

EMPATHY

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“Treat others the way you want to be treated.” Although I had heard this phrase before, I had never paid much heed to it. They were all just words to me, so I just went on with my life. I gossiped with my friends at lunch, made fun of people I didn’t like, and even started the occasional rumor about girls of whom I was jealous. I just didn’t think about the consequences for myself and the effects that my vicious words could have on someone. I didn’t realize the toll such things could take on a person’s self-esteem.

I stumbled upon the truth one day by accident. It was an average day and I was just going along talking to my friends and making jokes as usual. I went into the bathroom to fix my make-up when I heard a small sound, like a sobbing. Alarmed, I got down on my knees to see if I was alone in the bathroom. I wasn’t. I saw a small pair of cherry-covered Keds. Getting up, I tentatively opened the door. I gasped in spite of myself. There was a girl, popular, whom I had started a rumor about. She was holding tissues in one hand, wiping tears away with the other. She looked up and burst into tears. I asked what was wrong, dreading the answer. When she confirmed by suspicions, that the rumor was the source of her tears; I was appalled with myself. When she asked me what kind of person would say such a thing, I grew embarrassed and my cheeks flushed. I quickly excused myself and ran out of the bathroom into the deserted corridor. As I leaned against the wall, I pondered upon why I had never considered what I had said might hurt. This girl, an innocent victim whom I didn’t even know, was hurt by my malicious gossip. I thought of the other rumors and wondered if the targets were also wounded by me. Why hadn’t I thought of this? I spend the rest of the day feeling guilty and hanging my head. I focused solely on my schoolwork. But no matter what I did, my mind floated to Camille. When I passed her in the hallway, I avoided her despondent gaze. When I was home brushing my teeth that night, I glanced up at the mirror. I looked different; I looked ugly and cruel. Why hadn’t I noticed this recent development in my appearance? I threw down my toothbrush and walked downstairs to our computer. It was time for damage control.

I logged on and stared at the screen. I had to make things right with Camille and me. I remembered my Myspace. I needed to feel as embarrassed and vulnerable as she had felt, so I went to work. Out of it came an entry that said that I made up the rumors about Camille for the stupid reason I was simply jealous. I also apologized and said I hoped she’d forgive me.

School the next day was kind of hard. Her friends were extremely angry with me, and my friends called me weak for apologizing. But the amazing thing was when I dropped my notebook, the one I wrote in; it was like a diary. Horrified, I saw Camille pick it up. I feared that she would read it aloud. I anticipated her copying it and posting it all over the school or posting it on her Myspace page. I held my breath. But then, she looked in my eyes, smiled, and handed it to me. I gratefully accepted the journal. She nodded, and we went our separate ways.

Although we didn’t become best friends, or even friends, I still remember her willingness to forgive, to “let bygones be bygones.” And to this day, I think back and smile about how we

forgot about the rumor. We smiled in the hallway and said “hello” to each other. Camille taught me that words are not just words. They cut like a knife. She taught me honesty, forgiveness, and courage. I’m not truthful all the time, and I don’t always do the right thing. But because of the Camille altercation, I now think about what I say and do. The best thing about that day was when I looked in the mirror that night. I no longer looked ugly and cruel. I looked like someone who had made mistakes and learned from them. I looked like who I wanted to be. I looked like Meredith.