

## **The World Through His Eyes**

Each day, we do things we consider a matter of routine. These are activities that involve very little thinking on our part because we've done them so many times. Our muscle memory takes over and performs them flawlessly. But what happens when those simple routines or casual observations take on an entirely new meaning? This can occur when we become aware that there is much more to something than what appears on the surface?

If you are like most people, there are times that you are unaware of the complexity of our actual thought process related to many of our daily routines. Driving is an example. There are things in life that we do instinctively. Nobody needs to remind us to inhale, exhale, or to give our heart a nudge to beat. Once we've mastered the art of driving, the process of starting our car, putting it into gear and checking our surroundings before pulling out into traffic is nothing more than muscle memory and reflexes (even though some drivers have better muscle memory and reflexes than others!) Starting with the position of the seat, the mirrors, and even the act of choosing a station on the radio that best suites our mood, we are truly in a microcosm of the "real world" that we watch pass by as we drive. We are reduced to the dehumanizing and all-encompassing term called traffic. It's a word we use to incorporate everything we see that is either moving or stationary and has a similar purpose at that point in time . . . getting from one place to another.

## **Traffic - Is that what we've become?**

Along the way, we become casually aware of other cars, some traveling with us, and others moving in the opposite direction. Sometimes we recognize a person we know during these commutes, but most of the time those faces remain nameless. Then there is the realization that most of the people we see during our commute, we have never seen before, and may never see again. That's sad, because everyone has a story, and all of us live on the same planet and breathe the same air. We have much more in common with those "faces" than we realize. We enjoy the same picturesque sunrises, marvel at colorful sunsets, and our lives have similar hopes and expectations. We love, and hopefully are loved by others. Those faces also go about life in their own worlds, only interacting with others when there is a need to do so. But every person we see is a living and breathing human being who has a story to tell.

I have no way of knowing how a chance encounter with a total stranger might impact my day . . . or my life. Something special might simply come out of nowhere, and that's usually when unique opportunities present themselves.

I usually have lunch alone on weekdays. Not that I prefer it that way, I am a social being, but it is a part of the day that I reserve for that quiet time I truly enjoy. Yes, that sounds like a contradiction . . . having lunch at the same time most people chose to have their mid-day meal doesn't sound like a way to enjoy quiet time, does it? The disharmony of unrelated conversations fills the air amid the

constant traffic of people checking their watches and phones trying to budget their allotted time. While the tables are usually full, there's always room for one at the counter.

The Orange Tree Diner is a small, family-run restaurant on the western outskirts of Ft. Lauderdale. The food is good, the service is decent, and the menu prices are reasonable. Part of my reasoning for sitting at the counter is that I shouldn't take up space at a table that was intended to seat two or four during the busiest time of the day.

Courtesy. That's the way my mother raised me, and there are some things you simply shouldn't forget. There, I could enjoy lunch, read from a paperback or a book downloaded on my iPad, all within my three-foot circle that is indeed a microcosm insulating me from what was going on around me. I can be alone in a crowd. This day would prove to be different.

### **Best thing that ever happened to me . . .**

"Excuse me, is someone sitting here?" came a voice just over my right shoulder. Looking up from my reading, I saw a sixty-something gentleman looking at me as he held a cane to steady himself.

"No, I believe it's available. Have a seat," I replied. He nodded and began a laborious ascent onto the counter's barstool.

"I swear," he muttered with a half-smile, "these things must grow an inch higher every year!" as he carefully placed his cane in front of him as he swung himself around to face the counter.

It was then that I noticed the reason for his limp and eventual struggle to raise himself to the counter stool. He had a prosthesis that was attached just below his knee. He was dressed casually in cargo shorts. A black tee shirt could be seen beneath the cover of his unbuttoned flannel shirt. He was a veteran. The baseball cap on his head said as much. He caught a glimpse of me looking and I was somewhat embarrassed so I quickly looked away.

“Best thing that ever happened to me!” he said directing his remarks to me.

Those words caught me completely by surprise which was followed by an uncomfortable moment on my part.

“Really?” Was all I could say. The expression in my eyes must have given my true thoughts away.

“Really!” as he steadied himself and picked up the menu that was directly in front of him. “Are you a veteran?”

Turning to him, I said with a slight degree of embarrassment, “No, I’m not . . . but my father was. He was Army and his brothers were both Navy men. They served in the Pacific during World War II.

He nodded as his facial expression slowly changed. He seemed to contemplate his next words.

“Over forty years ago, I received my Purple Heart,” he said pointing to the emblem on his tee shirt, “and I’m damn proud of it. As I said, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. But judging from your bewildered expression, I didn’t expect you to understand.”

I didn’t. Again, a brief period of silence filled the latest gap in our conversation. He quickly filled that void as he began a conversation that briefly synopsisized his life. He

spoke about his wife, his children, while reminiscing about his travels and the “wonderful life” he has lived.

“I met my wife in the V. A. Hospital just after I was wounded in Vietnam. She saw me at my absolute worst. I was down—rock bottom you might say, but she never let me stay there. She gave me inspiration, hope, and more importantly, she never gave up on me. That woman turned everything around in my life. There were times I didn’t think I would make it—mentally or physically, but she refused to let me think like that. You know, we were married a year later and she’s been with me ever since.”

What became increasingly more obvious as he continued speaking were his eyes. They appeared younger and much more alive than one would expect from the “sixty-something” person sitting next to me. The longer we talked, the more animated and alive they became! But as he continued talking, my mind started to wander. I couldn’t stop my thoughts from reverting to his missing leg and the excruciating pain he must have endured. What a terrifying and life-changing moment that had to be; but more than forty years later, he’s here and very much alive. How would I have dealt with a disability like that? Probably not well, and surely not as well as he has. This man was genuinely happy. It was in his eyes, and people who study the science of Kinesics will tell you that a person’s eyes don’t lie. He was animated, happy, and extremely grateful. What was I missing?

This chance encounter lasted less than an hour, and he did eighty percent of the talking. As I finished my lunch and slowly got up from the counter, I remembered one of

the daily goals that I've tried to achieve for most of my adult life — to learn something new every day. Life has taught me that everyone has something to teach. If you're fortunate, you will have an opportunity to learn from someone regardless of their age, and there are times this happens when you least expect it. Standing beside him, I shook his hand, said a simple "Thanks."

He nodded, gave me that half-smile I had grown accustomed to seeing for the past hour and went back to his lunch.

Sometimes you need to see the world through someone else's eyes to appreciate what they have, and more importantly, what you have. Today was one of those days.

Happiness is truly in the heart of the beholder.

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## ***The Purple Heart***

*Awarded for "Being wounded or killed in any action against an enemy of the United States, or because of an act of any such enemy or opposing armed forces."*