



Can You Read Faces?

My first job out of law school was to clerk for a federal judge. He served on appellate courts around the country, so we often traveled together. One week I left early so I could attend a Christian Legal Society Conference in Chicago before flying on to join the Judge in Washington, D.C.

The CLS conference was informal, so I wore casual clothes for three days. As I was repacking my bag the last day of the event, I realized that I'd failed to bring a white dress shirt, which was an essential part of the suit-and-tie wardrobe expected in Federal Court. I had no way to get to a store and dreaded the thought of appearing in court improperly dressed.

As I walked into the conference center for the morning keynote, I was racking my brain for a way to buy a shirt. An attorney named Fred Cassidy, whom I'd never met before, walked past me, pivoted, and came back to where I was standing. Having noticed the worried look on my face, he asked, "Are you OK?"

I was a total stranger, barely out of law school. He was a highly respected litigator and CLS Board member, with many responsibilities at the conference. And yet his trained eye had noticed my distressed look and his kind heart had brought him to my rescue.

As soon as I explained my dilemma, Fred reached into his pocket and pulled out his car keys. After telling me where his car was parked, he explained how to get to a nearby shopping center. He then asked me if I needed any money ...

Thirty-five years later, I'm still moved to tears when I recall his sensitivity and kindness.

That one act defined the Christian Legal Society in my mind and moved me to become a member. That involvement exposed me to the concept of biblical mediation and arbitration and led to my founding the Christian Conciliation Service of Montana, which evolved into Peacemaker Ministries ... and eventually led me to establish Relational Wisdom 360.

A very small gesture on Fred's part, but one that changed the course of my life, led to two fruitful ministries and impacted countless other lives around the world.

Learning to Read Faces

Reading body language, and especially facial expressions, is a vital relational skill and key element of other-awareness. As Fred Cassidy demonstrated, this ability can have a life-changing impact on our friendships, marriages, parenting, professional success, as well as our ministry to others and witness for Christ.

The Bible gives many examples of how our facial expressions can communicate our inward thoughts and feelings, which may include anger (Gen. 4:5-6), anxiety (Gen. 40:5-7), sadness (Neh. 2:2), gladness (Prov. 15:13), gloominess (Matt. 6:16) and resolve (Luke 9:51) ... to name just a few.

Some people seem to have a natural ability to read others' faces. Not me. All too often, I've completely missed important facial cues from those around me ... often sending the message that I simply didn't care about their concerns or struggles.

But God has been helping me to steadily grow in this area. Here are a few simple ways that you too can improve your ability to read other people's faces.

Concentrate more deliberately on the facial expressions of people you talk to in daily life, intentionally seeking to discern their thoughts and emotions.

Watch movies based on high quality drama (such as a PBS Masterpiece series like *Downton Abbey*), or movies featuring gifted actors and actresses, and pay careful attention to the facial expressions and related emotions.

Watch familiar movies with the sound turned off, and note how the facial expressions carry the plot line forward even without hearing the words.

Watch some of the film clips that we've featured in RW Movie Blogs, many of which provide detailed descriptions of the underlying emotions that you see displayed in the clips.

When you sit in a public place, like a restaurant or the waiting room in an airport or medical office, thoughtfully observe the facial expressions of the people around you and try to guess what they are talking about and feeling.

Take advantage of online educational resources, such as the Body Language Quiz, which tests your ability to read facial expressions and explains key facial indicators of emotions like joy, interest, anger, embarrassment, fear, sadness, disgust, suspicion and shame.

The holiday season provides countless opportunities to improve your ability to read faces ... and to use your insights to minister to people who are lonely, sad, anxious or discouraged.

You never know when such sensitivity may enable you to read and bless someone the same way that Fred Cassidy read and blessed me—and impacted the course of my life—so many years ago.

— Ken Sande

Reflection Questions

Think of a person who has an unusual ability to read your facial expressions. What kind of impact does he or she seem to have on other people's lives?

Now think of a person who consistently fails to read your expressions or emotions. How much impact does that person seem to have on other people's lives?

How could improving your ability to read facial expressions effect your friendships, working relationships, or witness for Christ?

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