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Faces of Roane State

Written Expression

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You Don't Know Me

Fires have always befuddled me. Somehow watching their iridescent flames crack and char ornate logs can be hypnotizing enough to speak to something primal in all of us. Groups of people huddle around their hearth drawn by something more than the fire's mundane chemical reactions. Fires are lazy bards. They have heard many stories, yet no smoke or flame has carried them on. They tell tales of nothingness. They tell no stories, just pops and cracks. But people carry more stories on them than the ashen logs they gather to watch die.

One summer at church camp, the fire and the people around it gave me a message. It was a message that had speaking to me for years through acts of kindness and spite, but I wasn't ready to listen. The road that led me to that church camp was a hard one. I had grown up around prosperity but had not been subject to it. At the time I was not at my most meagre, but I was homeless. And the scars from being homeless were fresh: Only about a week old or so at the time. It was not the first time I had been homeless. Though no one would be able to tell it through my grades, social status, or position, I have been habitually poor since birth.

One thing I knew well was how to hide my baggage. If someone knew my past, they would often be worried about how I would handle responsibilities on top of my homelife. Since High School started I collected the nicest second-hand clothes I could find to make me appear more affluent than I actually was. I honed and mastered my ability like an insecure chameleon hiding from its prey. People began to trust me with responsibilities and positions of power. And one of those responsibilities was being a camp counselor. It wasn't nearly as glamorous of a position as some of my other titles but was by far the most life changing.

At this camp, we have a long-standing practice of gathering around the fire at night and baring our souls to it. The first night at this camp was incredible. I watched my cabin of girls, strong young women, stand up and tell us their truth. They stood up and told their stories, testimonies, and current struggles. And I don't know if it was copperheads or the holy spirit biting them, but other youth started jumping up and bravely telling their testimonies. I would have never known that those kids struggled like that, though they didn't know that their leaders did either. Children told tales of rape, parents passing away, poverty and abuse while the fire sat and listened with indifferent flames. Many of those kids at that camp suffered at the hands of things kids shouldn't have to go through. There were so many tears cried that I think that is what eventually put the fire out. I went to bed that night, singing a song of joy while

cicadas played their tiny instruments with me. Day one and my girls were already opening up. I knew this would be a transforming week.

The next morning, I rose early for a counselor meeting. I got up with the dawn, and started to get dressed, taking a good look at all my girls before I left. I was the only one up. All eight of my girls were sleeping still. We may have had the most diverse cabin in the camp. My youngest girl was thirteen and my oldest was nineteen, a year older than me at the time. They were all different sizes, races, gender identities, sexualities, and from different financial backgrounds. I noted all this with a smile. I thought it was incredible how well they all got along while being so different. I walked down the hill to the counselor meeting and took a seat in the circle of camping chairs. We waited for the last people to show up in an awkward silence.

The camp leader broke the silence after everyone had arrived, "So, last night I had some complaints about the camp fire testimonies. Some of the campers didn't feel like it was okay to share their stories."

Many of us seemed confused. I personally had thought that it was the best bonfire I'd ever been too.

A female counselor across from me spoke, "My girls felt like they couldn't share their stories because they are rich. Many of them have had some rough things happen in their life, but they feel overshadowed because so many other people have had it worse."

I felt a tinge of sadness rise in me. My cabin wasn't particularly affluent, but if they were I'd want them to feel safe sharing.

A different female voice spoke angrily from the crowd, "Well maybe your girls shouldn't make fun of people who don't wear name brand shoes. One of my girls came in crying because your cabin teamed up on her! She doesn't need that right now."

I felt anger boil in my stomach at that. I realized that was the reason why two of my girls were upset the day before. The rich girls had made fun of their Walmart shoes.

The first female counselor spoke up again, "You have no idea what it feels like to be that isolated. They don't feel like they can share their stories here. Its supposed to be a safe place."

The anger inside me burned into my face and out of my mouth, "So what are we supposed to do? Not be poor? Not share our stories because they feel bad?"

Everyone in the circle started to get angry. I noticed while we were yelling that we had divided ourselves: More affluent counselors sat on one side and less well-off ones on the other. The camp leader calmed the fighting. We sat angrily in silence for a few minutes before he asked for more comments.

No one said anything, so I decided to speak first. I felt a great pain in my stomach as I tried to conjure something to say, "I became homeless a few days ago. I still came to camp. I'm not sure why I did. I've been depressed and hard up on money, but I'm still here. None of you knew that. None of you know what is happening in my life. All you've got to base me on is the way I look. I don't look homeless or smell homeless, but I am still homeless. I am poor. Everyone has their stories. Everyone should be able to share them. But we can't do that if you can't get past what we think of people. If I'm being honest, when you brought up the fact that those rich girls don't feel safe to speak at bonfire, I was angry. Beyond angry. I've been given a lot of crap in the past for being poor. I spend too much time trying to look like one of you. But that doesn't give me a right to discount their stories. I'll talk to my cabin about it today."

The first female counselor spoke again, "When I came here as a camper, I had the same problem as my girls are having. I was from the same school they are from. My family is very well-off, but my parents always fought, and my Dad would hit me. I wanted to talk to someone about it here but felt like I couldn't because everyone else's problems were worse. I was afraid that when I got up to speak that I'd be discounted because of the school I went to. I don't want that to happen to them. I want them to feel safe."

The group of counselors disbanded, and I met with my cabin to talk. They seemed to understand but were angry that we had to be extra nice to the rich kids. Free time came around, and after some chores I decided to meditate on what happened. I was disgusted with the way I felt. In that moment at the meeting, I felt like crying. I was so angry. I was angry that I had to compromise for girls that seemed to have everything. I had to compromise for people that made fun of people for the way they dressed. I had to compromise for people that bring \$100 bucks to summer camp just to show off how much they can buy from the camp store while the rest of us counted change. But it didn't make it right for me to think that they don't have problems. They deserve a say just as much as I do. And by discounting their words, I was doing what they had always done to me.

I never knew I felt like that before. I didn't know that I hated people of higher classes. I started to realize all the things I judge people on. I judge them on their name brand clothes. If they wore a name brand, they were somehow evil. I felt somehow that because someone owned a pair of Nike shoes that they were going home to yell at their parents and kick puppies. But that is what I felt that they were doing to me. I felt eyes on me constantly. I can always feel eyes. Eyes are always looking at me and judging me. I was reminded of how it felt when people judged my character on how I looked. I was reminded of all the privileges I lost because I didn't come to school in a sports car.

Night fell on us like a dry storm. Thoughts and words swirled around in the atmosphere with an electric charge as campers gathered around the fire pit. The fire stretched out wide for its dance, then took its seat of complacency in the center. First we played and sang some

songs, waiting for the storm to fall on us. Then when the songs were over, silence came like electricity up our backs. Silence. Then a high school girl stood up a few seats over from me.

She stood and said, "You don't know me. I don't know you. I know many of you know where I go to school. I know you know my mom has a nice car. I know you think my clothes are expensive. But you don't know me. I'm having a rough time at home. And I don't think I'm prepared for it. My parents are getting divorced."

She continued her story. It was a story like those from the night before. A story that kids shouldn't have to go through, but they do. And the story changed my life. She didn't tell the fire. She didn't tell the crowd. She told each of us. She told us that we can't judge her anymore. We can see what she looks like, but not what she feels like. And we told her the same back. Many got up to speak during the fire, but there were no complaints afterwards. There were only sounds of fellowship, pops, and cracks.