

A Common Humanity: A Conversation with Bob Sadler by Richard Whittaker

Like a lot of people, I used to be afraid of approaching strangers, even in settings that made this easier—like at art openings. It still takes a little resolve, but I've found it so much more interesting than just being limited to the circle of my own thoughts. It was thanks to approaching a stranger during an opening at Green Chalk Contemporary in Monterey, that I heard a compelling story about a photographer who had been taking photos of homeless men. But it was more than that. There was something about the way he was doing this that was having an important effect on the men themselves. Many of them were finding homes. I'd never heard a story like that before and immediately wanted to hear more. Thanks to another photographer, Jerry Takigawa (the opening at GCC was for Jerry's work), I was able to contact Bob Sadler directly.

Richard Whittaker: I'm going to ask you to repeat a story you've probably told more than a few times. You were standing by a river with your camera...

Bob Sadler: Yes. This story starts in 1983 when I lived in Connecticut. I was using a 4 x 5 field camera one beautiful foggy morning down along the Connecticut River. I set up on a bike path along the riverbank. It was really fogged in; you could hear the Wesleyan University crew boats out practicing. I could just imagine catching one of those boats going by in a grey fog reflected in the still water. As I was waiting, I could hear them but couldn't see them. Then all of a sudden I heard this "squeak, squeak, squeak."

RW: This other sound?

Bob: Right. I'm under this black cloth and hearing this squeaking noise. It's really annoying. I picked my head up saw a homeless man pushing a shopping carriage toward me. I didn't want to be distracted so I got back under the cloth. Anyway, he gets alongside of me and stops; he starts this monologue: "Wow, you must be an artist with a camera like that. That's a very fancy camera. Were you just taking a picture of the fog?" And then he said, "So you're an artist. I'm an artist."

RW: Okay. And you're still under the cloth?

Bob: I'm hiding under the cloth and hoping he'll go away. Then he says, "I'm a writer. My life's work is in this carriage." I was getting curious and I took a look. There were these manuscripts stacked in his shopping cart all the way to the top.

RW: Wow.

Bob: Manuscript after manuscript. I'm looking at him now, and he says, "Well, I'm not really an artist. I wish I were an artist, but I just realized I'm never going to be an artist. I'm just an observer with a pen." Then I went back under my cloth and he starts off again. But as he's leaving he says, "I suppose the question for you is—are you an artist or are you just an observer with a camera?" Then he heads off into the fog.

I thought, "Whaat? Either he's crazy or he's really deep." I looked at him as he was heading off, and he turned just as he was about to disappear into the fog. It would have been a beautiful portrait—white hair, shocking white hair, full white beard, looking back over one shoulder, perfect background.

I just let him go. But I stopped what I was doing. I thought, "Yeah, listen, I'm just taking someone else's picture here. Every poster in a corporation that says 'we should pull together' has one of these damn pictures!" I began thinking, "What am I doing this for?" And I just stopped and relaxed, and took in the moment.

RW: Something shifted right there.

Bob: Yes. Something shifted. Then I saw what was in front of me. Which was this beautiful dock that probably had been used for shipping in days gone by. It was mirrored in the still water and with the reflection, the number ten was just perfectly created. I got very excited about that and took the shot. It's still one of my favorites, and a transformative moment. But as much as I liked the dock, I wanted that picture of the homeless man.

RW: Those missed shots are painful. I mean, I'm a photographer. There are photos I see, but I'm too slow, you know?

Bob: Don't get a chance. Yes, it's a moment you missed. That one is still burned in my head. I mean, I can still see it.

RW: That's an iconic one, something that has lived on like that in your memory.

Bob: Yes. It set up for what was going to happen in 2013. From 1983 to 2013 is a long time, but it put something my head I wasn't ready to do then—which was I really wanted to take portraits of these guys.

Back then I wasn't feeling gregarious enough to put myself out there. I was happier shooting things that didn't involve people.

RW: I can relate to that. I don't know if you are, but I was pretty much an introvert and uneasy with just chatting up some stranger.

