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Grade 11

“We Make the Difference”

I make the difference. You make the difference. We, together, make the difference. We all have the capacity to love. We are all inherently good people, and have an overwhelming capability to love and be loved. We need love, and we need to give love. Love, acceptance, and respect are the tools necessary to prevent a horrific tragedy like the Holocaust from ever happening again. One of the best examples of the power of these “tools” is the example of the Freedom Writers.

I believe love is the most powerful thing on earth. Love can and does change people’s lives. People are angry, bitter, and cold when they are hurt and feel unloved. Mother Theresa once said, “There is no greater sickness in the world today than the lack of love.” By reaching out in love to each other, we are able to heal one another. By healing one another, we are able to find peace, and prevent genocide and hate crimes of all sorts. Karl Menninger believed “Love cures people, both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.” He could not be more right. Love embraces someone and admires their talents and gifts. Love is the ability to see past someone’s faults to the good that lies within them. Love is capable of seeing a person’s inherent goodness no matter what bad choices they may have made. Love believes in a person. Love wants to reach out to someone and heal them. The love I have been describing is ideal. Because we are human, we struggle to love perfectly. However we can strive to love one another with the most perfect love we are capable of giving. Simply trying to love each other in this way brings about change.

Acceptance is necessary to love. In Julia Alvarez’s historical fiction novel, In the Time of the Butterflies, one of the Mirabal sisters, Maria Theresa, explains that “What matters is the quality of a person, what someone is inside themselves.” Acceptance places no emphasis on one’s religion or ethnicity, but instead it appreciates the gifts the individual has. Acceptance is seeing a homeless person lying on a street corner and

instead of seeing someone who is lazy, a drug addict, or alcoholic, seeing an individual that needs love and acceptance. Acceptance removes judgment, but it does not refrain from hoping someone will be the best that they can be.

If love and acceptance rain down, nourishing a garden, respect is the flower that grows. When I love and accept someone, I am respecting them. Respecting someone can restore their self respect. It gives them the courage to embrace their strengths, work through their weaknesses, and have faith in themselves. Respect is contagious. If I talk about how much I admire someone for certain qualities, other people begin to see and admire those qualities as well. The respect I have for someone can cause others to have respect for that person also. The same concept of accepting and respecting other people can be applied to how we treat entire countries and ethnicities. We must learn to appreciate the good things each of us have to offer. We must learn from one another's customs, beliefs, and traditions.

The Freedom Writers Diary is the collective diary of 150 teenagers from Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. These were the students that the faculty had dubbed "hopeless", "un-teachable", and "at-risk". Their teacher, Ms. Erin Gruwell, showed the students their ability to change the world through tolerance and respect. Their English class read books such as Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl and Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo. The students were shocked at how similar Anne's and Zlata's lives were compared to their own lives. One notes, "I started to read this book called Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl because I wanted to prove Ms. G wrong... At the end of the book, I was so mad that Anne died, because as she was dying, a part of me was dying with her... Just like her, I knew the feeling of discrimination and to be looked down upon based on the way you look... Ms. G was right. I did find myself within the pages of the book, like she said I would."

The students were surrounded by discrimination, gang violence, and all kinds of abuse. Some of them were struggling with alcoholism, drug addictions, and abusive family relationships. The class decided to find Zlata, and write her letters asking her to visit and talk to them. One of the letters ended like this: "Now that I've read your book, I am educated on what is happening in Bosnia. I would like the opportunity now to

educate people on what is happening in my ‘America’ because until this ‘undeclared war’ has ended, I am not free!” By educating our generation, and all those that come after us, we will be able to prevent history from repeating itself. By showing each new generation the connection between the violence of today with that of yesterday’s, and by looking deeper to the roots of the problem, hatred and intolerance, we can pass on the lessons we have learned.

When these students learned that hatred, intolerance, and violence could lead to events like the Holocaust and the destruction in Bosnia, they were moved to change the world around them. Ms. Gruwell gave them hope that their generation could change things. One Freedom Writer had been influenced by her father’s racist views. During a field trip with her fellow Freedom Writers, she roomed with girls of three other races. Afterwards she wrote, “When I have my own children someday, the custom I was taught as a child will be broken, because I know it’s not right. My children will learn how special it is to bond with another person who looks different but is actually just like them.” Another student referred to the Freedom Writers as “a family that knows no color lines and only sees what lies deep within your heart.”

Eventually, the Freedom Writers combined their journal entries to form The Freedom Writers Diary. It was later made into a movie as well. When I read this book, I was inspired. The message of the Freedom Writers is one of tolerance, non-violence, and most of all hope. I was inspired to change my world and fight for tolerance. I believe peace is possible because I can see how we can get there. Peace, love, acceptance, respect: they all begin with me.

“Never Again” starts with the individual. I impact the people around me. They impact the people around them. The ripples spread across the pond. The rain falls on the garden bringing forth new growth. By changing my attitudes to ones of love, acceptance, and respect, I can and will change the world, but I cannot do it alone. I can only begin the change, and continue it. Maya Angelou is right: “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, but if faced with courage need not be lived again.” I make the difference. You make the difference. We, together, make the difference.

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