

Bringing an Empty Locket: A Fulfillment of Character in Washington D.C.

On May 4, 2014, I arrived in Washington D.C. with my eighth grade graduating class. I had packed for the portaging the night before. I included everything that seemed important at the time. In my suitcase lay carefully folded dresses, sensible shoes, a little makeup, some snacks, and a bag of jewelry. Among my store of jewelry was a beautiful, empty locket. I used to romanticize the concept of lockets. I believed that there was something magical about the representation of a loved one literally in my heart, as if it deepened that love. I had gotten the locket some months before the trip, and had become immediately intent on finding the perfect picture to keep in the necklace. I pondered which photograph to put in it. As soon as I thought I had decided on the right picture, I began to wonder if anyone it excluded would take offense upon viewing the chosen picture. My indecision continued, and by the time I stepped onto the plane, the locket was still empty.

However, I loved the idea of travel. I loved the clear breath of foreign air, the intoxication from drinking in exotic surroundings. Time doesn't seem to run the same way in a different city. You can experience more in one day anywhere else than you can in a week at home. Maybe that's because our habit at home is to squint our eyes so we can only see the narrow territory that our daily lives cover instead of the rich experiences that exist around us. Engulfed in different surroundings, eyes reflexively widen to soak in all around them. I can't explain this travel phenomenon, and I don't intend to; I simply want to share how those days in Washington D.C. contained a wealth of wisdom that needed to be shared.

I vibrantly remember waiting for the tour bus to return after we had visited the Lincoln Memorial. I was wearing the important locket, as I did every day of the trip. We had a reportedly late bus driver, whom many people griped about, but I didn't mind. Washington D.C. was such an intricate city. I enjoyed having a few extra minutes to take in the view. However, the bus driver was especially late this time. We were waiting on a sidewalk, and right next to us stood a Capitol Bike-Share station, with a row of bicycles electronically locked to the rack. Within five minutes, the entire class was sitting on the bikes side by side, pedaling in place while the bikes stayed attached to the rack. We laughed and chattered together, experiencing a communal happiness as the springtime sun set over the city. For a rare moment, we were all connected.

Even though we had spent most of our lives together, we rarely interacted with those outside of our respective cliques. We each had our friend groups, and we respected that fact. As we would form our groups outside on the playground, the distinct separation was obvious; anyone would have been able to distinguish different divisions of friends. I didn't enjoy this societal structure; I would've readily started talking to anyone outside of my friend group, and I believe there were a number of others that would do the same. However, there was a major factor that prevented this: fear.

The experience on the bicycles was memorable because it was a chance to be with the other kids of my class free from the societal restrictions we had inflicted upon ourselves out of fear. We had been propelled away from each other by fear of rejection or judgment. But that moment on the bicycles, we were without that fear. In a foreign city, we were familiar surroundings to each other, and after journeying all this way, we sat spontaneously next to each other to enjoy the sunset. We smiled on the bicycles, finally being brave enough to sit side by side.

Another momentous occasion during that trip was the precious opportunity to meet our nation's heroes. After a scheduled period of time among the white granite and rushing fountains of the World War II Memorial, we were told to gather in order to head back to the bus. I was one of the first to regroup with the class. I was remembering the section of the memorial that commemorated the fallen soldiers of World War II. It was an array of golden stars against a black background containing the words, "Freedom is not free." When I stepped out of the memorial, my mind was still buzzing from the sight of all those stars, each one representing a large number of fallen heroes. It was difficult to grapple with the number of lives that ended so abruptly, all for the price of freedom. I pulled out a nickel from my bag and tossed it into one of the fountains, making a wish for peace.

