

Honorable Mention

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10th grade

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Title: Seeds of Empathy

"Empathy will allow you to reach your dreams. It's a precious gift, once you learn how to wield it. Just wait, and you'll see." These words, spoken to me by my father, meant little on first hearing. My eleven-year old mind labeled them as "fancy nonsense" and left it at that. Not until years later did I discover the true definition of empathy. Ironically, one experience taught me what my father had failed to convey, that empathy, as a word meaning 'understanding,' isn't just a gift. It's a law of life.

My first year of high school started rough. Changes swept through my life, leaving me breathless and confused. Old middle school cliques had disappeared. Friends had travelled to distant piers of the social caste system. I began to feel distant toward people I had known since grade school. An anxiety blossomed in my soul, bearing buds of treacherous quality. People, for no discernible reason, suddenly terrified me.

I solved my social phobia by trying to avoid it. I stopped talking at school, becoming quiet and withdrawn. I alienated myself from my classmates. One day, when the lunch room became too arduous to face, I sought refuge outside it. I sidled out of the cafeteria and into the hall, spotting the perfect spot for isolation. A bench sat snuggled up against a Pepsi machine, offering a shield to hide behind. I seized the seat with relief.

Within minutes, I became familiar with my territory. The wood bench contained a detailed history of past occupants, written in layers of gum wads. The Pepsi machine I soon regarded as a work of art, its side covered with obscene words and mindless doodles scrawled in black permanent marker. A low drone buzzed from the cafeteria down the hall, and only a trickle of students passed in front of where I sat. I settled in comfortably, my back pressed against the cool metal of the Pepsi machine and a book in my hand. Then, not seconds later, my peace shattered.

They came without warning, a group of four or five boys with slicked back hair and passionless faces. They had emerged from the classroom across the hall. I knew them by sight as the bad crowd, the kids you don't ever admit to your parents that you know. They were the smokers, the delinquents, the "thugs." My mind latched onto the unjust word without hesitation. It described them completely.

The boys judged me with rash precision, much as I had done them. They saw my book and drew conclusions about my character. I jammed my back against the Pepsi machine in a futile attempt to escape their scrutinizing eyes, forcing my own eyes downward, pretending to read.

One boy smirked. "hey," he said as way of greeting. "Why you out here? You don't like people, or somethin'?"

I shook my head, "I—" The boy didn't wait for an answer. He grabbed my copy of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World and appraised it with a scornful eye. "What grade you in?"

"Ninth," I replied. The boy plopped down next to me. His friends followed suit. I slid over, albeit reluctantly, to allow them room. Striking up a conversation with his cronies, the head boy showed no intention of relinquishing my book. I pressed my trembling hands under my thighs, forcing them to remain still. It seemed that I had no choice but to sit and listen to the thugs.

Foul language poured fluently from the boys' mouths. Harsh and pointless, their conversation rang strangely through my mind. Yet gradually, as I began to sift through their curses and swears, it all became intriguing. They did not grapple with matters foreign to my heart. They discussed their parents, their frustrations at school, their plans for the future. For one moment I felt united to those boys, if only through our mutual concerns as human beings.

When the bell for class rang, the boy who had taken my book presented it back to me. "Thank you," I murmured, shoving it into my backpack.

"No prob," he replied. He smiled at me and walked away. In that smile I understood him well. The boy lived as an antagonist. It was his role in life. By taking my book he had caused no harm.

As the weeks passed, the thugs grew more dogged in their attempts to harass and annoy me. They kept me from completing my homework, they took my possessions, and they pestered me with questions. I knew that I had the power to turn my back on them, to reenter the cafeteria and mingle among the other students. Or, if my courage showed itself lacking, I could always retreat to the benches past the gymnasium doors. From there I could sit in undisturbed peace, observing life from a distance, as I was apt to do.

Yet, day after day, something drew me back to that vandalized Pepsi machine, to those boys whose scornful eyes mocked education and authority. Their harsh and crude words held an insight and a beauty quite apart from my own befuddled thoughts. I felt fascinated with their world. Not in its difference but in its parallel to my own life. They struggled with weaknesses I had already encountered. Much like myself, they sought isolation from the rest of the school.

One day, a new thug appeared. As I worked on some homework, he began asking me absurd questions. He used his mocking tone to tease, and he pushed his jeering face up close to mine.

"Hey man," the head boy, who had once taken my book, said "Don't bother her. She wants to be left alone."

"It's cool man," the newcomer agreed, backing down.

The corners of my lips turned up in a gentle smile. The head thug noticed and inclined his head my way. Suddenly, I realized an unpleasant truth. From the day I had first met these boys I had expected respect. Never had I attempted to return that respect; never had I considered it necessary to do so. Surely *thug* was a derogatory label. Surely the coldness I sensed from the boys did not waft from them alone.

These boys were my equals. They couldn't speak with proper grammar, they didn't have good grades or neat clothes, they acted against my dearest values, but I could understand them. Their motives in life, if I thought about them, did not differ from my own. If I tried to see the world from their point of view, it revolved just as beautifully. The boys had shown me the seeds of empathy, a most precious gift. They taught me a lesson I'll never forget.

During my freshman year of high school, I learned how to understand others. My father called this trait empathy, a skill he felt would help me to achieve my dreams. I have discovered that it is also a law of life. Empathy allowed me, and allows me still, to appreciate all humans. It helps me cooperate with diverse groups of people because I can step back and experience the feelings of another. Although my social phobia has never dissipated, empathy lets me put it aside. More important, empathy permits me to benefit the world, by way of the compassion it sows in me.