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Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Sunday, March 13, 2005

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## Books

### Author strives to raise the rank of 'nobodies' to 'somebodies'

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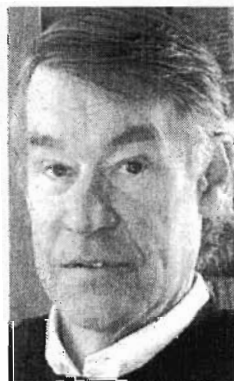
By Mark Roth, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When Robert Fuller stepped down as president of Oberlin College in 1974, burned out by the academic wars he had been through, he took a year off to relax and read.

Then he was ready to re-enter public life. He wanted to raise money for some international projects he had in mind.

There was only one problem -- almost no one returned his calls.

Only 38 at the time, Fuller had started college at age 15 and already had co-authored a physics textbook and had been a top-ranking administrator at two universities. He wasn't used to being treated like a nobody. And he didn't like it.



Author Robert Fuller

In fact, no one does, he realized, and it led him down a long, winding path that eventually resulted in his 2003 book, "Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank."

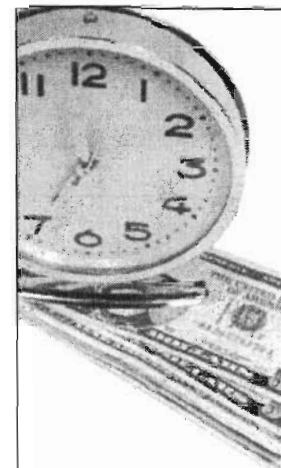
The book in turn has inspired a fledgling social movement, with Web sites devoted to its themes, a growing list of international speaking

engagements for Fuller and such unusual developments as a single philanthropist buying 20,000 copies of the book to distribute free.

Fuller's core thesis is simple.

Underlying all other forms of discrimination -- the mistreatment of women or minorities or older people or disabled people or members of an ethnic group -- is a misuse of the privileges of rank.

In all these social sins, the problem isn't the fact that someone belongs to a certain gender or age group or ethnic community. It's that someone else has decided he is superior to the people in those groups.




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As he thought about it, Fuller realized that "rankism" -- the name he gave to this form of bias -- was even more pervasive than just discriminating against certain categories of people.

Almost everyone has been a "nobody" at some point in his or her life, the victim of a boss or parent or coach who abused his position.

And truth be told, when we have finally become a "somebody," many of us have been guilty of occasionally abusing our own power over a co-worker or child or spouse.

"In rankism," he said, "we're all victims and all perpetrators."

Now that he has a name for what he had been thinking about for so many years, Fuller wrote, "I see it everywhere ... a boss harassing an employee, a cook or a customer demeaning a server, a coach bullying a player, a doctor disparaging a nurse, a school principal insulting a teacher, a professor exploiting a teaching assistant, a teacher humiliating a student, students ostracizing other students, a parent belittling a child, an officer abusing a suspect, a caretaker mistreating an invalid."

And while he suffered from a version of rankism himself, he's also aware that "my story was nothing compared with the rankism that afflicts the working poor or people like adjunct professors at a university, who really have nothing to hang onto but their title."

Now he labors to translate his insights into a social movement.

He knows it won't happen through the book alone. While an article about the book in The New York Times last summer briefly boosted its sales to No. 58 on the [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) list, one spot above the latest Harry Potter novel, it didn't stay there for long.

Where will it all lead?

"That's the \$64,000 question, and I don't have an answer yet," said Fuller, who lives in Berkeley, Calif.

One big obstacle is that the "nobodies" of the world can't easily identify each other, as women or minorities can.

He also has to overcome an insidious message in American society that convinces many people that they deserve to be nobodies -- that somehow their lack of accomplishment or the criticism they get is entirely their own fault.

For those reasons and more, he said, "I think we're going to have to invent the dignitarian movement, and it's not going to look like the civil rights movement or the women's movement. ... It won't have a Million Man March."

He hopes it will grow organically.

"It will be about how we turn Joe's Ice Cream store into a dignitarian store, how we turn General Motors into a dignitarian company, or turn the University of Massachusetts into a dignitarian university."

The techniques for creating such changes in a company, for instance, might range from the personal -- "you don't tolerate bullying at any level" -- to the organizational -- lowering CEO salaries. "American companies are still paying their CEOs 500 times as much as their janitors," he said, "which is a form of institutional rankism that's not nearly as prevalent in Europe or Asia."

Fuller believes his proposals should appeal equally to liberals and conservatives.

Conservatives should like his approach, he said, because he actually celebrates rank if it is earned and it isn't misused.

Although he favors the new corporate structures that emphasize more openness and less hierarchy, Fuller nevertheless believes that good managers are vital -- "you need a timely way to reach decisions and if you don't have someone to pound the gavel and demand a decision, you won't get anything done."

Liberals should respond to his message, he said, because "they question authority and domination that doesn't serve the interests of a group."

Fuller is the first to admit that his central idea is not original. Prophets, saints and sages throughout history have emphasized the need to treat all people with dignity.

"Of course the golden rule is thousands of years old, but the golden rule is not enough by itself. You've got to have the political dimension to do something about it."

Fuller has been assisted along his journey by some remarkable turns of fortune.

One of the biggest is that he was financially supported for more than 20 years by a single patron, almost in the manner of a Renaissance artist, which enabled him to focus on setting up some nonprofit organizations, writing his book and giving 150 talks in the past two years to promote his message.

The benefactor is Robert Moors Cabot, a novelist and former diplomat who is a descendant of the wealthy founding Massachusetts family.

Cabot said he had always been impressed by Fuller, and then, when he was deciding how to use a trust fund he inherited, some of his friends "persuaded me that one way to base philanthropy is on faith in a particular individual rather than an organization. You just have to take a flier, which I did, and I think it's paid off handsomely."

Over the past two years, Fuller said, his publisher, New Society Publishers of Canada, has sold about 20,000 copies of the book -- but another 20,000 copies were bought by a single person, former TV news anchor and present-day philanthropist Ruth Ann Harnisch, who oversees a family foundation.

"When I met Bob, I just became convinced that this is a decent, honorable,

well-meaning visionary who had a great notion and no idea how to share it, and I just thought I could help."

So she made a deal to buy thousands of copies of Fuller's book and came up with creative ways to distribute it, including offering it for free to nearly 5,000 subscribers who responded to an offer on the [www.wordsmith.org/jawad](http://www.wordsmith.org/jawad) Web site, which features a new word and its definition each day.

Harnisch said she hopes Fuller's ideas take root and grow.

"I dream of a dignitarian society. I do not expect to live to see it. But I hope that I do live to see the words 'rankism' and 'dignitarianism' be used in common parlance."

Two other big fans of Fuller's work are sisters Ann and Mary Lou Richardson of Roanoke, Va., who were so enthused by his book that they started a Web site, [dignitarians.org](http://dignitarians.org), to promote the concept.

Fuller, now in his late 60s, feels no lessening of zeal for his newfound mission.

He is thinking about writing a follow-up book that would describe what a dignitarian society would look like, and "I continue to give every single talk I can book."

He doesn't think the speeches will stop anytime soon, because "every third person who hears me wants their boss to hear it, because he's a bully."

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