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CUNY Ethics and Morality Essay Contest

Sals' **Zhi (Wisdom)**

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Sometimes when I walk past an elderly person sitting on a park bench, I try to imagine what their life was like when they were my age. I'll think about digging through boxes of old photos, while they tell me who's birthday party that was and what war had just ended. I go back in time for just a glimpse, and then I come back to the park. Maya Angelou once said, "We spend precious hours fearing the inevitable, it would be wise to use that time adoring our families, cherishing our friends and living our lives." Angelou expresses that along with the idea of staying present comes the time for our families, our friends and ultimately ourselves. I know, from experience, that most of our elderly are more present in the moment than we realize, and I try to see them for that. A research article in *The Week* examined a few different cultures and how in general the elderly are regarded within them. The author, Karina Martinez-Carter, addresses the U.S. as a "youth-centric" culture focusing primarily on "individualism and independence." She goes on to quote anthropologist Jared Diamond on the geriatric community in America, saying they live "lonely lives separated from their children and lifelong friends." This "youth-centric" approach is not conducive with preservation, but rather, abandons it.

A few years ago, I decided to volunteer at a large city hospital here in New York. After the lengthy vetting process and orientation I was placed in the Friendly Visitor Program. This program focused on the idea that the large, diverse population of inpatients that were being treated, would all benefit from some quality time with a visitor. The truth, however, is that not every patient has visitors. So I would walk the long, poorly lit halls, looking for patients who wanted some company. Sometimes we would chat about life or love, other times politics, and always start with how bad the hospital food was. I had patients who wanted a television buddy

and patients who wanted *The Times* or *The Post* read to them aloud. We sipped tea while the nurse took vitals and talked small talk while the phlebotomist drew blood. We would even sit in silence, watching the sun set through a dirty screen- it was all quality time. Everyone had a story and most were sad, considering where we were, but there was the occasional patient with the end in sight who saw nothing sad about their circumstances. This brings me to Sal.

Sal was a 93 year old native New Yorker, born and bred. Half Italian, half Irish, and had hands that could crush a Prince Albert tobacco tin like a Dixie Cup. As a Detroit born Sicilian-American, raised with working class family values, we instantly hit it off. Sal would tell me stories about when he was a hell raising kid and the first time he got drunk. He could still taste the Cuba Libre (an old timey name for a rum and Coke). He told me how he met his wife and how she got sick. And every story ended with a silver lining. He would repeat the same stories again, and again, reliving them each time. His dementia allowed for about a minute and a half loop before it refreshed and started up again. I tried to respond like it was the first time, every time, however my attention span only allowed me a few times before I had to tell him to get some rest and that I would see him in the morning. "Sure thing Charlie" he would say. I am not sure who Charlie was or why I reminded him of the guy, but I like to think that he was an old friend from Canarsie that had Sal's back no matter what.

One morning as I walked towards Sal's room a doctor and a woman passed me in the hall saying something about palliative care and keeping him comfortable and I rushed through the doorway, Sal was in rare form. He was curled up, almost fetal, and his dry tongue was hanging out of his mouth. He was asleep and snoring, so I poured him a little cup of water, unwrapped the bendy straw and sat in silence. He coughed a few times and woke himself up. He looked at me

and said quietly “Charlie, you don’t need to stay, get home to your kids,” Charlie must have had children, I told him the kids were at school and that I brought him a drink from the bar. He sipped the water slowly and suddenly had a moment of clarity. It was almost as if his dementia let him out to the yard for recess and told him not to go too far. He put his hand out and gestured for me to take it. I clutched his once strong, hard working hand. The hand that shot a gun pointed at the Nazis. The hand that held the ring as he placed it on his wife’s finger as she said yes, and eventually as he said goodbye.

Then Sal told me he was ready to go, that he was ready to move on. He lived his life and he didn’t want to die alone in a hospital bed. “I laid in my own shit for three hours last night” he told me with his raspy Brooklyn accent. He pleaded with me as if I were the doctor, telling me he wanted to see his wife and that he was ready. I teared up. Sal saw I was upset, and recess was over. “Charlie, what are you doing here? It’s late, get home to the kids.” I told him the kids were at school and that I snuck him in an ice cold Cuba Libre, and gave him a bit more water, he smiled and dozed off. He was still holding my hand, or maybe I was still holding his, either way I didn’t move. I sat there for twenty-five more minutes hoping that he didn’t have to live through another uncomfortable night and that each faint breath was his last. I couldn’t visit Sal for the next two days because of midterms, he was gone when I came back. The nurse said he was transferred down to the ICU and that he passed around two in the morning while in his sleep. I think she was surprised by my smile.

I chose the virtue wisdom, or Zhi, because I choose not to abandon it. I am not speaking of my own, but the wisdom of others. The wisdom that needs to be passed from our seniors who sit on park benches, our immigrant grandparents who eat and go to bed in silence and our elders,

like Sal, who die alone in hospital beds, and always see a silver lining. It is in their stories that the rewards lie, we just need to slow down and see them for what they are. Even though we may feel like they do not fit into our idea of what is relevant today, we owe it to future generations to address this cultural dissonance now, so that it is not as present in the future. Mo Yee Lee and LeeAnn Mjelde-Mossey from Ohio State University present a solution to this by empowering family members to “draw on personal strengths to which multiple worldviews and values of individual members are recognized, incorporated and negotiated.” But this negotiation shouldn’t only exist within the family, it can be extended to strangers on the street or in the park. In order to listen and truly hear wisdom one must be present and step back from one’s ego. If we don’t, the biggest personal obstacle is our self. Thomas Merton wrote that “every moment and every event of every man’s life on earth plants something in his soul.” With that being said, I will continue to look to the full, moment rich souls for wisdom, because they will plant something into mine.

Work Cited

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