Bob: Yeah, exactly.

RW: So what happened? That's thirty years.

Bob: Well, I've been thinking—why wasn't I there earlier? I just turned 70. That's a long time to not get what you're cut out to do, artistically.

RW: Yes, it's a long time. But you know what? A lot of people never get to something like that.

Bob: It's fabulous. Many people have said that. It's extremely rewarding. Anyway, a year later I was on a business trip to Washington D.C. and saw a Karsh exhibit there at the Portrait Gallery. I was blown away by his prints and spent a good bit of time studying what he'd done, technically. I couldn't imagine what he'd done in the sitting to get the iconic versions of all those famous and powerful people.

I thought, I'd love to be able to do that, but it was so far outside of my thinking it wasn't as if I was just going to go out and try it. But I did get his book. It still sits in the house here, and I look through it a good bit.

I was always drawn to the f/64 crowd and their legacy here in Monterey of Ansel Adams, Ed Weston, Imogen Cunningham and all of that.

RW: Wynn Bullock. Morley Baer. A lot of those people were focusing on nature, weren't they?

Bob: Some of them were using nude models, but they were nude models as form. So it was almost like they were creating still life in the environment. The nudes are part of the composition, but you don't see faces; you don't see personality. I'm really struck by that, still.

RW: Right. And it's incredible work those photographers were doing then.

Bob: It was fantastic. Basically I was going to school on that and trying those things—and in retrospect, developing the craft. So I was really thrilled to get a chance to move out here from Connecticut. And I did, in fact, start to meet those people.

RW: Those people, meaning associated with the f/64 group?

Bob: Yes. They're very much present and accessible, and wonderful people. Dick Garrod is still going strong. There are like five of them who are in their late 80s and 90s in the group that I'm in.

RW: Is Morley Baer still around?

Bob: No, he's not. But he was here. So that tradition is still very strong here. And they've been extremely helpful. I also ran into, and became very good friends with, Daniel Dixon whose father was Maynard Dixon, the painter. And his mother was Dorothea Lange. I always was particularly interested in Dorothea Lange.

RW: Wow. What a pair of parents!

Bob: Yes. He was in his late 80s when I met him and his parents were long gone. He was

in the process of documenting his life. He used to work for Ogilvie in New York. He's really sharp, really creative. So he began telling the stories of growing up with these two artistic giants. He did it through pictures and it was quite powerful. I spent a lot of time with him. Then I brought him in on some of the work I was doing, because I needed an ad man.

RW: And the work you were doing was what, right then?

Bob: I'm a management consultant. It was more messaging and shaping brand and story.

RW: So you have a professional life apart from your photography?

Bob: Yes. I'm still working full-time. But at any rate, from Daniel I really got to know the work of Dorothea Lange. What the pictures were. How she got them. Why she got them.

What I loved about that was, unlike Karsh, she was dealing with the other extreme—people who had the lowest status, and she shot images that really brought out their nobility. Nobility is kind of the common thread in all of her shots.

RW: That's so interesting.

Bob: And as much as I like Karsh's lighting, I also just love Dorothea Lange's ability to work with people to bring this authenticity and resilience and nobility to their faces. I talked to Daniel a lot about that. He had been out with his mother.

RW: Somebody might ask, is that a trick? Or is it bringing something out that's really there?

Bob: It's bringing something out that's there, for sure. Authenticity is very easy to read. You know it when you see it. You see it in Dorothea Lange's pictures. Even though these people are really in miserable conditions, she got it. She was a tall woman and had a clubfoot; she didn't wear make-up and dressed very plainly. And just carrying all this heavy camera equipment around got her some respect for just being out there in Dust Bowl. And then dragging this clubfoot on top of it. He felt that people identified with her very quickly as a hard worker.

RW: That's easy to believe.

Bob: And to see someone sort of—injured is not the word I'm looking for—but there's something there that breaks down a barrier immediately. She talked to people and told them what she was trying to do. She approached them in a way that worked. And she's got the most iconic images from that period, as a result.

