

Absence and Introduction

I remember the feeling of loneliness. I remember the feeling of confusion. I remember the dread of each day. But I know that these feelings aren't entirely exclusive to me. I know that there are others who have yet to leave these feelings as simply memories. I know they live like how I lived. This is why I need to be there for them. Because if it weren't for someone, I would still be there.

I come from a busy household of 4 children, one of which – my older brother, has a mental disability and needs constant guidance and from an early age, I learned to take care of him and teach him how to lead a good life. Between us four siblings however, I am always seen as the oldest, the most mature, the one that needs to set an example and be responsible for the other three siblings. My entire life has been to set a good example for others and to teach them how to navigate the path. But with this, I've never been taught how to look beyond the paved road, what endless possibilities lie before me because I am simply too afraid to look towards the unknown where I haven't been forced to enter just yet. Others who have long exited the forest tell me how to follow the road, unaware that the path has since long changed. This is absence of empathy. Everything that I have been told by adults and teachers has always been out of good intent and they comfort me with immense sympathy, but it is always different from empathy.

I detested the first weeks of high school. I had no classes with my best friend and I had difficulty relating with the people around me. I didn't have many common interests with others and I didn't grow up with most of my classmates, so it was difficult for me to find people who I could hang out around. Instead of trying to integrate myself with my classmates, I decided to just feel sorry for myself and watch the clock intently during each class until the lunch bell rang where I could finally go find my best friend and lament about my day. I didn't know what else to do. For the first weeks of school, life became a cycle of waiting, never pleased with the current moment, always waiting for something better that never seemed to arrive.

Things changed within a couple weeks. A last-minute planning error prompted me to be pulled into the school's liturgical choir. Initially confused and scared about what was going to happen, I soon found something that I enjoyed and looked forwards to. Singing had always been

one of my passions, but I had never thought about applying it anywhere outside of the occasional talent show or icebreaker game. With this choir, however, it introduced me not only to the chaplaincy team of my school, but also one of the people who helped shape me into who I am today.

It wasn't the notion of being in choir which made me different. Nor was it the introduction to the chaplaincy sector of the school. Rather, it was the acquaintance of a very special individual who led the choir that changed everything for me. She became my guiding hand and mentor as she led me through the first turbulent months and years of high school. The leader of choir, I looked up to her as someone I would like to become one day.

She and I became good friends shortly after the first choir event, soon talking to each other quite often. When our conversations were not about what songs we should rehearse at the next practice or when the next performance would be, she would ask me about my problems in school and offer guidance for whatever I told her about. What was special was that she was able to offer me reassurance and comfort when something bad happened because she had also experienced it previously and knew that things would turn out okay. That was the thing I needed the most. Someone to relate to that could truly tell me things that I needed to hear and be living proof of what I needed to do to fix it. She didn't need to know how to fix everything. She just needed to let me know that I wasn't alone.

It's been over 2 years since she entered my life. Even with this much time, I can still feel the ripples of empathy that she showed me when we first met. She is the reason for my devout commitment to demonstrate empathy to those who look like they are going through what I went through. I believe very strongly that if it weren't for her, I would be a very different person today, perhaps for the worse.

We all need empathy in our lives, whether it be from a friend or a family member. The emotional response invoked from knowing that we are not alone in this world is enough to get us through even the toughest nights of our lives. And if I can be there for someone, I will not give up the opportunity because I have firsthand seen what empathy can do.

