

2022 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – Honorable Mention]

Embracing Diversity

(Original)

Rajwa Nadia Lathifa

(Age 16, Indonesia)

SMA Progresif Bumi Shalawat, Sidoarjo, Jawa Timur

First grade, Civic Knowledge Class. That was the first time I learned that phrase. Courtesy of Mpu Tantular, from the poem of Situsoma. My teacher stressed how vital the saying is, especially for our nation, Indonesia. How it shaped the country as a whole, a foundation for all of our regions. Though at that time, I don't really regard it as more than just another material to remember for exams, with a funny language I don't know the meaning of.

In the third grade, I realized I was "different" from my friends. Though people dress, speak, and behave differently, I thought it was just that, distinction. I accepted it as it was, and my friends never made problems about it. My mother taught me to always wear a veil except in our house. I never question why some of my friends didn't do the same, and they never speak of what I wear. Nine years old, I didn't quite fathom the world yet.

I attended an extra course after school. Imagine my surprise when randomly, a boy suddenly grabbed my veil from my head. He said he wanted to "see my hair" and how "weird it was for me to wear them." It took a while for the teacher to separate us both. I cried a lot, and my parents were called to send me home early. I asked my mother why the boy did that. I never bothered him or even attempted to talk to him. I felt so hurt, and I was eager for an explanation. Anything so (I could forgive or justify his actions).

"He's still young. He doesn't know any better," I was also around his age. I never tried to hurt anyone. "And because we are different."

This event opened my eyes to the world's true nature and people. Does being "weird"... unacceptable? Diverting from the norm warrants us getting hurt by other people? Does being different justify ordinary people hurting us? Was it my fault that the boy pulled me?

Not long after that, I quit the course.

One year after the event, I had to go to one of my neighbor's houses. All the residents in my house were away, and I was entrusted to them. Entering the house, I was introduced to the neighbor's kid, a girl a little older than me. I was a bit intimidated because, at first glance, I knew I was "different" from her.

She said hello, and asked me to play with her. I got into her room filled with dolls and toys. She tried numerous things to entertain me, but we didn't do much because I put my guard up.

"Hey, did I do something wrong?" she suddenly asked, finally noticing my aversion to her.

I contemplated her question. She didn't do anything but treat me well. Doing nothing wrong yet faced with scorn, I quickly realized my error.

"Sorry, I was wrong."

At that time and place, realization dawned. I was slowly becoming "that boy." And knowing well what it felt to be in that girl's position, I knew I was in the wrong.

"..Do you think I'm weird?"

"No? What about you? That's weird?" I quickly warmed up to her.

In sixth grade, I finally knew the meaning behind that phrase.

"Unity in diversity."

Differences, rather than tearing us apart, make us one. The way we pray, the languages we speak, the traditions cascading from generation to another... though they contrast each other, it unites us, disregarding that distinct dividing line.

The phrase has a unique beauty in it, envisioning a world where the people celebrate diversity, leaving behind background and status. Where minorities can be proud of who they are, believe what they want, and do things without being labeled strange or a target of harassment. They don't need to conform to the majority to live and be accepted.

I want to be a part of that world.

Everyone is different, so no one is strange.

I hope this phrase doesn't unite Indonesia alone but the whole world.