

“Growing Pains” (Li – Fall 2016 Ethics and Morality Essay Contest)

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Growing up with Buddhist roots, including monthly visits to the temples upstate, and regular prayers at the Buddhist altar in our house, it is safe to say that the traditions of respecting my elders is thoroughly embedded in me. Buddhism teaches “compassion for the suffering of others, so younger generations have an obligation to respect and help the elderly” (Stuart). It was a concept that I had always thought I had been achieving simply by default until I realized I was not even close.

The strange thing about growing up is watching how everyone changes around you. The even stranger thing about growing up is watching someone stay the same. Watching my aunt remain at a mental age of six was hard to wrap my mind around. It was something that took me sixteen years to figure out in terms of how to honor the idea of “respecting your elders” in such a situation.

Up until the age of six, my youngest aunt was my companion, my friend, and my equal. We would find the same things funny and I always had someone to create mischief with. And by always, I mean *always*, because she and my oldest aunt lived within five minutes of my family so she was over almost every single day. It was nice to have someone that related to me, especially when I was still the youngest child amongst all of my close family by far and clearly did not fit in with my older cousins.

The older I got, the more I wanted to distance myself from her. I began to notice that my aunt was the butt of every joke due to her short temper, over-the-top reactions, and inability to read social cues correctly. Not to mention there was an increasing rift growing between us due to the language barrier between her elementary level Chinese and our advanced level of English. I did not understand why she had seizures, or why there were orange bottles full of pills scattered

about her house. I did not understand why she never seemed to change when everything and everyone else did.

All I ever strived to do was emulate my older cousins when I was younger because they seemed so much wiser and so much cooler. When I saw them pointing and laughing at the video footage they took of her sulking in the corner or when I saw them flinch away from my aunt, I could not help but imitate their behaviors. It seemed as if in a blink of an eye, she had transformed into a caricature of a person.

The simple fact of the matter was that I never bothered to understand *why* she was that way. I had not viewed her as an “elder” so I did not treat her as such. As I got older, I started to laugh a little less at the jokes less because I did not understand how continuously making fun of someone so vulnerable was funny. I assumed she was just born this way so I should pity her, but by making these assumptions, I was not really giving her the respect she deserved.

So, when I was sixteen, I decided I no longer wanted to be ignorant or disrespectful. I remember asking my mom in the car, and she told me that my aunt had a severe case of Japanese encephalitis that sprung on her when she was five. I did my research and found that this disease is transmitted by mosquitos to cause inflammation of the brain, and is the leading cause of encephalitis in Asia (CDC). It is a disease that is only supposed to result in mild symptoms. Only 1% of cases develop into encephalitis, with side effects of high fevers, convulsions and headaches that cannot be cured (Kraft). My aunt was that 1%.

My mom said that if you look at photos of her before the onset of this disease, she looked as if she had a very bright future ahead of her. But instead, she grew up isolated from the rest of the world since my protective grandparents wanted to keep her safe. As a trade-off, she never

had the chance to fulfill her educational future, nor did she have the chance to ever know the world outside of her family.

After hearing that, I thought about people that have faced this kind of adversity. I saw parallels in her story with Helen Keller's beginnings because they both lived with a handicap that hindered their ability to grow up in a way most people would perceive as "normal." People had described Helen as a little girl who frequently threw temper tantrums and was deemed difficult to deal with (Herrmann). Her circumstances led to a lot of frustration, but she herself was not an angry person. With years of guidance, she managed to beat the odds with a mix of her own strong will and the help of Anne Sullivan. Anne Sullivan got through to her because she took the time to look beyond her disability and came to respect her as an individual who was more than that.

Although not as extreme, I often witness my aunt cursing in the corner and almost always upset. I now realize it is not because she is simply immature but it is because she has a hard time communicating with others who cannot understand what she is going through. My aunt's Anne Sullivan came in form of my older aunt in a way. But I realized Anne Sullivan does not have to come in the form of just one person. Simply taking the time to respect and listen to people is a positive step in all senses, regardless of who it is.

Since then, I have done my best to treat her with respect— not as someone to target, to baby or to pity. Finding that balance is hard, but I try to listen to her, and I definitely no longer laugh along at the jokes that are made about her. From this, I take pride in her willingness to talk to me and tell me what is wrong, even when she is not in the best of moods. I take pride in the fact that I have taken the time to try and understand someone so different from me, rather than allowing myself to be aloof.

Luckily, my family has also toned down the jokes about her and we have all come to a better understanding together about the best way to treat her in a respectful manner. Respecting your elders even if she may not be a conventional “adult” is crucial. Having a disability does not make you any less of a person and any less deserving of respect. And having compassion for other people’s suffering as I mentioned earlier, even when I cannot quite understand it, is something that I always try to keep in mind from now on.

"Do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself." (Scholastic) I always strongly believed in this quote and admired and valued this quality in other people. Admiring and executing are two different things, and learning to transition from simply admiring to executing takes time. It took sixteen years of my life to *start* learning the true meaning of compassion and respect, but it is something I am proud of. Respect is something that will stay with you forever and something that no one can take away from you.

I do not think that I have perfected respect in its entirety quite yet, as often times my impatience with my grandma’s Alzheimer condition, and defensive judgments on my dad’s critique will cause me to lash out. However, as my relationships with others continue to grow, I learn more about the other person. Everyday, I try to tell myself that each person has a complete different upbringing than I do, and I should be respectful not to discount anyone else’s perspective.

This past year, my friend from high school told me that she only keeps friends in her life that she gains something from. And as her friend, she said that she is inspired by the empathy and respect that I have for other people. Just hearing that was enough to know that my efforts to improve this virtue about myself are working. The best thing that comes from trying to fulfill this virtue to the fullest extent are the solid relationships that are formed with others and an openness

in communication. I will reiterate that I am definitely not close to perfecting the quality of respect because there is always something new to learn and there is always something to work on. Yet, my friend's words will stay with me for a lifetime because that is a reminder of the kind of person I will continuously aim to be.

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