

Empathy: "Walking in Another's Shoes"

"It would really be handy right now if I could drive and drink my coffee at the same time," I thought to myself. I was weaving through cars on the main highway when I looked down at the arm that stops at what once was an elbow. It used to eat me up inside knowing that I would forever be known as "the girl whose surgery went wrong". Though I've learned how to function with only one hand, I'm still self-conscious about the way it looks ever since the humiliation doled out by my middle school peers.

I turned into the parking lot of the crowded community center and then spotted Stan waiting by the entrance. After getting out of my car, I rushed over to Stan to receive my ticket. We were going to see an inspirational speaker that came into town only two weeks ago. With Stan being my best friend, I had to believe him when he said the last session was "life changing".

"I said 5:30 sharp," Stan looked down at his watch, "not 5:39."

"I'm sorry," I pleaded, "there was just a lot of traffic"

"It's fine, lets just hope he hasn't started yet."

I looked around to see that people were rushing in the same general direction that we were. Stan and I entered a large auditorium with rows of red velvet seats. After our tickets were checked, we walked over to our seats, which were the fifth row from the stage. Stan looked down at his watch and said, "It's 5:42 he should be starting soon." A minute later, the lights started to dim and a man walked onto the stage. He had snowy white hair with deep lines that covered his face. The man was barefoot and was wearing all black except for his olive green tie. Stan became very excited and joined the crowd in an overwhelming applause. The man sat down on the single chair that was set in the middle of the stage.

"For those who don't know me," he said to the microphone clipped to his jacket, "my name is Allan and I must ask you all a question. Do you know what it's like to be... different?" I swallowed when he said this and thought immediately about my arm.

"Last week we were here talking about how life can be more useful if we appreciate what we have, and that material things aren't really that important. I'm going to start today with the same general theme in the hope that one word will have you all evaluating your conscience." There was a long pause before we went on, "Empathy. Yesterday, I read an article about a fourteen-year-old girl who committed suicide after being tormented by her classmates because she was overweight. I know that everyone in the audience today can still remember a person who had made life miserable at one point."

I remember Melanie Stilwell perfectly and how she turned all the girls in my seventh grade class against me. The hurtful notes, nicknames and rumors made me want to cry when I came home from school. "Obviously we know many ways to describe this person, but one word would not be empathetic." Allan continued, "The sad thing about this article was that it didn't even make front page. Do we really care more about the latest fad than someone around us who commits suicide? I'm sure if parents taught their kids to not judge a book by its cover then the world wouldn't be as full of hate and wars. Maybe if more questions were to be asked, we would learn the answers from another's perspective." He looked into the distance and his face became stern, "I have a friend that I grew up with who is Muslim and wears the traditional turban around his head. He tried to fly up to Illinois to see his very sick mother but ended up missing his flight because he was accused of being a terrorist. Sadly, an hour before he boarded the next flight, his mother passed away. One day I asked him what it's like to be judged so easily and he simply replied that if people knew what it was like, they would understand how hurtful it is." Alan walked over to the chair slowly and sat down, leaning with his elbows on his knees. "See if people took the time to experience another's perspective, there wouldn't be nearly as much judgment. If the girls who caused the suicide of their classmate understood what she experienced on a daily basis, that little girl might still be around today. If before we declared war on a country, took time to understand their side of the argument, there would be more compromising and less bomb dropping."

He stood up in his chair and looked down at the crowd, "I want you all to go home tonight and think about how the world would be if everyone thought about other people's feelings. Think about how your life would be if you didn't feel judged for the things you can't control. Thank you so much for your time and I hope we'll see you next week."

I stood up in my chair and clapped together my arm and my hand, with people around me gradually doing the same. Alan waved his hand, saying the words thank you before walking off the stage. That was the first time I had ever felt thankful being known as "the girl whose surgery went wrong".

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