

Just People

My earliest memories are of men who were missing limbs from being in War. They had pant legs pinned up so they wouldn't drag in their wheelchairs, or short sleeved shirts so an empty sleeve wouldn't hang. When I was about five, I remember sitting in bleachers watching a drum and bugle competition. The man next to me asked me to knock on his leg. I was startled to find it was made of wood! These men were veterans who were part of an organization to which my parents belonged. That same organization had an association with children with mental disabilities and would put on functions like a Christmas party for them every year. We had a deaf neighbor who used sign language. My playmates next door were from Hawaii. I lived in Florida, and in second grade had to switch schools because of "cross bussing" which was the name given to integration of the schools. I didn't think anything of it except that I had to go to a different school. Everywhere I went I just saw people. I saw people who had all their body parts and people who didn't. People who were children, old folks and people in between those ages. I had a blended family with a step brother and a full biological brother, but both were annoying brothers to me.

When I was nine years old we moved from sunny Florida to Michigan. My first impression of Michigan was the revelation that while I was living in Florida all these people were living their lives here in Michigan and I didn't know them! I didn't know they even existed before we moved. That thought blew my mind. That meant that there were lots and lots of other people all over the world living their lives just like me. I guess I am a people person. I was interested in getting to know all people, especially people who were different than me. My best friend when we moved was an orphan originally from Korea. We were just two little girls playing together. Eventually she was adopted by her house parents and moved away to another state.

As a teenager, I found myself drawn to older people who had wisdom and skills to teach me things I wanted to know. Instead of hanging out with folks my own age, I spent many an afternoon in the company of an old person who taught me how to sew, knit, cook and even make root beer! When I went to college, I studied a field which allowed me to work with "special" populations. At church I was always drawn to international people. Other cultures fascinated me. Over time I had many friends from every continent on earth except Antarctica. These people were special to me because of WHO they were, not because of what they looked like or where they were from. Most of them shared my faith and values and that was definitely something that bonded our friendships. But mostly I have found that people are people. They will reflect back to you what you give to them. If you smile at someone, they will return that smile.

It makes me sad today that people don't care to get to know other people at all. They make judgements about what they think and believe based on something they heard or read in the media. Everyone only cares about themselves and they sit and focus endlessly on their own petty grievances and never even care about what may be major traumas in others' lives. This is just selfishness in its full flower, which of course is what our human nature is bent toward. It is the "default" setting for all humans to fall to if we don't work very hard to prevent it. No, I am sorry, but we are not basically good. We are basically bad, and without any self control or desire to curb our basest instincts, we will just be mean, nasty, hateful people who judge others and imagine that everyone is out to get us. The people who have repeatedly given into these base instincts and have made it a habit are probably not going to ever change. They will continue their bitter, angry lives until they breathe their last breath. I want to reach those who are not that far gone yet. I want to smile at the grumpy looking person in the grocery line and see if he will smile back. I want to say a kind word or do a small act of kindness for someone who looks stressed and tired

and hope to make their day a little brighter. The messages bombarding us are so incredibly depressing and angry and hateful, that it gets harder and harder to break through. People are understandably grumpy and tired. They rarely hear a kind word or something to make them feel like a worthwhile human.

It is harder than I ever remember it being in my life to counteract all this. Yet, there is hope. We can create islands of peace in our own little worlds. I have found that by giving people knowledge of even basic skills, they are empowered. They have a new tool by which they can be productive and then they can rejoice in the work of their own hands. It gives them something outside themselves to think about and to focus on. Caring for animals and even plants gives people something outside themselves to care for. There is something dependent on them for life and health. By taking the focus off themselves and finding a purpose in their lives, people begin to feel like they have something to contribute to the world. Hateful rhetoric just pollutes the air with choking smoke that stops anything productive from happening. A kind word or deed, or just taking a small amount of time to listen to someone else talk, can clear that nasty air and bring out the sunshine of a peaceful smile. So, I have discovered that I have to shut out the nasty rhetoric and instead create an atmosphere that brings peace and joy to those who are around me. I have taught my children since they were toddlers that there is only one person on earth each of us can control, and that is ourselves. I often need to remember that myself when I get discouraged by all the nastiness swirling in the air today. But, I can make a difference one person at a time. I can listen to my mentally ill friend who repeats her stories over and over and is prone to depression. She walks away with a smile. My daughter sends stories she writes to three old lonely ladies every week. It gives them a ray of sunshine in their lonely lives. I can pull some weeds in the garden and be reminded of what the Bible says about the wheat and the tares. I can hug a goat, and she appreciates it, even if there are no humans around who do.

I can be still and know that God is there, that He made me, and every other person on the earth. He loves them more than anyone else can. It grieves His heart that we hurt and kill one another. But that was not His plan. We chose to sin, we chose to listen to the voice of the evil one who questioned God's wisdom. Now we continue that sin and somehow blame God for it. It is the devil that hates mankind and seeks to destroy all of us. His best weapon is to turn us against one another. This whole battle is just people who don't want to follow God, so they make up all kinds of excuses for their evil behavior. But God doesn't give up on us. We need to trust Him and follow Him and by trusting His wisdom treat others as we want to be treated and share His love and sunshine when we can. God is the judge, not us. We need to see people as just people. People created in God's image. People who He loves and grieves that they reject Him. We need to reflect His love so they can see that what they have believed may not be the truth. We need to be slow to speak, quick to listen and slow to get angry. We need to let God sift our thoughts before they spew forth from our mouths or our fingers. I have taught beekeepers that if you don't know what to do when you see something in a beehive, close the hive and do nothing. Consult someone if you can, or just give it 24 hours before you do anything at all. More damage can be done by doing something rash without understanding than to do nothing at all. The Bible says that even a fool is considered wise when he says nothing. Maybe we can all just be a part of the solution by being still, sitting quietly and just listening – not to an electronic device, but to another person, actually in person. We might learn something we never knew before, and even make a friend in the process. I wonder if we are brave enough to give it a try?