

2018 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Children's Category –3rd Prize]

A Small Conversation

(Original)

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Some days I would take the train home, smoothly gliding on elevated rails over rush-hour traffic, crowds pouring in and out of the car as I watched the world rush by through the windows. It often rained in Vancouver where I lived, and raindrops hit the composite body of the train car with stunningly consistent thud-thuds before forming unpredictable streaks of grey water down the sides of the train. We all sat in our ugly blue seats, silently listening to that thud-thud of the rain; occasionally we yielded our seat to a standing neighbour out of politeness. Wordless, we smoothly glided on elevated rails over rush-hour traffic, watching the world go by.

At first, it all seemed normal to me. People got on, people got off. Everyone arrived where they needed to be, and if there were no unreasonable delays everyone was happy. We simply looked forwards to arrival, caught in our bubbles of obliviousness to the rest of the passengers. Some stared into their phones, while others enjoyed music or appeared lost in thought. I doubt that many of the passengers were anything but satisfied. After all, all of us made it to our destinations, more or less unharmed. I think that few were truly aware of the realisation I came to, when one day I witnessed two strangers engaging in conversation.

This conversation was not one of politeness. It was not an offering of a seat, or a terse "thank you" at some small favour that had been done. An older woman and a middle-aged man – to whom I must apologise for eavesdropping – had entered conversation, and discovered that both were immigrants. The woman had moved to Vancouver in the 1990s, and the man had just arrived from Hong Kong with his young children. As he described his worries and hopes for himself and his family, I watched the woman nod, sharing her own stories, radiating with sympathy. I watched as the two created a meaningful connection, the rare kind based upon authentic understanding of one another. They had met on a random train car, and would likely never see each other again, but for a fleeting moment, they

shared a human bond that could only result from true compassion. They shared that instant of empathy that we all seek so much, and I almost felt lonely in contrast to them.

It was then that I discovered how isolated we were from each other. We had crammed ourselves into a small metal tube, united by the shared goal of arriving home, and nevertheless acted as if we were alone, our relations limited to the occasional polite “thank you” at a yielded seat. How could we be satisfied with such meager and meaningless associations? I realised what change I wanted to make to our world.

I wanted people to communicate more. I wanted them to form genuine connections, even if they were small ones. I wanted people to break their bubbles, and reach out to one another. We had become a lonely group of people who had neglected our links to the rest of the world; to the people we passed by on the street, stood in line with at the grocery, and held a door open for when they walked in behind us. Our interactions were limited to mere vestiges of human contact.

When both the strangers had left the train for their respective stations, I sat in silence again, listening to the thud-thud in my ugly blue seat while pondering about the vast ocean of knowledge and personality that, every day of my life, I had passed by, not giving a second thought. So many inspirations and influences that could have been had, but were in the possession of strangers, out of reach to those who were confined to themselves. So many lonely people, who were all surrounded by millions just like them. Yet, each of us was holding the key. We were all able to seek in each other what we did not have ourselves – to reach out just a little. A quaint bravery, a simple “how are you?” was all it took.

And imagine how much meaning just a small conversation could give.