

The Bird Who Broke Through The Window

My whole life I have viewed myself as a spectator. Telling myself I'm not someone who can make a difference. I wished I could be. I thought that maybe, someday, possibly, hopefully, I could inspire a change... But I need to finish my homework first. Or I need to wait until I have the time. I left the work up to someone else. Someone else who is powerful, inspiring, and creative, all of these characteristics that I would never use to describe myself. I lived by the mantra "not me".

This summer I looked at my life. At my identity. I asked myself who I really am. What I really believe in. What I want and what is keeping me from getting it. During this inquiry, I saw how I was my only obstacle. I was the only person who said I can't change the world. I was confined in my own version of reality masquerading as the truth. A reality that I had created and had told myself I couldn't change.

At a conference that I attended this summer, I heard Craig Kielburger, the founder of Free the Children; speak about his life and work as a political activist. My initial thoughts when I saw him were, Good for him, but I could never do that. I'm horrible at public speaking. Nobody would ever listen to me. I'm not like him... Within the first couple minutes of his speech I had already limited my own potential, I had already told myself "not me". At the end of Kielburger's speech, he looked toward the audience and said, "Every single person in here can make a difference to better the world". It was the same line I had seen on posters and heard over and over again, but for some reason this time I was moved by his words. In my seat, I took out a crumpled piece of paper and a pen and wrote: I will make a difference. After I set down my pen, I looked at that piece of paper for a long while, realizing its implications, feeling the weight of the commitment I had just made. The words began to overwhelm me and my self doubts resurfaced. I quickly scratched out what I wrote.

I cried in my room that night at my own defeat. I saw how trapped I felt and how afraid I was of my own power. I felt like a bird stuck in a house. I could see the outside through the window, but each time I tried to fly out, I flew smack into the glass. I then realized that I, myself, had constructed the glass. I had created my own fear, and if I was willing to be brave, I could break through it. I had never been more scared and yet so inspired in my life. I took out another piece of paper and wrote the words again: I will make a difference. That night I chose to live by those words. I changed my mantra to "Yes me".

This I believe, and this is what I live by: every single person can make a difference. It's a scary and seemingly impossible responsibility. But it's simply a question of whether you're willing to acknowledge your own power. There are no limitations except the ones we place on ourselves. However, if we replace those limitations with possibilities, imagine what's capable of the world and humanity. I submit this essay with the commitment to inspire other people like myself, who doubt they can be the difference, because I know that any and every person can if they choose to. In addition, I ask a simple question that has been the basis of my own life's transformation: Who do you want to be and what is keeping you from being that person?

*Dylan - San Anselmo, California
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Somebody to Lean On

You know the old song "Lean on Me," by Bill Withers? What a simple song that to any average person is just another tune on the radio. But to me, that song emphasizes a belief that I've had for most of my life. I believe that everyone needs someone to depend on—to know they're there for you no matter what.

For me, I rely on my identical twin brother, Tanner. Yes, we have the same DNA, so in that respect we have as close a bond as you can get. The only things that make me different from him are my personal experiences. But despite the close genetic bond, I think we share a brotherhood that is different from all other brothers. We go through the same things, think the same way, and even get on each other's nerves, only because we can't be separated. Something as small as shooting hoops without him feels odd. Now I don't mean to sound mushy, but I don't know how else to put it. Because of our bond, we need each other, depend on each other.

I can recall certain times when we needed each other, like running a hard cross-country meet, or even harder times like going to a new middle school with completely new friends. But there is one specific time in my life when I made the connection that everyone needs someone to lean on when life gets hard, and for me, that one person is my brother.

The moment I realized this was after my bone graft surgery. Tanner and I were born with cleft lip and palate, and this was one of many procedures we needed to have done. We were both getting the surgery done on the same day. After the surgery, I was aching in pain all over, had horrible nausea, and was sick of the antiseptic smell of the hospital room. I was really ready to go home. My thinking was in and out; I was sleeping a lot and eating little. I was just feeling pretty alone when my mind told me to look to my left, to my bedside. There, I saw Tanner, all sick and tired, just like me. He was going through everything I was. He knew just how I felt. I sat there and realized that this is why we are so close. No one on earth knows me as well as he does. Without him, I felt alone. But with him there, I knew I could get through it.

