

An Experience with Empathy

September of 2008. I still remember sitting alone on the classroom carpet, watching with a sinking dread in my stomach as kids around me all got up in pairs to sit at round tables. It was my first day of school in Canada and I did not speak a word of English, and nor did I have the guts to open my mouth in the slightest. My goal that day was to go unnoticed.

It was that moment when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around, immediately flushed with embarrassment at the thought of confrontation. A girl I did not know came into full view. She smiled, beckoned at me, and said something I couldn't understand. Suddenly I realized that she was inviting me to sit at her table. At that very moment, I felt the tight knot in my stomach loosen and a wave of overwhelming relief wash over me.

It was hard for me to contain my gratitude and excitement as I walked over to sit at her table – But I couldn't help wondering why. Why did she ask me to sit at her table? It was clear that she knew I couldn't speak English, so why bother? The girls at the table began talking amongst themselves and I had not a single clue what they were talking about despite my best efforts to decipher the language. Nevertheless, I was just thankful that someone cared about me.

Fast forward two years to September of 2010. It was the first day of fourth grade at a brand new school and I was feeling at ease. With two years under my belt, I was a lot more confident and had made many new friends. Although this was a new school, I was no longer afraid of speaking up. I had a good feeling about this school year.

Days, weeks, and months flew by. I grew more and more comfortable in the environment – but very soon it became apparent that not everyone was as content as I was. There was a boy who stood out from all the other kids in the class. It was barely noticeable, but you could tell he wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer from the way he would freeze and stutter when the teacher called on him. He always kept his head low when kids whispered behind his back in the halls, as if he couldn't hear them. He sat alone at recess and ate lunch in quietness while others chattered loudly around him every day. It gradually became an unspoken rule among the kids to stay away from him as if he had the "cheese touch". Like all the others, I stayed away from the boy simply for the sake of becoming an outcast myself.

One day after school, I was waiting for my mom to pick me up. It was getting late in the afternoon and all my classmates had already gone home while I waited alone in an empty courtyard. When my mom finally came, she asked me about the boy who was sitting by himself on the swings.

"Who?" I asked. And then I realized that he was there too the whole time that I waited. It just never occurred to me that I should approach that boy, never mind talk to him. "Oh, *him*? But mom, I don't talk to him."

"Why not? He looks like he needs a friend or two."

Why not? I felt as if there were a million reasons why I shouldn't talk to him, but for some strange reason I just could not shape those reasons into words. It was then did I realize how ridiculous I was

being for judging him without having spoken to him ever in my life. I reconsidered my mom's words.
"Okay, I'll give it a try."

You know, some things are easier said than done.

The next morning, I looked for opportunities to strike up a conversation. Perhaps he was avoiding people all the time, or that my unconscious reluctance steered me away from the idea of reaching out, but I just couldn't find an opportune moment to approach the boy. My chance came at lunch, when he sat alone again by the tire swings. Pushing back the last of my doubts, I took a deep breath and made my way over. One of my friends asked where I was going. I only shrugged and kept going, keenly aware of curious eyes burning into my back.

Okay. Do I really want to do this?

Although nobody talks to him, I know we all sympathize with him. We feel bad that he's not as bright as the rest of us and we pity his situation. We feel bad-we really do, but our kindness stops at pity. Kindness with no action, I decided, was futile. After all, how could you possibly understand someone without putting yourself in their situation? I thought back to the time in second grade when that girl empathized with me and lent me a helping hand. Without her invitation, I would never have gained the confidence to adapt to a new environment.

As my last doubt vanished, I took a deep breath and approached the boy. He didn't notice me until I called his name. Based on his flustered look, I guess it wasn't something that happened very often. For a split second, I saw myself in that face of surprise. It was an expression of relief and gratitude that words can hardly come close to describing.

"Hello, what's your name?"