

CHRIS: When you're living in the countryside, the smells are different and the feelings are different, you know, the air smells different and the people are different. One of the things that I've had difficulty getting used to, even in 22 years living in the city, is passing by people on the street and having them ignore you, not even look at you. Because I'm used to saying hello and I'll smile and nod. But when they completely just freeze you out- in fact, I've written about that in some of my poetry, that sense of being ignored.

But I understand the reason for that because people don't want to make friends with strangers and strangers are dangerous and, you know, who knows? They get too close, they could wanna come borrow sugar.

ADAM: Let's do an experiment. If you're listening to this while out in public, maybe at a coffee shop or walking down the street, make eye contact and smile and nod with the next person you see or pass. Don't stare at them creepily. Just a brief, kind acknowledgment of sharing the current realm of existence.

If you're driving, at the next light or stop sign, look for the person next to you or walking along on the sidewalk, and repeat the eye contact and nodding process above. But please, not while you're driving. That could be dangerous.

And if you're at home and alone, I don't know, look in a mirror and nod and smile to yourself.

The point of this is to engage with humans in a brief, kind, neighborly way. Sure, you may get roundly ignored or weird looks but somebody out there in your community surely just needs to know they're seen by others. Perhaps you could be the one. Perhaps just a brief "I see you" is something we all could use.

My name is Adam Greenfield and you're listening to The People In My Neighborhood.

CHRIS: I'm Chris Ernest Nelson and I live in the San Diego neighborhood of Golden Hill.

ADAM: And Chris is no stranger to the Golden Hill neighborhood...

CHRIS: 22 years.

ADAM: ... let alone San Diego in general.

CHRIS: I've lived in San Diego County since 1959.

ADAM: Chris, however, was born in Tacoma, Washington.

CHRIS: Yes, I spent the first five years of my life on a farm surrounded by cows and chickens and pigs, horses... chores. (laugh)

ADAM: And it seems that farm and country livin' was a big draw for Chris's family, as they traded the northwestern rural community charm for a southwestern one.

CHRIS: I spent most of my life here in San Diego in Jamul, which is a rural community- used to be very rural. And my grandfather owned the Jamul general store. So the family was very much a part of the community and knew everybody.

And by the time I was in high school I worked at the family store so you get to know everybody in the neighborhood and it was a wonderful, quaint little community at that time.

And you couldn't be out in front of your property hoe-ing weeds or planting bushes without people stopping to chat for a half an hour, that kind of community.

I spent most of my life there. And in my mid-40s I decided I was going to relocate and I came to the city.

ADAM: But several lifetimes happened for Chris before he left the small country for the big city. When he was 24 his father died suddenly, which caused his grandmother's health to spiral downward.

CHRIS: So I began looking after her and, you know, living my life and little by little her situation digressed where she was completely incapable of looking after herself, and then eventually bedridden for nearly four years. So I spent 11 years of my life taking care of my grandmother.

ADAM: During this time, Chris still made space for a life of things to be passionate about.

CHRIS: My friends and I raised rabbits and I had dogs and I was able to enjoy- I had a big yard of planting trees and gardens and growing marijuana, all the great things you would do back in the 70s and 80s. (laugh)

ADAM: Still, Chris struggled to make a decision about his future. Though after a little reflection of my time on this rock, I'd say that's pretty standard. Fortunately for Chris, it took one encounter with a community member to alter his life's trajectory after his grandmother's death.

CHRIS: And when she died, and there's a great story about that but you'll have to ask me to tell you-

ADAM: Oh, I'll make sure we come back to that.

CHRIS: - when she died, I was completely aghast. I had no idea what I was gonna do. So I tried different things. And a friend of mine, a former nun named Margaret, she and I were speaking about my future and my frustrations with the various jobs that I had tried. And Margaret said

these words to me- and these few words changed my life- she said, "Chris, why don't you become a teacher?"

And there was no question mark on that. And I went to become a teacher.

One of the most extraordinary things that can happen to a person, the ship in calm seas, is the slightest wind can change your direction.

ADAM: Sometimes, though, it's more than a slight breeze. Sometimes it's a hurricane. As it turns out, his grandmother's passing is a haunting story of what pushed him towards his friend, Margeret, and subsequently a newfound passion of teaching in his 30s.

CHRIS: There's a point come where the doctors no longer care when you have dementia. The general sense, it might've been alzheimers, but they didn't diagnose in those days. And I think she had a stroke because she fell and stopped walking. But they didn't bother to diagnose it. She didn't speak for four years. At least, for four years.

