

In the Cafeteria, Around the World
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11-12th Grade Category, Third Place

I watched as the new girl walked from lunch table to lunch table, looking more mortified by the second. She was, well, different, and no one would let her sit with them. And they mocked her. Viciously. I was indignant. I could not believe how cruel kids could be, kids from my school. It was terrible, just terrible, but there really was nothing I could do. I mean, I didn't know the girl or the kids who were teasing her. *I* was not the one teasing her. Really, there was nothing I could do.

I can not count the number of times I have heard these kinds of excuses or made them myself. I almost believed them until I heard the story of David Kauffmann. Kauffmann was a German Jew who immigrated to the United States in 1903. He moved to Grand Island, Nebraska and made a comfortable living as the proud owner of a small store. David Kauffman married a "wonderful woman" and formed friendships with his customers and other members of the community. Life was good. When the Nazi party gained control in Kauffmann's native Germany and began their reign of hatred and violence, Kauffmann was in Grand Island, safe from the horrors of persecution, ghettos and concentration camps.

Physically, he was safe. In 1936 Kauffmann's cousin, Fedora Levy Kahn, sent him a letter detailing the escalating tensions permeating his homeland. Unable to ignore her desperate plea, Kauffmann arranged to sponsor her immigration without hesitation. During the following years of the war, he actively sought out and "signed dozens of 'affidavits of support' - pledging his ability to provide for the immigrants if they needed it" (Hendee). Kaufmann offered each family fifty dollars for seed money, but many families refused to accept this additional kindness. During the course of the Holocaust, it is estimated that Kaufmann saved well over thirty Jewish families from certain suffering and probable death.

I was reminded again of the power of an individual to make a change when I was flipping through the business section of the newspaper. At first glance, the photo of a featured cosmetic appeared to be just that- a cosmetic. The article, however, went on to

describe how an entrepreneurial couple, Ann and Kummy Thariani, use their business prowess to empower downtrodden all the way around the globe. The Thariani's, both of Omaha, Nebraska, set up a small workshop in Pakistan to manufacture specialty self-care products. They employ women and provide every employee and their children with a top-notch education. The knowledge and experience these women gain is life changing, not only because the women are wage earners, but also because they are able to read and make educated decisions in their day to day lives. The opportunities that the Thariani's provide to these women drastically improve their situation in their patriarchal society. When asked why they chose to take on the added complication and expense of producing these products in the specialized Pakistani workshop, the response was, "I want to sell product, but more than that I want to help people." The Thariani's saw that they were capable of making a difference, and considered their potential a responsibility.

The responsibility both Kauffmann and the Thariani's felt and acted upon is, from an ethical standpoint, defined as moral courage. In a time when the rest of the world was turning their back on injustice, they made a conscious decision to right wrongs and to liberate the oppressed. They abandoned all thoughts of personal needs and wants and turned their attention outwards, across the globe. They defied all limitations that humans so often impose upon themselves- distance, time, money and ability. In a world of selfish excuses, they refused to say "I can't".

Their moral courage has taught me to say "I can". Their moral courage has taught me that this world can not afford for me to say anything other than "I can". Their moral courage taught me that I must conquer injustice in my school, in my community and in my world. I can not wait passively for hate to be eliminated, because it is our responsibility as *humans* to care for each other. Although cowardice may be our primary instinct, our position as the most intelligent life forms on our planet is derived from our ability to make choices that defy the laws of nature. I now enter the lunch room ready to defend the helpless with the hope that someone else would do the same for me. After all, if David Kauffmann and Ann and Kummy Thariani could save lives all the way around the globe, *nothing* can stop me from changing one person's lunch hour in my own school's cafeteria.

Bibliography

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