So each of those three things: the homeless man back at the dock, the Karsh exhibit and the Dorothea Lange thing were all setting me up. In retrospect they make sense. But I wasn't consciously thinking about it. I was still pursuing the photography of the hour around here, which is landscape, still life.

But I belong to the Unitarian Church and we're very active on social justice issues; homelessness is one. We're part of a program that feeds and houses 30 homeless men one Sunday night a month. The other churches in the area do all the other nights. So the men go to a different church every night. They get a meal, sleep on the floor. The next morning they get breakfast and they're out. It's been going on for 23 years. It's a really good program. And someone said, "Why don't we do a service about that program?" He

said, "Would you take pictures and do a slide show so the whole congregation can see who these guys are"

So I showed up with my camera. This was August 2012. We gather around for a blessing before we eat and while we were gathered, I said, "Look we're going to do a sermon about you guys and the program. We think you're great. I'd love to take some portraits of you and have them as part of the service. So would you let me know if you're willing after dinner? I'll make a print for you and give you an electronic copy. You can use it any way you want."

Three guys sort of reluctantly agreed to do it. So I just did environmental shots. I did them in color. I brought the prints back the next month and everybody loved them. Then more of the guys were like, "Yeah, I'll do that."

RW: Now the process of taking the photograph is actually more than just, "Okay, I just took your picture." Right?

Bob: It is. What I found is they would bring a mask to the situation. It's an awkward moment. Just breaking the ice and getting into a conversation that's authentic is hard. How do you do that?

RW: Right. And you're talking about the mask we put on to protect ourselves.

Bob: Yes. Except maybe more so. These guys are really protecting themselves either with aggression or by being overly ingratiating. It seems to be one extreme or the other.

RW: I see what you're saying.

Bob: You know? One mask or the other is prevalent on most of them. So I would just take that picture and another picture and another. After about 15 minutes of having them try all kind of poses that are never going to work, I'll start asking them questions and finding out more about who they are until I find something. I really don't want to know the hard luck story. I want to know what their value is—what are the good moments in their life? I want them to get lost in telling me that story. That when I'm going to find who they are.

Well, now I've got a really nice excuse to engage. I began feeling more how I imagined Dorothea Lange did. After twenty minutes of that they're right there and completely different. I take four or five really great shots before I say, "I think I've got it." Then I have them come around and look at the back of the camera, which is an advantage you couldn't have done in those days.

RW: You're still working with like a 4x5?

Bob: No. The technology has gone so far that it was absurd to go with a 4x5 on this, because I need so many shots just to break the ice and get past the masks. I have an advantage that Dorothea Lange didn't have. So I bring them around to the back of the camera and say, "Why don't you take a look and tell me which one you like and I'll make one for you." They say okay. So I start flicking back through the photos. Of course we're going back over a period of 20 minutes. They're watching themselves go from authentic and likeable to very defensive and very not likeable. They're recognizing it as they go.

RW: They're seeing that.

Bob: Right. And they'll say, "Oh my god! Is that what I look like?" I say, "Well, yes." Then I'll add, "That's what life will do to you." And I'll point to the authentic photo and say, "But this is who we hire and want to house. So how do you get there?"

It's a big eye-opener for them. I point out, "You know, there's 365 muscles in the face. Most of them are controlled inside. You can't fake it." I'd say, "You're either going to get there or the face won't show that. If your face doesn't show it, no one is going to buy it."

And that's what I say to the executives I work with. Which is how it's all kind of come to the same spot—two different worlds, but the same principle.

RW: So talk about this journey from that day by the river thirty years ago to now where you're not only photographing people, but really understanding something about the whole process. Right?

Bob: A couple of other big things happened. I took these 15 color shots and we showed them at church and raised a thousand dollars. It was a really nice event. But I was enjoying the monthly interaction with these guys so much that I just kept shooting, not for any particular purpose other than to meet these guys and learn about them.

