



Eye-Contact

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A Thousand Words

Hi. Welcome to “A Thousand Words”, August 30th, 2019. I’m Richard.

The other day on my way to work I walked past a boy on the street in my neighborhood. He was primary school age and had on a backpack too big for his body, headphones in his ears, and a lollipop [1] in his mouth. We made eye contact, smiled and nodded [2] as we passed each other.

I used to do this so much more. I used to make eye contact with people on the street I’d never seen before. I don’t know when I stopped. Actually now that I say it, I think I can trace it back [3], not to a single moment but to moments along the way. My story today is about that slow process.

As far back as I can remember, I was always interested in looking at people. I didn’t always nod and smile at them, but strangers’ faces always interested me. Passing people on the street requires [4] an understanding between you and the person you’re passing. It’s a kind of social dance. Most of the time you don’t really want the person you’re passing to become your newest best friend – it’s just a quick moment you share [5]. Of course there are some exceptions, but mostly you don’t. All social dances have rules: small talk has its topic restrictions [6], flirting its physical boundaries, crossing paths [7] on the street its own conventions.



When I moved to San Francisco I was about 20 years old and took my sunny beach boy mentality with me, looking most people directly in the face. Not everyone, of course – there are some people our instinct tells us to avoid [8]. But by making eye-contact I felt a connection with the community of people I lived among by simply keeping my head up and my eyes open. Small sparks [9] of magic happen when strangers pass and acknowledge [10] each other with a simple smile or nod. But at some point that magic, those nods and smiles, became problematic. And I slowly found myself avoiding them more and more.

When Ronald Reagan was governor [11] of California – not yet the President of the US – he began making cuts to the State’s mental hygiene department. When he became President, it got even worse. I don’t know if mental institutions in the US are good places – there are many reports of abuse [12] and corruption and incompetency. But, unfortunately, there are few other options. Reagan once said that the nine most terrifying words in the English language are “I’m from the government and I’m here to help”. It’s actually 11 words, but I think his position was clear. The man, ironically, didn’t like government agencies. But with nowhere else to go, many went to the big cities - like candle flames at night, San Francisco and other cities attracted many lost souls [13]. And like refugees arriving in waves, the cities felt their presence. They were everywhere, blending in with [14] the drug addicts and ex-soldiers and elderly without pensions and newly homeless. And though they didn’t seem to mate with [15] one another, they multiplied year after year.

San Francisco became much more colorful because of this. After a quick nod to a man across from me on the bus, he moved to sit in the empty seat beside me. He whispered that the English alphabet was being renovated and that he was the chief architect of the new version. From a pocket in his jacket he pulled out a sheet of paper with lines connecting dots into geometric figures. These were the new alphabetic symbols he was working on. My stop came before his, but he decided I needed to hear more and so got off with me and followed for ten blocks until he came to Thergo, the name he had given to the last letter of his new alphabet.

David became my newest best friend after I asked if I could sit on the bench he was on, hoping the smell of my lunch wouldn't disturb him. It was his bench, he told me, but I could share it with him because I asked politely. Politeness was important to him. I should have seen what happened to the last guy who sat next to him without asking. David was collecting examples of impoliteness – all kinds of impoliteness, not just sitting on benches. When he collected enough, one day he would write them all in a book. And what a book that would be! When I tried to leave after finishing my lunch, I did it impolitely. And so he pulled out his small notebook and added me to his long list.

Nancy was at a table in a Korean restaurant, and when our eyes met and we smiled, she lifted her plate, silverware [16] and glass of water, and carried them to where I was. The seats on both sides of me at the counter were taken. But it didn't stop her from asking them both if they would move so she could sit next to me. She was maybe 40 years older than me and wearing some kind of animal print on stretchy pants [17]. Neither man gave away his seat. So she just waited behind me, standing and holding her plate as she ate, nodding at me and smiling, happy that someone had noticed her. When I left, she followed me out of the restaurant back to my office, calling me Chris for six blocks.

Kirby was a guy I gave a quick nod to who was waiting for a bus. We started talking, casually at first. But before long he was telling me about buildings in the city he wanted to blow up with dynamite. He knew some guys, he said, who wanted to help him. I wasn't sure if he was serious, trying to scare me, or just pulling my leg [18]. When he realised that I wasn't as enthusiastic as he was, he stepped closer and said:

"You like this here shirt I'm wearing?"

"It's nice," I said.

"You know why it's my favorite?"

"No," I said, not sure I wanted to know.

"From a distance it looks like a plain [19] white shirt, right? But when you get close, you can see it ain't [20]. See the faint [21] red stripes?"

I saw them.

"Remember I asked if you knew why it's my favorite?"

"I remember."

"This here shirt represents my soul [22]. How many of your clothes represent your soul?"

I said I didn't know.

"From a distance I look plain and pure [23]. But the closer you get to me, the more you see thin streaks [24] of red – thin streaks of violence just under the surface. I'm not ashamed of the violence in me."

"Nice," I said, though nice wasn't what was going through my mind.

Kirby followed behind me and discovered where I lived. He broke into [25] my apartment a couple times when I wasn't home. He didn't steal anything. He just left faint red streaks on the floor and walls. He wanted me to know he'd been there.

At some point, I started lowering my eyes on the street, becoming a bit more selective about who I smiled and nodded at. A city will sometimes do that to you. Some days I just didn't have the energy to meet my newest best friend every few blocks.

Thanks for listening.

I hope you liked the podcast, or others you've listened to on our website podclub.ch. If so, tell a friend or write us a message. You can download our app if you'd like, and we also have a vocabulary trainer to help you practice some of the new words you heard. You can also follow me on Instagram.

Glossar: A Thousand Words

- [1] **a lollipop:** hard candy on a stick for sucking or licking over a long period of time
- [2] **to nod:** to move one's head up and down
- [3] **to trace something back:** to understand something by thinking back to the beginning
- [4] **to require something:** a need for something particular
- [5] **to share:** something people do together
- [6] **topic restrictions:** themes not allowed to discuss
- [7] **crossing paths:** to move past someone who is moving in a different direction
- [8] **to avoid:** to keep away from
- [9] **sparks:** quick flashes of energy
- [10] **to acknowledge someone:** to signal someone that you have seen or understood them
- [11] **governor:** in politics, a person elected to manage a State
- [12] **abuse:** physical and/or mental mistreatment
- [13] **lost souls:** people who seem unable to deal with everyday life
- [14] **to blend in with:** to look like the things around you
- [15] **to mate with:** to produce children with someone
- [16] **silverware:** fork, knife and spoon
- [17] **stretchy pants:** trousers made from fabric that stays close to the skin but is flexible
- [18] **to pull someone's leg:** to joke with or make fun of someone
- [19] **plain:** simple; not decorated
- [20] **it ain't:** it is not
- [21] **faint:** not strong
- [22] **soul:** the spiritual or emotional part of a person
- [23] **pure:** clear; simple; free from negative qualities
- [24] **streaks:** lines, both physical or part of a person's characteristics
- [25] **to break into:** to enter someone's home without permission