



“We don’t mean much to each other anymore”

After the news of Governor Mark Sanford’s adulterous escapades last summer, a journalist commented that such affairs are not due primarily to lust, media influences, or even overwork. The journalist’s analysis was scalpel-like in its precision: “We don’t mean much to each other anymore.” Wives and children and constituents are of no consequence.

By extension, I will apply that analysis to some other human situations with equally devastating results. We don’t mean much to each other anymore.

Gus Poulos, a Vietnam vet, was a refrigeration mechanic. He went to night school to study accounting, and became a senior financial analyst at a local hospital. After seven years of work there, he was laid off. He found part-time employment at Wal-Mart as a cashier at \$8.50 per hour. In an interview in *The Atlantic*, he said that when his neighbors shop at the store and he rings up their purchases, they don’t greet him. “I know they know me,” he said, “I’ve been in their homes.” We don’t mean much to each other anymore.

Filmmakers Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar were told their teenage daughter had cancer. “We experienced such isolation. I did as a mom, Lela did as a teenager sitting at home, her friends too scared to come over and see her. It was really bad,” Reichert said in an interview in *U.S. News and World Report*. An ending identical to Psalm 88. We don’t mean much to each other anymore.

So how do we come to mean something to each other? Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick says *value* is something that when we integrate or appropriate it for ourselves, our life is given value and meaning. *Meaning* happens when a link is established between oneself and that which gives one a sense of value. What has to happen is to get beyond the limits of what closes off one’s life from value and where a link called meaning is missing.

German theologians Gerhard Sauter and Helmut Thielicke speak of persons needing awareness of a structure of references on which they can draw. Without this framework of person and stories for references there is no context for interrelationships. There is no person, story, or framework to give one value. It’s like being an orphan.

So let’s go back to Mr. Poulos. When he checks out his neighbors at Wal-Mart, they won’t even acknowledge that they know him. He has just lost his frame of reference and set of relations he thought he had. They are his neighbors. He has been in their homes. The link with what gave *value* is now gone and so is meaning.

As for Lela, the daughter of Julia and Steven, sick with cancer and isolated without her school friends, from where does she get a sense of human value? There is no frame of reference, no set of interrelationships. There is nothing to which she can be referred.

Like the risen Christ who re-valued his isolated and lost disciples, why not find someone whose life needs to mean something? Be that one who shows them their value. ■