I love stories. I was getting a lot of them. So I just kept going. Then Wynn Bullock's daughter, Barbara, who is in our church and is very tied into the world of photography, approached me after one of the services. She said, "I can't get those pictures out of my mind, those 15 that you took. I think they should be exhibited. I think these pictures need to be seen."

I said, "I don't know about that."

She said, "Well, I think you're missing something. I don't think I've ever seen any pictures of homeless people look that good. So it can't be that easy."

And because of who she is, I paid attention. Wynn Bullock was one of the reasons I came out here. And as soon as she said it, that's where everything came together. I didn't think it. I didn't say it. I heard myself say, "Yes, I'm going to do that. I'm going to find the space between Karsh and Lange. I'm going to take Karsh's treatment as if they were really important people like prime ministers, but I'm going to use Dorothea Lange's technique and subjects."

RW: Right, right.

Bob: And Barbara was kind of puzzled. She said, "I like what you've already done. Don't mess it up."

I said, "Oh, I know exactly what I want to do." I had it completely in my head and a huge impulse to go do it. But I had no studio equipment. I'd never studied strobe lighting and all that sort of thing, and I didn't have a space to do it.

I came home and talked to my wife. She said, "How much is the equipment?" I thought with the two strobes and a reflector I could probably do what I wanted to do. It was maybe \$500. So she gave it to me for Christmas.

A couple of weeks later, I set up in the basement of the church. I just went upstairs and said, "Guys, I want to take this to the next level. If you've got time tonight after dinner

come on down and help me figure this out.” So they came down. They were helping me set this stuff up. One of them had a master’s in photography from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

RW: That’s amazing!

Bob: Right. He knew exactly what to do. You don’t know who you’re working with. That night I got the look that I wanted. I got three pictures right off the bat. So I brought those back the next month. They’re like, “Oh my god!” Because, if you look at it—I said, “That looks like a CEO. That looks like a famous pilot. That looks like a famous rock star. That could be an athlete.”

They are teasing each other about how good they look. It changed the mood of the group. It was pretty rewarding for me, and them. It was a self-esteem thing.

I thought, “Okay, this is no longer about the art as much. It’s about using art as a social justice tool.” Because you could see the men’s self-esteem boost. You could see the boost in the group. So it had to be a good thing.

I did it for about three or four months this way. I was getting really excited. I signed up for a lighting workshop. I knew what I wanted. I knew how to get it. I just didn’t know why it worked. I figured there were other things I could learn. I figured that if my lighting improved, my speed to get it done would improve. And when I had it down I could completely focus on the conversation and on the relationship.

Almost at that same moment, which was about a year ago, I was out working at my real job and taking corporate executives through a program to build more authenticity and likeability. These are people who are generally over-subscribed to content development and not enough to human development. So I run a program for them. I had a couple of actors in from San Francisco doing a workshop with us. One of the exercises the actors did, which was absolutely phenomenal, is around status.

What we were realizing is how unconscious that is for most people. You treat people according to the status you think they have. When we were doing that with the executives, they said, “Oh, yeah. We know how to do this. We know how to communicate to people what their status is. We know how to hear that, and we know what our place is.”

I said, “Yes, and all the dysfunction I see in organizations are around this issue, because people who are treated like twos and threes and fours lose motivation; they coast and they hide, and they become passive-aggressive. People who are treated like kings and queens no longer get the message as to what’s really going on because everybody is sucking up to them. These are really dysfunctional behaviors.”

So the executives said our goal should really be to treat everybody like a ten. They were referring to an exercise the actors did where cards are dealt out at random; you get a two, three, four, all the way up to a king or queen. You put the card on your forehead and you don’t know what it is. Then you interact in simulated conversations and within ten minutes you know exactly where you are. You know you’re a five, not a six; six, not a seven. So we know how to send the signal. And we know how to hear it. It’s really fast and it’s really powerful.

So I give the exercise again and say okay, this time no matter what the card is on the forehead, treat each person like a ten. And after ten minutes I ask everybody to line up in

order according to their cards and they can't. This second time, the simulated conversation has an energy level and a warmth that wasn't there on the first exercise.

