



I and Thou, Part 1

In any war, there are psychological as well as physical military tactics. It does no good to line up your tanks and aircraft, missiles and torpedoes for use against the foe if nobody will shoot. So, the other side must be dehumanized. Charlemagne told his Franks that the Huns would eat their children unless they were destroyed. Roman legions in Britain believed that the Picts and Scots would eat their still beating hearts, and so they built and guarded Hadrian's wall. In more recent history, we fought Jerry and the Nips in World War II. We sent our sons to fight Gooks in Korea and Vietnam.

Our sons and daughters are now in Iraq and Afghanistan. We've become more polite about how we dehumanize the enemy. We speak of them in terms of the beliefs that motivate them. They are now "Muslim extremists," or "terrorists." But, they still have no faces. They are not individuals, rather an amorphous mass of "hostiles."

But, it is not only in war that we reduce others to non-human status. It is also in business, in school, in nearly every facet of daily life. We get angry with "that silver Lexus that cut us off." Or "the bean counters who denied my insurance claim." Maybe we're angry with "those stuffed suits in Washington who make more money than we do, and we pay their salary!" Sometimes it's as simple as "that stupid sales clerk," or "the loudmouth in line in front of me." All of these examples take people with faces, names and stories and turn them into objects, entities that we can be angry with and express hostility toward.

Most times, our hostility is just a symptom of how discouraged, frustrated, weary, overworked and unloved we feel in the moment. That sudden flash of anger at the other is a less painful way to be with our discomfort than examining our own feelings and acknowledging the hurt. And so, we indulge. The danger comes when that momentary indulgence becomes our habit. As we deny or ignore our own feelings, we become more hostile and the world is filled with objects instead of people.

We have a game we play when we're driving and the driver gets frustrated by someone in another car. It goes like this.

Driver: I can't believe that silver Lexus just came over here without looking! I didn't have anywhere to go!

Passenger: Well, maybe his wife is at the hospital and he's trying to get there.

Driver: Yeah, right.

Passenger: She's delivering their first child, and it's too soon. He's really worried.

Driver: Sure he is.

Passenger: He is. (pause) So, maybe he's just being stupid . . . but what if he's really upset right now?

Driver: (with a sigh) You're right, we don't know what's going on with him.

Now, sometimes this works as I wrote it. Sometimes it doesn't. The key factor for me is that Driver gets to have the feelings that come up and Passenger doesn't make any comment about those feelings. Passenger simply tries to think of a reason for the other driver's behavior and supply it to Driver. Driver then ends up considering, at a crucial moment, that the other driver is a person, and may be so focused on something going on that he forgot to check the lane before moving over. Instead of becoming an "it" because of my frustration, the driver of the other car remains a "thou." Generally, the follow up to the game is to wish the other driver well, and that those in his path will be safe.

You will note that Driver did not have to lay bare the reasons for the flash of anger. This is not an encounter group or a therapy session. Driver can go on feeling discouraged, frustrated, weary, overworked or unloved. But, Driver does not take out those feelings on someone else. Instead, Driver rises above them in the moment. The odd thing about that is that sometimes, just rising above the feelings for a moment makes them less powerful. So Driver might benefit immediately from making the effort.

Whether Driver benefits immediately or not, Driver will benefit from making the effort. As will the rest of us. Driver is less likely to put him/herself in a bad situation because of the stress of that encounter. And there is now one less angry driver on the road, so we are all a little safer. The other driver may not feel it, but he benefits, too. From the consideration of him as a person and from the good wishes or prayers that follow him from that encounter.

We do not relate to objects in deeply meaningful ways. Even if there are things which warm our hearts when we see them, it is not the object itself, but the memories attached to it which evoke that response. I treasure my 1-gallon green glass Sparklett's Water bottle because it is the one my Nana used in her

refrigerator. That bottle reminds me of refreshment on hot summer days, soft evenings with Nana on the glider swing watching the stars come out, and being tucked into bed with a small glass of water beside me when I spent the night. My relation to that object is really because it evokes my relation to Nana. Could I remember all that without the water bottle? Surely. It is not the bottle which makes the memories precious, it is the memories which make the bottle precious. The “thou” behind it makes the “it” an object I treasure. The opposite is never true.

And that is the bottom line. If we are to have joy in this world, we must recognize at all times that it is the “thou” that brings value and love. And that being a “thou” is what gives our lives meaning.