

Michelle Hatch
June 18th 2014

This I Believe
Statement

The Strangers We Manage to See Ourselves In

I believe that it is the simplest connections with strangers that fuel, humble, and understand us best in life, even better than our own families.

There is something about making eye contact with a complete stranger, looking up and having two sets of melancholy eyes locking upon each other, and for that single moment, stepping off our high horses and meeting at eye level. We can stand with one another without judging, seeing only a piece of yourself within that person, causing an upwelling of empathy to cross your entire body, knowing you are not only seeing a stranger with struggles, but really yourself in their shoes.

I was in my second semester of freshman year at college when I had an emotional connection with a complete stranger. Having not come from a financially blessed family, I was paying for college entirely on my own, my bank account was running dry and the money was vanishing quicker than the last turkey leg on thanksgiving with my large family. Worried about where I stood financially and doubting the likelihood of ever landing a job within the field of my major, I headed to the school bookstore mentally preparing myself to invest the last of my savings into my future like westernized society demanded. I knew these next few books I was purchasing would push my checking account on the edge but what I didn't know was if school was really worth all the trouble and worrying. I was completely caught up in my own head and distracted with my own pitiful 'problems.'

"Hi, how are you doing?" was what pulled me out of self-pitying trance.

I looked up and saw a man just a few yards from the bookstore. He was grey at the roots, wrinkles lead the eyes down his entire body down to knobby fingers and wobbly knees, his eyes looked as if they have gone without sleep for the past decade; surely this man was old enough to have been retired, though instead, he was spending his glory years perfecting the university's' image. Instantly I began to feel bad for him.

"Good, just heading to the book store. Spending too much money. You?" I responded.

"Oh, good. Good. Just rakin' up some leaves," he responded genuinely while cracking a contradicting smile.

About a 45 minutes passed while I finished purchasing the required, but hardly used textbooks, still frustrated with the norms of large-scale societies. When I walked out the door the old man was still hard at his job. He looked up at me with a more half-hearted smile, sleepiness growing on his face, and said "I'm still raking these leaves..." self-disapproval growing in his voice.

Hopping off my high horse, I felt completely at level with this complete stranger. We stood, eye to eye, with no judgment, fully understanding one another and our troubles. I could see we both envisioned ourselves in the other shoes, imagining life had we chose a different route. At the end of the day, money isn't going to make or break you, unless you let it. We understood that regardless of the age and gender gap, us two strangers shared our problems in common –attempting to survive with minimal money.

Cracking my best impromptu smile, while the empathy for the man was surging through my veins, I responded "I'm still spending too much money."

This was the end of all contact with this stranger but I still see much of myself in him, like I do with the most random people on the streets.