So I say, "What you're trying to get is for everyone to be treated like a ten. You want to treat a king and a queen like a ten, also. That's really how they want to be treated at the end of the day, because they need to know the truth. They don't want to be isolated, but they've come to expect the king and queen treatment; and it's faulty. So take the chance and treat the top people like tens and see what happens."

RW: Meaning with a little less deference and fear.

Bob: Yes. And treat twos and threes as if they were tens. That forces you to recognize that there is an organizational decision-making order where some people have more power than others, but there is human worth and dignity that's equal. So you treat everyone with the same human dignity, no matter what.

That's become my signature exercise with executives. They don't have that in mind coming into the workshop and they go out like that's the most important thing they've learned.

RW: That's very interesting. So these executives are touched by the experience of this warmth?

Bob: Very. And they are really touched by being treated like a two, even for ten minutes. They said, "Oh my god. I wanted out of that exercise! That was really painful." That is what I do to people. They'll be quick, you know? And they'll say, "I'm not doing a great job raising my kids, either."

RW: Oh, wow.

Bob: So that's been a real eye-opener in the last year. And almost simultaneously I was taking a world religion course with a guy from Harvard Divinity School. He was talking about the Axial Age, from about 800 to 200 years B.C. where you had Socrates, Plato and the birth of three religions: Judaism, Confucianism and Hinduism. And he was pointing out that there is one sentence they all have exactly in common. And that is: treat others as you want to be treated

As soon as he said I thought, "Oh, that's what everyone being a ten is all about." I know when I'm in that situation with these homeless guys, from the minute I walk in the door for dinner to the time I pack up and go, everyone is a ten.

I did it right from the beginning, without thinking. It's my intuitive response. It wasn't purposeful. Now it's very purposeful. I'm getting the same pictures, basically, but I know what I'm doing. I could teach somebody to do it as opposed to being unconscious about it.

RW: I'm struck by the power of what you're describing. So tell me some of the results that you've seen.

Bob: Well, I do three or four sittings a month and every sitting is a joy. Now I realize it's because these guys are not used anybody looking for what's good in them and recognizing it immediately. I'm told I'm very expressive once I see what I want. And because I just get so excited it pulls out more.

RW: You give a very positive response to the good that you see coming out.

Bob: I'd say, that's it. "Don't move!" Then of course, they get more excited, and now I've got something even better and better and better. So it's like bang, bang, bang—five shots in a row that just get better and better and better. Then, "That's good enough. That's him! That's him right there!"

Our church doesn't have a creed of any sort, but the one thing that is always said is that we are in search of the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. And I realized this is the inherent goodness in each person. It's a good experience for folks who are not used to that, but it's a great one for me, because it just blows any stereotype out of the water. One of my favorite moments was at the church when a Latino guy said, like almost mocking, "So you're the photographer, huh? You know what they're saying about you?"

I said, "No. What are they saying?"

He said, "They're saying it's good luck to have a picture taken by you."

I said, "Really? Why is that?"

He said, "Well, because of the ten people that you've shot so far, eight of them have found a place to live. We don't find that very often."

I told him I thought it must just be a coincidence. He disagreed. He said, "When they get up in the morning, instead of looking in the mirror, they look at that photo and they think, 'That's a good-looking guy! He deserves a house.' Then they go out and get one. So it changes the way you see yourself."

I said, "Wow!"

And he said, "That's why I want mine taken tonight!" He couldn't wait and he came down. He was right there. There was no mask. He knew exactly where he was headed. I gave him his picture. He got a house and he got a job, and he was gone.

RW: That's incredible.

Bob: I didn't know the experience was that powerful, but the fact that one of these guys came up with that story blows your stereotype away. I just thought, you know, the story is what's important.

I don't want to try to prove cause and effect, but there is an impact. So finally, I got up enough courage and took six of my prints to Image Makers. When I went in that night, the guy who runs the group said, "Sorry, but tonight we're only doing portfolios for people we've pre-selected. David Bales is here. (He's a well-known photographer and in his 80s.) He's going to evaluate portfolios." So six people had been selected.

