain me. For whatever reasons, encounter after encounter in our shared life remains a cold, non-happening. It seems easier and safer to stick with the meaningless, empty, verbal filler that says no more than "How are you?", "Nice to see you", "Have a nice

day.” It passes for human contact but is actually only an audible gimmick used instead of being in touch.

It’s tragic, because we rob ourselves of some of God’s most available gifts to us. One writer said it well: “We are brought to life through living encounter with our fellow human beings. We need not only the field of meaning which they have created, but we also need their living presence, their actual activities. It is within the encounter with others that we become fully human.”

Exactly! And without question his sense of just that is what fueled Jesus’ appetite for and excitement over all those incidental meetings along the way, the chance encounters, the timid voice so easy to miss or ignore. It’s why, with this woman at the well and some others, he was so determined to break into their isolation despite all conventional wisdom saying that it would have been best and safest not to. And let’s not just say it was somehow different for Jesus than for the rest of us. He too had to risk this with the same unknowns that bother you and me. In this case, for example, the woman might immediately have taken off running for the town square yelling that there was a Jewish masher hanging around the town well trying to put the moves on innocent women when they tried to get water.

So there is a lot that gets in the way of our discovering that there really are those miracles and graces and blessings on the other side of our timidity, our fear. We face it over and over again in each week of our lives: when we’re standing, for example, in a line full of tight-lipped, tired-looking, empty-eyed people, or when one of us is waiting for his car in one of those car dealer waiting lounges, or when I’m sitting on a plane and find the general appearance of the person sitting next to me intimidating. “No, not now, in this situation. There will be other times.” So another one goes by forever. It’s true that some of us are more introverted than others. When that’s so, it takes even more courage and is more stressful to dare to initiate human contact in impersonal or anonymous circumstances. It can be very difficult for some of us just to make ourselves speak those first words that break the silence or to make eye-contact or other gestures. Even so, doing so is what God has called each of us, in our own way, to be and to do: that is, to bring warmth to cold situations, to be a real person in impersonal circumstances, to restore life to dead spots in our surroundings, to be those who re-humanize life wherever it has become sub-human; to be (as Jesus described) light to our world and salt of the earth. Shy or outgoing it is a gift to ourselves and to our human surroundings that every one of us has to give.

But there is still more. The cordial gesture, the encounter can still abort. Even the most extroverted, gregarious person – the one who has no problem talking to anyone – may not be

making real human contact when he does so. Two persons can seem to be conversing, while what is actually going on is that two soliloquies are happening within earshot of each other. That's what it is when neither listens, neither is really present to the other, neither is taking the other seriously, nothing human or personal is being disclosed or allowed. It's quite possible for two persons to talk AT each other without talking TO each other.

One could hear a version of this when an older woman said to the younger daughter of her hosts, "How do you do, dear?" And very properly, politely and with a nice smile (as she had been taught) the little girl said, "Quite well, thank you." But then there was silence until the woman finally said, "Why don't you ask me how I am?" "Because," the little girl said with the same nice voice, "I'm not interested." Maybe it wasn't so explicit, but you've been in encounters like that, haven't you – where the form was there, but no substance?

The New Yorker ran a fantasy parable some years ago that spoke to this issue. An Insurance man, Grayson Thomas, was driving in Connecticut and hadn't sold a single policy on his entire swing through the area. So he pulled off the road and stopped and sat down in a small grove of trees. Softly, so softly, he was barely surprised to discover he wasn't alone, and a voice asked, "Tell me of your quest, please." "Quest," said Mr. Thomas. "Quest?" "I sell insurance." He opened his eyes and sitting beside him was a gossamer figure, translucent in the golden summer light. She was beautiful. "A seller of insurance!" she repeated in a warm, lilting voice. "Oh what wonderful secrets you must know!" "Actuarial tables are what I know," said Mr. Thomas. "Life expectancy, accident risks, incidence of arson," he went on. She drew back in awe. "Life! Death! The future! How great is the knowledge of your tables!" she cried. "Male children," said Thomas, "born today will live to be seventy-two. Teen-age boys will probably have an automobile accident of some kind!" She sank to her knees and took his hands. "Oh, let me come with you and learn your wisdom," she said. "Let me be your disciple and your friend. Let me be at your side and hear of the miraculous actuaries who guide you!" "I'll tell you what," said Mr. Thomas pulling out one of his cards. "Give me a ring sometime at the office and maybe we can have lunch." "I really need to get moving." Grayson Thomas made it back to Hartford by four-thirty. He walked to his desk and slipped a sheet of paper into the typewriter. Under "expenses of the trip" he wrote, "Solid prospect at Leggett's Bridge."

The sheer, blatant obtuseness of Grayson Thomas in that little parable is almost too familiar to be funny. Technically, he was in the conversation but he was so wrapped up in his narrow little "insurance world" that he remained oblivious to all the color, the inspiration, the

excitement that could have touched him if only he had listened enough to see through her eyes.

Something a little like that, then, is the other thing that causes us to pass close to each other without ever really getting in touch. The good, the gift, the possible miracle aborts because we've already decided what this encounter will be like. We're sure we know what his relevance is and what he's really about.

People who operate in that way eventually become quite jaded, cynical and weary of people. Not surprisingly, they end up feeling that everyone is just about the same, that there are few really interesting people around to be found, and that people in general are exhausting. That isn't, of course, the way people are. It's the way that person has prepared himself – trained himself – to experience them.

It's stupid and self-defeating. When you and I have before us a person with all their history, all their experience, all of their complexity, emotional color, their hopes, the changes in process within them, their perspectives, and then end up squeezing them into our own one-dimensional, pre-digested image of them, it's like skipping a gourmet feast because we're so much in the habit of eating at McDonalds.

Now the point in all of this isn't that we must try to turn every human contact into something breathtakingly profound, a fervent gut-spilling session, or the beginnings of eternal closeness. This is only to be reminded of the fact there are instances of God's grace to us, flashes of new insight and understanding. Experiences of warmth, moments of refreshment and yet more, right there at the grocery store check-out, in that brief elevator ride, passing you in hallways, there eating alone at the table next to you in the fast food place, maybe right next to you in the pew. But we never discover who or how until we determine to do so.

At least, keep this incident in mind, in which Jesus, without doing anything superhuman, supernatural, mystical, or mysterious, in a most-down-to-earth way became the very presence of God to that woman on that hot noon in Samaria. Something just like his little miracle at that well is a large part of what you and I are here to perform.