Right then, I came to believe that everyone needs someone to lean on. Whether it's a mother and a child, two inseparable friends, a husband and a wife, or even a dog and its owner. Everyone needs someone to rely on in this life. We cannot live life alone.

Is it a simple belief, like in Bill Withers's song? Yes. Is it powerful? More than powerful, it's true. I believe we all need somebody to lean on.

Cole Dowdy wrote this essay for an assignment by his eighth-grade teacher at East Oldham Middle School. He now goes to South Oldham High School, where he enjoys running cross-country and track. Mr. Dowdy lives with his family in Crestwood, Kentucky, a small town just outside of Louisville.

The Triumph of Kindness

I believe that when people come together, it's a beautiful thing. And when someone who can't do something tries to do it and everyone else helps, that is a great moment.

One beautiful sunny day, I had a Little League baseball game. At the time it was very important to me, and I was really focused on doing well, as were the other seven-year-olds. It was our last game of the season, and we were all trying to have fun and to end it with a bang the best we could.

As the game progressed the score got close. When we had our final chance to win at the end of the last inning, it was my turn to bat. I looked over at my coach, who was talking to my dad about something—probably the stock market or something like that. As I stepped into the batter's box, my coach called me back to the dugout. He asked me a strange yet interesting question. He asked if it would be all right if my brother hit for me.

My brother wasn't on the team. He had never even played baseball due to his disability. He couldn't stand, and he certainly couldn't hit. But I responded very maturely for a kid my age. "Of course he can hit for me," I said. I was still puzzled as to how, though. Thoughts ran through my mind, such as: Would the kids make fun of him? Would he hit the ball?

As my dad carried him to the plate, I realized that without his wheelchair he would have to be held up. The joy on his face couldn't be traded for anything in the world. Just being on the field gave him all the happiness he needed. What will the other kids think? I wondered.

I heard someone call out, "C'mon, hit it outta here." Then came another, "You can do it!" These words of acceptance showed me how great the moment really was. On the first swing, which was pretty much my dad holding Sam's hands around the bat and my dad swinging, he—or they—hit the ball. The kids on the other team did something amazing then, something seven-year-olds should never know how or why to do. But in the spur of the moment, these seven-year-olds did. They purposely overthrew the ball. Three times.

Sam had hit his first and only home run. And as my dad carried him around the bases, I knew this memory would stick with me and everyone else there forever.

I've seen it with my own eyes. When people come together, it's a beautiful thing.

Josh Stein is an eleventh grader at Hewlett High School in Hewlett, New York. He enjoys playing tennis, basketball, and golf and hanging out with his brothers.

America's Beauty Is In Its Diversity

America is built on the idea of freedom, and there is no exception for Muslim women. I believe in the freedom of religion and speech. But mostly, I believe it's OK to be different, and to stand up for who and what you are. So I believe in wearing the hijab.

The hijab is a religious head covering, like a scarf. I am Muslim and keeping my head covered is a sign of maturity and respect toward my religion and to Allah's will. To be honest, I also like to wear it to be different. I don't usually like to do what everyone else is doing. I want to be an individual, not just part of the crowd. But when I first wore it, I was also afraid of the reaction that I'd get at school.

I decided on my own that sixth grade was the time I should start wearing the hijab. I was scared about what the kids would say or even do to me. I thought they might make fun of me, or even be scared of me and pull off my headscarf. Kids at that age usually like to be all the same, and there's little or no acceptance for being different.

On the first day of school, I put all those negative thoughts behind my back and walked in with my head held high. I was holding my breath a little, but inside I was also proud to be a Muslim, proud to be wearing the hijab, proud to be different.

I was wrong about everything I thought the kids would say or even do to me. I actually met a lot of people because of wearing my head covering. Most of the kids would come and ask me questions—respectfully—about the hijab, and why I wore it.

I did hear some kid was making fun of me, but there was one girl—she wasn't even in my class, we never really talked much—and she stood up for me, and I wasn't even there! I made a lot of new friends that year, friends that I still have until this very day, five years later.

Yes, I'm different, but everyone is different here, in one way or another. This is the beauty of America.

I believe in what America is built on: all different religions, races and beliefs. Different everything.

Fifteen-year-old Alaa El-Saad is a student at John B. Connally High School in Austin, Texas. She hopes to study medicine and become a pediatrician. El-Saad says she wants help children learn to embrace their differences and accept who they are.