



The Person Sitting Next to You

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Who is the person sitting next to you? You might say a name, and describe how tall he or she is, and the color eyes and hair. But none of these things are what the person is. A person is invisible activities.

Who then is the person sitting next to you? The person sitting next to you is suffering. He is working away at problems. He has fears. He wonders how he is doing. Often he doesn't feel too good about how he is doing; and he finds that he can't respect or be a good friend of himself. When he feels that way about himself, he has a hard time loving others. When he doesn't feel good about himself and finds it hard to love others, he suffers...

The person sitting next to you has a right to be a person; that is, she has a right to choose and decide, to have a private life of her own. She also has a right to be understood. And unless she can be understood by other people, she is thwarted from being a person.

The person sitting next to you is an inexhaustible store of possibilities. Within him are energies that have been only partially awakened. Nine-tenths of his potential has not been yet touched off. There are all kinds of good struggling to be born from way within that person. There are also worries, fears and hates that are struggling to get themselves expressed. Sometimes if only these could be expressed, he would be free to love other people.

Thus, the person sitting next to you is a cluster of memories of the past and expectations of the future. She is really a whole colony of persons, of people met all during a life. Something of these people has entered into this person forever. So that the person sitting next to you is really a city—a community. In that community live the father and mother of this person, the boys and girls who have played with her most, the people with whom she went to school; all the live things of this world that came and interacted with this person. They are still deep within...

The person sitting next to you is the greatest miracle and the greatest mystery that you will ever meet. The person sitting next to you is sacred.

After reading silently, have a table talk about these questions before sharing with the whole class:

1. What "invisible activities" are occurring within us all? (hint: think senses, abstract nouns)
2. How do we all suffer? What are some "sufferings" common to most people?
3. Do we believe people are sacred? In what way? How does this influence the way we should treat people? How do we treat people in a way that shows they are uniquely valuable?
4. In his novel, *Heart of the Matter*, Graham Greene says, "If we knew all there is to know about someone, we would forgive them anything." Do you agree? Is a human being (are we) capable of such understanding, such love? Try to recall some examples.

After our class discussion, look through the cutting magazines in the classroom and cut out a picture of a "person sitting next to you" who seems about as different from you as you can imagine. Study the picture as you re-read the essay. Write a brief musing (prose or poetry) about your "found person" in a way that offers us (and you) a deeper understanding of his/her sacredness. Attach the neatly trimmed picture to your typed text. Please clean up your cutting scraps and put magazines back neatly.