My social studies teacher had shown the documentary "Honor Flight" in class. It was about a program of the same title that sends World War II veterans to see their memorial in Washington D.C. I had been deeply touched by it. Therefore, when an Honor Flight bus pulled up in front of me and my classmates, I couldn't believe how perfect the moment was. Elderly heroes with their canes and wheelchairs were only a few yards away. They started to file into the memorial as my class trickled out of it. At first, I was stunned and didn't know what to do with myself. I tentatively murmured my thanks to a few veterans, but I wasn't sure if they'd be offended by it or not. The bus driver approached me and a few other classmates as more eighth graders arrived, and said that the veterans truly appreciate my thanks. I thanked him for the prompt, chagrined by my awkwardness. He stepped aside, and a lady veteran said, "We really don't mind at all." With that, I took her hand and smiled. "Thank you," I said.

As more of my classmates lined up, two lines formed, connected by handshakes; one was made up of kids no older than fourteen, the other composed of war veterans with white hair and wrinkled smiles. As each of us thanked another veteran, much went unsaid. Again, the "Freedom is not free" mantra echoed in my head. I wondered how many friends might have been among them today that I couldn't thank. Each veteran I passed expressed some form of deep emotion. I shook hands with some who were smiling and had eyes brimming with tears, returning my thanks with their own words of gratitude, as if we were the ones who helped them. Others kept staring straight ahead with military posture, steady and grave. Although none of them told me about it, I knew that each of them could name someone who was represented as a star on the "Freedom is not free" wall.

I am so grateful that I was able to have been part of their Honor Flight experience. These men and women were the heroes of World War II who triumphed over the evils of their day and made their worthy contribution to world history. As I watched them go through the line of handshakes in a spectrum of emotion, I didn't detect any trace of conceit or entitlement. They were honored to have their hands shaken with the respect they deserve for their heroism. After witnessing their inherent humility, I was humbled, in turn.

We hiked up a mountain on our last day there. We were in Shenandoah National Park, where the rolling mountains were a glorious sight. They stretched so far up into the sky that my ears popped on the bus ride up. We walked and chatted, grabbing fallen branches for walking sticks or walking backwards for the fun of it. But when we reached the summit, the mood intensified. Led by our chaperones, we reflected on our grade's journey throughout the years as we stood amidst the serenity of nature. A stillness came over the group that no one dared to break. The largest, most rambunctious class our school had ever seen, the one teachers could never successfully quiet, was standing silent without prompt or resistance. Our teacher played a song on his stereo, and our tears started to fall. I

was almost afraid to look up at my classmates, worried to see them in such a vulnerable state. I thought of my own memories from the past decade. I thought of times we remembered that others forgot, times we all shared, and times that were remembered more for the emotions they carried than their concrete quality. I thought about what I carried through it all, and the answer became clear. Even though there were negative episodes, there was always love. On that mountain as we cried, there was love. We were middle school kids, afraid to broach such a deep feeling with each other, yet words didn't need to be said. We all felt love, and that was enough.

I may have left with an empty locket, an undecided heart, but I returned knowing exactly what I needed to fill my locket. My locket would contain the bravery required to be a friend to others in our time allotted with each other. While sitting on the bicycles near the Lincoln Memorial, I finally realized that time continues to race, but that form of bravery can make the moments you experience with others last in your memory long beyond the natural limits of time. My locket would earn the humility required to recognize the outstanding achievements of others. When I shook hands with the veterans, I realized how enveloped I was in my own insecurity and perfectionism. I knew that there are many daily heroes surrounding me that deserve recognition, and I need to look beyond my accomplishments to appreciate theirs. My locket would then be sealed with the ordinary love that brings harmony and quality to life. Atop a mountain, standing in the crisp breeze, that love was so strong it permeated deep into me. I realized that I brought stylish outfits and money for souvenirs on this trip, but none of that was truly important. I realized that the trip had brought me farther than Washington D.C.; it had brought me to a full heart, one prepared for the further trials of life.

There will be more bicycles to ride that refuse to inch forward, more significant handshakes that will only last a moment, and more unknown mountains to climb that will frighten me. But for every bicycle, there is bravery; for every handshake, there is humility; and for every mountain, there is love. My trip to Washington D.C. was unique because I gained as much as I brought. However, I cannot always portage with fragile dresses and flimsy jewelry. The journey will change as I continue to do so, but I must trust bravery, humility, and love to be my luggage as I portage on future journeys.