The way that David ran it was you put your photos up. You don't say anything and people write three words that are evoked by those pictures. Then David takes that information, plus his own point of view, and does a critique of your portfolio. So he went through five portfolios, and it was a great night. But the sixth person didn't show. So the president of the group said, "Well, Bob brought his." He asked me if I'd show my photos.

So I put these six portraits up, black and white. I couldn't say and they went through the

process. Everyone wrote two or three words. Then after five minutes they all start calling them out—"wisdom" "power" "resilience" "father," "in charge" "humility" "famous"—all these really positive qualities.

RW: Oh, my gosh.

Bob: I'm sitting there going, "Oh, my god!" I knew this was a good test, because these people are smart. Then David said, "What you're hearing is that these photos are having the same impact on everybody." So he asked me, "Is that what you were going for?"

And I said, "Yes. Actually, it is. I'm happy to have it confirmed that it sort of worked."

He said, "No, it didn't just sort of work. Those are really, really good pictures." Coming from him it was a big deal and gave me the confidence that I was on the right track. Then he turned and said, "Actually this is the most important work I've seen tonight. So who are these men?"

I said, "They're all homeless men in Monterey County." I didn't even finish the sentence and the room just lit up with gasps. It just completely blew the stereotype out of the water.

I realized the social justice impact of it. Then David Bales said, "I'm not going to give you one piece of advice. You're on a journey; just go. See where it takes you."

I walked away sky high. So now I've got 50 of those portraits. I'm trying to raise enough money for the project to do all the printing and framing, which is expensive because these are big. I'm going back and videotaping each man we can find. What we're going to do is use a relatively new technology that you can deploy at an exhibit. If you really want to know more about that person in the photo, you can point your digital device at a picture and a video will appear; the portrait will come alive and the man will tell his own story.

RW: I think this is very special what you're talking about.

Bob: It's going to be unbelievable.

RW: This is a healing, powerful story. So how has this been for you? You've said a little already, but say again what this has meant for you.

Bob: Well, it's transformational for me, certainly in a photographic sense. I look back on my whole life and career, which started in community organizing, civil rights. After ten years, it morphed into business, which has allowed me to make a living, but it has always been community organizing and organizations, basically.

RW: Early on you said you were involved in civil rights?

Bob: Yes. I went into mostly African American or Latino neighborhoods that were deteriorating and built programs to turn them around. I did that for 10 years.

RW: Listening to your story, it feels like it's gone full circle.

Bob: It is full circle. It's right back.

RW: A full circle, but with consciousness and a kind of integration in yourself...

Bob: Yes. A whole lifetime of observations and experiences. So it's really fantastic. It's now consolidating with what I'm doing at work with different people, a different level of society, but the same problem.

RW: Hearing about your experiences of working with executives, I want to think that there's some way to wake some of these folks up out of this terrible stuff that's being done by corporations, especially to people on the bottom. I want to hope that there's a way we can reach these folks. Does this resonate for you?

Bob: Yes. I don't have any illusions about making any significant changes in any one of these corporations, but I think the workshops I'm running are transformational for the people in them. And they are executive vice presidents. So the people I'm working with have an impact on a lot of lives.

Now they don't control shareholders and shareholder greed, which is really what drives things today. But after a two-day workshop with me, they'll say, "This is not just about learning communication tools. This is a lifestyle change that's really powerful."

We've lived for 2600 years under a set of values we aspire to and usually fail at. The more you can get in touch with those and communicate in a way that brings that out, the more influential you're going to be. But in order to do that, you have to be influential about something that has high value—and I don't mean shareholder value.

RW: And high value in this case would be?

Bob: What's universally good for humankind—which, in the long run, is even good for business. But you can get fired a few times in the process of pursuing it. I still feel, and I say this very strongly, that in 45 years of work, I've never regretted speaking truth to power. I never varied from my own integrity. I've lost jobs as a result, only to find better ones. I would never guarantee it, but I would never live another way, either.