

Stranger in the aisle

by [Robert B. Horine](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

As I emerged from the dairy aisle in the neighborhood supermarket and turned toward the bagels, I spotted my old friend Terry Regan over near the soups. He saw me at the same time and we started toward each other. I hadn't seen Terry for nearly a year and he looked slimmer. Good for him, I thought; he needed to trim down a little.

We were grinning and had our hands stuck out to shake when I realized this wasn't Terry Regan. This wasn't anyone I knew at all. Still, our hands were out there and so we went on with the handshake and I said, "I'm Bob Horine. I thought you were someone else, but you're not. Who did you think I was?" Still grinning and shaking his head he said, "I don't know who I thought you were."

He introduced himself as Bob Halberson. Then he said, "Horine? Were you kin to Monk Horine?" No one ever called my Uncle Monk by his real name, Clarence Calhoun. Monk was a dozen years older than I, and Bob Halberson, I learned, was one of his high school classmates. He had been at Monk's military funeral and had done a critique of the service. Poorest playing of taps he had ever heard, and the sailors had to refold the flag several times before they got it right. A sorry spectacle.

After we got past the funeral Bob told me stories from high school days and then moved on to tell about his time in the navy. He had wanted to be a navy pilot, but said he did so poorly that he was given the option of becoming an ordinary U.S. sailor or joining the Japanese navy. Bob talked for 15 or 20 minutes until I had to leave to keep an appointment.

I've made other mistakes in identity. Once, in high school, I talked to a boy who was trying to move in on my girlfriend. I finished what I had to say and left him standing in the hall, speechless. No wonder. Wrong boy. Well, there are, after all, only so many faces to be shared among 6 billion people.

Recognizing people can be tricky business. After the resurrection Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for the gardener. The travelers to Emmaus didn't recognize Jesus until

he had broken bread with them. And the disciples fishing in the early light weren't sure of the identity of the man on the beach until Peter said, "It is the Lord!"

On Ash Wednesday my wife was delayed in getting to church. The imposition of ashes had been done. I was waiting in a back pew when she arrived. As if we had planned it, she turned to me and I took the ashes from my forehead and made the sign of the cross on hers, saying, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." In that moment I saw my wife in a way I cannot describe except to say it was a deeper kind of recognition, a discovery, a knowing beyond my experience of her through all the years of our life together.

Just before Easter I had a dream. Two friends were talking and in the middle of the conversation the world ended and they were changed and one said, seeing her friend clearly for the first time, "I had no idea!"—no idea of her true nature, the miracle of her friend's being, and of her own. The friends were seeing each other for the first time without the dark glass that obscures our mortal vision.

We are all connected because we are of the same stuff—"the dust contemplating itself," Teilhard de Chardin said—outcroppings of earth destined by God to become immortal spirit. How differently we might treat each other if we could always recognize every person in that way. How humbling to be aware of our common origin and our dependence on God for life. And how outrageously wonderful to see that God can do such things with a little dust—that he can and did and does and will.

We do get glimpses, now and then, here and there, in church, or maybe between the milk and the bagels.