

A second glance: The image of God in everyone

by [Richard J. Mouw](#) in the [December 25, 2007](#) issue

For several months during my time as a seminary student I worked the night shift at a local mirror factory. My title was prism inspector, and for every hour of work I was expected to check about a hundred car rearview mirrors for possible defects. But I was also required to take a ten-minute break each hour, to rest my eyes from intently staring at mirrors for the previous 50 minutes.

During these brief rest periods I would study for my seminary courses. Alongside the stacks of mirrors on my work bench was a small pile of books—Hebrew grammar, church history, systematic theology.

My attempts to cram some studying into my scheduled breaks were often frustrated, however, by the appearance of Jed, the night watchman. Jed always seemed to pass my way just as I was in the middle of some important reading. And he liked to talk.

I dreaded Jed's interruptions. Frankly, he did not strike me as a very bright human being, and he insisted on trying to engage me in conversations about topics that would not have interested me even if I was not so intent on studying. Jed seemed oblivious of whatever signals that I was sending about not wanting to be distracted from my reading.

Jed came along one night while I was reading a church history text. "You really like books, don't you?" he remarked. With a sigh I responded, "Yes, Jed, I really do like books, and right now I have to be reading this one in order to be ready for a test in class tomorrow." Jed was not to be ignored. "Yeah, Ernie really liked books too. He was always reading." Without lifting my eyes from my book, I mumbled "Ernie who?" "Ernie Hemingway," he responded.

Jed had my attention. "What do you know about Ernest Hemingway?" I asked him. He proceeded to tell me that he had worked for a while as a hunting and fishing guide for a wealthy physician who owned a local estate with large tracts of forest

land. His employer often hosted Hemingway, and when Hemingway came to stay the doctor would assign Jed to accompany the writer on hunting excursions.

“Yeah,” said Jed, “Ernie always had a book. He would read with a flashlight in the tent at night, in his sleeping bag. Sometimes the light kept me awake!”

As a college English major I had studied several Hemingway novels, and I always found him fascinating as a writer—and as a larger-than-life person. I was eager to hear more from Jed, who had suddenly become a more significant human being—a person who knew Ernest Hemingway, and who could call him “Ernie.”

Later I realized that this experience with Jed pointed to a real defect in my way of viewing other individuals. I had come to see Jed in a very different light just because he had known Hemingway. A seemingly insignificant human being had risen to a new status in my eyes because he had spent hours in the same tent with one of the great novelists of the 20th century.

Here is what troubled me about the experience: I am not going to come across many people who will surprise me by having a connection to one of my literary heroes. If Jed had not told me about “Ernie,” I would have continued to treat him as a person whom I could legitimately ignore.

Of course, Jed was related to someone greater than Hemingway, and I did not have to pump him with questions to find that out about that relationship. Jed was a creature of God, fashioned in the image of the divine. He was a person for whom Christ died. He had an eternal destiny—a fact about him that matters much to the Lord whom I serve.

Why did I have to wait until I found out about the Hemingway connection before I took Jed seriously? Why could I not have seen him right off the bat as a God-connected person?

OK, maybe I am being a little hard on myself. Jed did lack some people skills. And I was a student desperately trying to support my wife and myself while also wanting to succeed in my studies. Even after I found out about his experiences with Hemingway I knew that I could not devote too much of my time talking with Jed. And I suppose it is reasonable to say that even if I had kept Jed’s status as a friend of Jesus clearly in mind from the start, I still would not have owed him the kind of attention that would have distracted me from other important commitments.

But there is still a point here that I cannot ignore. The Christian life is a special way of seeing. "Open mine eyes that I may see / glimpses of truth Thou hast for me." And other human beings are high on the list of what we must work at seeing in a Christian way. However else I might rationalize the way that I had been responding to Jed, there can be no denying that I had not been attributing to him the value that God had placed on him.

To be sure, we can't always be thinking noble theological thoughts about every person we come across each day. It is unrealistic to expect that when we're going through the checkout line at the local supermarket we will always remember to see the image of God in the person who asks whether we want paper or plastic. But we can try, and entertain those thoughts more often than we do. It is a good exercise to step back on occasion and think about some seemingly insignificant soul, someone we'd been ignoring, as a friend of Jesus. That is a lesson I learned while gazing at rearview mirrors. It took a story about Hemingway to bring the lesson home.