



9-17-2014

A Piece of Myself

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Lauro, Alison, "A Piece of Myself" (2014). *SURGE*. 168.
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A Piece of Myself

Abstract

I believe in empathy.

In the hustle of our daily lives it's easy to forget that there is an entire world of people around us. We are often blinded by what's going on in our own lives, listening to the daily gossip, intent on focusing on our own struggles, celebrations, and the moments in between. When daily struggles come about, or tragedies consume our families and ourselves, it's hard to remember that we are not the only ones suffering; it is equally difficult in happy times, when luck is on our side, to remember that most people are not so lucky. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, empathy, Washington D.C., prejudgments, humanity

Disciplines

Other Social and Behavioral Sciences | Sociology of Culture

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

A PIECE OF MYSELF

September 17, 2014

I believe in empathy.



In the hustle of our daily lives it's easy to forget that there is an entire world of people around us. We are often blinded by what's going on in our own lives, listening to the daily gossip, intent on focusing on our own struggles, celebrations, and the moments in between. When daily struggles come about, or tragedies consume our families and ourselves, it's hard to remember that we are not the only ones suffering; it is equally difficult in happy times, when luck is on our side, to remember that most people are not so lucky.

During a recent trip to Washington DC, I learned what empathy truly meant when I spent two days on the street. Sitting on the curb and panhandling, waiting for time to slowly tick by, watching the smooth speed of the city, I saw hundreds of faces pass me by. Most didn't glance at me, and many that did only did so out of curiosity, and quickly looked away. There were the few that dumped a dollar or sometimes more in my empty coffee cup, and an even precious fewer who stopped to talk, to ask me questions, to learn who I am beyond what they saw: a teenager in dirty clothes sitting on the streets, her belongings crammed into a black trash bag.

I can't fully blame the people who kept walking past me. I might have been one of them a few days prior, and many friends and family members would have been too. We are used to ignoring people, turning a blind eye rather than questioning the situation, asking people how they're doing, if they're feeling OK. To do so would be uncomfortable, unpleasant, after all,

and we've been taught to ignore those feelings. It's not easy to pass by a homeless person, someone who might look dirty or unkempt, sad or beaten down, and smile their way, say hello, drop some change in their cup. We tell ourselves that a person's plight is due to their own personal choices and character flaws rather than accept the fact that calculated systemic choices in our government and judicial system have caused the plight of so many living on streets or in poverty.

One man I met in D.C. struck me. He was a soft-spoken Ethiopian man in dark clothing; you could tell he was somewhat dirty; he walked alone as night fell. A girl I was with invited him over to sit with us (something, in truth, I probably would not have had the courage to do). He was kind, polite, and very sweet. Sadly, I know I would never have looked twice at him had I passed him on the street under any other circumstances. It is those snap judgments that keep us from seeing the true core of a person; it is our lack of empathy that allows us to ignore a man sitting on the street, a woman sleeping on a bench in the park, an immigrant struggling to learn a new language, a child with not enough food or resources to earn a good education, a peer who comes to class with eyes red from crying.

The truth is that when we choose to only see parts of someone—choices they've made, circumstances brought upon them—we lose a small piece of humanity. When we are empathetic, when we see beyond the shallow façade of what a person allows us to see, we might—will—be surprised by what we find: another person, maybe even a piece of ourselves in them.

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