But little by little her conditioned worsened to where she couldn't focus her eyes, she would drool, she couldn't sit up without being assisted in the chair.

But the night she died, she was leaning forward- I used to get her up everyday and put her in a chair that my friend and I made for her. A special chair so she could be upright for just a few minutes everyday. That's twice a day I used to get her out of bed, even though she was completely bedridden.

And the night she died I had got her up and put her in her chair and I had sat down in my chair and I was watching the news. And something called to me. My grandma was leaning down like she always did. Head forward, eyes unfocused, glossy-eyed. And I turned to look and she raised her head and looked me right in the eyes... and died. And she had not focused on me or looked at anything that I could see her focus on for years. But that moment, she woke up... to die. She came out of her stupor... to die. And she looked directly at me. And in that look, volumes of communication were exchanged.

ADAM: To Chris, though, that moment, as haunting as it was, had a much more long-term profound effect.

CHRIS: That moment was only a punctuation point on a long process.

ADAM: With time, Chris has come to learn life is full of both painful and joyous lessons and gifts.

CHRIS: The gift that she gave me through her sickness was that I learned constancy. You know, when you're a young man you're up and down, in and out, your passions change, your

interests change. But I was called to be disciplined in my care. Every day you had to take care of business. Every day.

ADAM: Alright, so we can learn discipline through trauma and we can enjoy ourselves as much as possible with animals and cultivating weed until we figure out our path in life. But without a way to express ourselves, that path can feel like a long hike up a mountain. Fortunately for Chris, art helped him stay on as level a ground as possible.

CHRIS: Art was a way for me to express myself and the quality of uniqueness about myself. And I was kind of- (laugh) I love this phrase from "Gods and Monsters." The old gentleman says, "I was like a giraffe born to farmers. They didn't know what to do with me except hook me to the plow."

And I felt that way in my own world. And art was a way for me to say who I was without giving away all the secrets. Art was a way for me to be excruciatingly honest and still keep my secrets.

ADAM: And to Chris, art isn't just painting or drawing. It encompasses so much more than that to him, including poetry.

CHRIS: When I speak of arts I speak of all the arts. Dance, music, drawing, poetry, because they do the same work. They allow someone to speak about things that they have no other means of talking about. I could write a narrative, a prosaic narrative, but it would be so... prosaic. It wouldn't have the significance that words have when I write it in verse, when I give it poetry, when I use the magic language of poetry.

ADAM: But for Chris, and probably many artists out there, myself included, it sometimes is more than just about expressing yourself.

CHRIS: One of my greatest joys is when somebody tells me they understand my work. To be understood, even with my own complexity, the complexity of my own experience and my own passions and my own denials and my own whatevers. When someone says they get it, when they gravitate to my work, then I rejoice. Because that's what I'm doing. Somehow, what I'm trying to do is talk to myself in you, reach myself through you, through your understanding. And if you can understand me, then I'm understandable.

And moreso than understood, here's where it all leads: accepted. And I'm going to take you one step farther... and loved.

ADAM: At this point, let's hear Chris read one of his poems, Nothing to Fix, from his book Harvest.

CHRIS: *audio of Nothing to Fix*

ADAM: So where does Chris go from here? From living on a farm as a kid to being a caretaker for his grandmother to becoming a teacher and poet and wise sage, if Chris could do anything, what would it be?

CHRIS: The one thing I would love to do- and the challenge for me is actually to begin it, I'm 66, god willing I have another 20 years if things go well- I want to learn to play the guitar. (chuckle)

I'm working on becoming a painter. That's what I'm doing right now so that's in the works. And I have skills and I have the attention and I have the tools so I'm doing it. But the thing I would love to do- but it seems out of my reach. You see where I'm at? My dream, I'm gonna be a painter. I am a poet. I am a historian. But I would love to be able to make music with something besides- besides humming outside on the front porch in my rocking chair. And you know, I get to humming Beethoven and I don't know who gets it besides me. (laugh)

ADAM: Thanks for listening to The People In My Neighborhood, a podcast series about really getting to know who we know. The music in this episode is by Blue Dot Sessions.

Special thanks to Chris for letting me into his air conditioned home and talking with me. I very much share his sentiment about the talk we had.

CHRIS: I've enjoyed this.

ADAM: So until next time, I apologize for the noise the other night. I had some people over and things got a little loud and rowdy....