

Third Place
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Title: Courage

For some people, life is no breeze, but a cruel, whipping gust of wind pushing you to the ground with no mercy. The very few to survive must fight their way back up with all of the courage and might that their hearts possess. This kind of courage is hidden deep within all of our hearts, though scarcely seen by sight alone. This important law of life remained to unknown until this year, when I came upon it face to face.

Summer was just coming to an end, and today was the class meet-and-greet. Rain profusely down poured from above as clouds thundered wildly with vengeance. As I walked into the pavilion dripping with water, I couldn't help but notice a face that stood out above all others. It was ghostly pale and rather gaunt, with a scare amount of hair up top. A terrorizing chill went down my spine as I suddenly realized whom it was.

Peder Otterson had been diagnosed with brain tumor the previous year, struggling for his life the whole way through. By some miracle, which I could not begin to understand, he had survived. I spent the remaining time at the picnic observing Peder. I couldn't imagine how he could be laughing, smiling, and having a good time as he was after all of the horrible things that had happened to him. This remained a mystery to me for many months.

One day in science class, Peder drew a black smiley face on his pinkie finger. Then on the top of his finger he put a black Lego hat that fit perfectly. As all of the cold souls walked past him without notice or acknowledgement, he chuckled to himself. Though nobody laughed with him, he didn't seem to care what everybody thought. He knew that he was funny, so he laughed. I wanted badly to laugh with him, to show him that I too thought that it was funny and clever, and to tell him that I noticed him, but what would everybody else think? What would they say? As much as I felt awful for Peder, I certainly wasn't planning on doing anything to find out.

Many new questions arose in my mind. I didn't understand how people could ignore Peder as they did. Though he was not actually teased, it was obvious what people thought, and Peder was bright. He knew why other students didn't talk to him anymore, and why they pretended not to notice. They had not the courage to face the fact that he had gone through something horrible and they had not. Students also couldn't handle being around somebody, who was different, because that was un-cool.

Overtime I began to realize that I was one of them; one who was weak and afraid of what I didn't understand. I had been so horrified of what would happen to myself that I had completely forgotten about what was really important in my life. I was supposed to try to be a wonderfully courageous leader, not a cowardly shadow.

Soon I became so embarrassed and ashamed of myself that I couldn't deal with it. I decided that I would force myself to have the courage that Peder had to smile and laugh, the courage to live on without recognition, and the courage he had to try to his fullest. I had to do something big, something huge, something giant to change, or I would go mad!

Shortly, I began to make visits to Peder and his few friends' table and lunch. I can't tell the truth and say it was thrilling at first, watching Peder eat in silence and all, but it grew on me. Before I knew it, I was spending whole lunch periods with Peder and his few friends simply chatting the time away (it was normally very rare for me to spend more than five minutes at one place at a time).

Of the many things that Peder taught me, (and still does), the one that sticks out in my mind the most, is his amazing amount of courage. Courage ties everything else together. To persevere, to express yourself, to be honest (with both yourself and others), to laugh and learn from your mistakes, and not to judge others, you must know this crucial life lesson.

To me, a day may be a tiring drag, while to Peder it is an upward battle for happiness and a struggle for acceptance. Peder has so much courage just to get up each morning, knowing that he might well be ignored, and still put a smile on his face ready to fight the odds and hope for a better day. Nobody can beautifully draw out this essential law of life as Peder Otterson can.