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STUDENT WRITING

A Conversation with Anna

Christine Pepe

During my placement, my supervisor usually stations me on one of the floors for an hour. I was sitting on the third floor, just keeping watch of the transitional working ladies. They encouraged you to bring books and read, so being a productive student, I succeeded in finishing up a history chapter. While I was reading, Anna came up and sat in the chair next to me. One of my goals when I go to Pine Street is to listen to what the ladies have to say and show them that someone does care. I want to provide for them a light in the harshness of their reality. Also for selfish reasons I suppose, they have so much to offer and teach about life. Anyway, after I had introduced myself to her, she began to express the fact that she was upset because she has not been able to get in touch with her daughter by phone. Then, she willingly began to tell me about her life. Equally incredible to me was the fact that I told her about my life too and she was equally interested. We shared.

Anna is a sixty-year-old homeless woman who lived in New York about thirty years ago. She became pregnant at the age of thirty by a married black man. Her mother wanted her to have an abortion, but she refused. Realizing that everyone was humiliated because she had decided to bring into the world, out of wedlock, a child of mixed race, she moved to Boston. Here, Anna alone raised her daughter. She said it was difficult because of prejudice and financial struggles. She felt as though economically she let her daughter down. Before her mother died, although she never saw her granddaughter, she admitted to Anna that she was glad that an abortion never took place. I do not know all the exact details about when her daughter moved out or the circumstances. I do know that Anna was a nun for quite some time. She also revealed to me that she had a drinking problem before and after nunhood, even recently. She told me also that she is handicapped, contributing to her difficulty to find work. Pine Street is giving her room and board as pay for her work at the shelter (Transitional Program), although currently she has not started working. I expressed to her how I felt the homeless were inhumanely lumped together as a statistic. She came out and said that she would never accept money from anyone, begging on the street for example.

However, I quoted to her one of the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the meek/humble" and proceeded to explain what I had learned in class, that when someone gives in the right way, without putting himself or herself on the back, but rather acknowledging that being able to give is a gift from God, accepting is noble. When I give of myself, it is not because I am a noble person by myself. However, it is because God has created me and given me the grace, the gift to pass his divinity on. In a sense, when we give of ourselves, we are allowing someone else to experience God through our actions. And of course this involves the hand of God leading us in that direction, provided we have faith. After I mentioned that Beatitude, I quoted another, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Then I continued to say that in a sense poverty and suffering can strengthen. We discussed the fact that we all play a role in the Kingdom of God, which she knew was now and continuing after death; eternal. I quoted what Professor Byrne said in class, "suffering can provide detachment from all the finite things to free one for the attachment to the infinite." I apologized because I felt shallow, sitting there saying that suffering strengthens. Compared to Anna, I don't know what suffering is. But suffering can strengthen, as well as cripple. She replied, "You are not shallow because you are here, experiencing it." I guess in a way that it true, but I won't put myself on the back.

As we continued this conversation, the entire time I was thinking to myself how incredible this was. I have never willingly preached to someone about God. Also, I have never been so captivated by our Faith. Even right there, the fact that I said "our" scares me because I doubted the Catholic Church and the reality of God all first semester. But part of believing is disbelieving. It comes down to faith. The disciples doubted Jesus when he was dying on the cross. But what would be the point if Jesus came gloriously, conquered dominantly and then saved himself?...

I asked her, "What is prayer to you?" I asked this because I have always wondered if the traditional idea, my Catholic school version of prayer, is the only way. I now know it is not. She replied, "prayer is anything you want it to be." To me, prayer is any experience of God, a deepening of faith. My experience with Anna was prayer. After my conversation with her, I wrote everything I could remember down, I never wanted to forget this experience....

Some of the things she said amazed me. For example, "I am just so happy to be alive and thankful to God for everything." I am thinking to myself, how exceptional is this woman? Hours before I was just complaining to myself about the cold and how miserably tired I was. How ignorant and selfish am I? My problems have been so trivial compared to those who truly suffer. Granted we all suffer, but complaining about it robs it of all nobility. This woman is homeless, handicapped, unmarried and jobless, yet she has a fondness of life. To truly live one must strive. And although she has suffered in the hardest sense, she is happy. She said that it is always important to remember that there is something higher, a divine force to which we owe everything. I truly believe this. Otherwise why would we be here? If we didn't have anything—or should I say anyone—to strive for, what would be the point to life? We would have no direction, acting only for selfish reasons. She said something that I had never heard before, "God wants us to love ourselves correctly." I know partially what this means. Love ourselves and each other in the eyes of God. It also has to do with fondness and respect for life because it is a gift....

An hour had passed, and it was time for me to go back downstairs. Anna had a key to the elevator so she rode down with me. The things she said to me in the elevator probably affected me the most. She said that I made her so happy. She said that I am a great person and that my parents must be proud. The thought of my parents for some reason made me want to cry. That word "proud" has such immense power, especially in reference to my parents. It was one of those moments at which you just want to reach out. I wanted to hug her but I didn't. I have had some experiences like this, when you feel humanity. I can't explain it. It is a feeling you get through another person. I realized that I had experienced God through her. But isn't that why we are here, to share God's gift of faith with others through our words, action, touches and eyes?