

How People Shape Us

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If you sat someone down and asked them how they became the person they are today, you would most likely hear about important places, events, and influential people. Throughout our history, we have tended to live in communities. We began in tribes where every person did their part to keep the community functioning, and over time, we grew into towns, and then cities. While doing this, we introduced new things that separated us from each other. We separated ourselves physically through buildings and borders, but also socially through wars and segregation. Most recently, we have found a way to separate ourselves through the use of technology such as the Internet. But no matter how much we seem to have separated ourselves from one another, this separation is an illusion. We affect each other whether we want to or not, whether directly or indirectly. It all depends on whether or not we choose to let these interactions with people affect us, and this choice determines how well we remember these people. Through a series of interviews I conducted amongst my peers here in the Oxbow community, I set out to discover the answers to the question, “How do we affect each other?” I have recreated three of these interviews below—one about a long lost friend, one about a stranger, and the last about my own family member. From conducting these interviews, I learned many different things, but the one common trait I found was that people affect us in the most surprising ways.

Memory 1.

He stared ahead, his eyes seemed to be glued on the sky, taking in the Florida sunset, but I could tell he wasn't paying attention to the explosions of color in the sky. Instead, he was watching the events of the day in his head, like a sad, painful movie reel as he retold me the day's events. We were sitting on the porch outside the back of his house, the yard had been transformed from its usual plainness of the porch and a sparse lawn with a picnic table and grill, and the perimeter of the yard had been decorated with Target bought tiki-torches and lights, giving the whole place a festive feel. We knew that at some point our parents would be coming out to join us so that we could start dinner, but we weren't concerned. Whenever we had these barbeques, the two of us would go out to the yard and hang out on the porch and talk. We would talk about school, and our parents and other things that twelve year olds usually talk about, but every now and then the conversation would turn serious and I would hear a little bit about his life that he usually hides from other people. This was one of those times. This didn't often happen, but needless to say, I didn't really like hearing about it. He would tell me about how his father would take him out of school to go work on jobs with him for a little extra money. The jobs were hard too, and he would describe things like constructing a roof for a house, I would picture him standing for hours under the hot sun of the humid south, drowning in sweat, the front of his white t-shirt that he always wore drenched.

Once he was done with the jobs, he would have to come back home to his homework and often be too exhausted to do it. Being a twelve year-old kid, he liked school about as much as the next person but he had a secret appetite for learning that not many people knew about. I doubted his father even had an idea how much his son wanted to be in school instead of being dragged to go work. I wonder if he even cared to find out. Even though the conversation had turned serious, the honesty in his voice never faltered, he was still his genuine old self that I admired so much.

Little did I know that one day I would be using him as a template to try and be as genuine as he was with people.

As he was talking, he looked down at his hands. They weren't the smooth, small hands of any other twelve year old, they were big carpenter hands, with lines like canyons running in between the mountains of calluses that surrounded the edges of his palms and continued up his fingers. These hands had history, but the kind of history that you would expect to find on a forty year old man. They weren't made to be on this young boy. More than any other feature, his out of place hands were his dominant feature, and if you looked close enough, they could also tell you the most. I wondered if the school knew about his situation.

He turned from his entranced stare at the sunset to look at me. His face had a look of emptiness and exhaustion. His eyes were those of a broken person whose hope for the future was slowly dying, and at the same time, trying to fight for its life. I didn't feel like I was looking at my childhood friend, this person was different, I didn't know this person. This talk was much different from any other we ever had before. I looked into his eyes and watched as that hope struggled to survive; it felt as if he was trying to send me a message, or telling me to take the hope and hold onto it for him. I felt the helpless feeling that all I could do was sit there and pray that the hope survived and my friend would emerge from this new person I was seeing unfold before my eyes. Years passed and I saw fewer and fewer of him until I didn't see any of him at all, but I couldn't even if I wanted to because one day my parents informed me that he had run away and joined a gang and that being in that gang had led to his death. All I felt was hatred towards his father for working him too hard, and hatred towards his parents for letting their son become this. I felt sadness that the hope I had been asked to hold onto for my friend was now hope that I had inherited forever.

Memory 2.

The sun had just gone down when I walked into the crowded, dimly lit room with my friends. The atmosphere had quickly changed from the cool, quiet, feeling of the majestic Appalachian mountain range to one that was the exact opposite. Clumps of people lined the entire outer edge of the room, talking while they drank their beers and smoked their cigarettes or leaning up against the wall, watching the moving mass of people in the middle who were dancing to high intensity folk music provided by what looked like a local band who was rocking out on the small stage on the opposite end of the room, moving in synchronization and laughing at each other.

That's where I saw him. He was standing in a group of people who were all talking very animatedly and laughing and drinking with each other, but he didn't seem to be in that same place. He was looking around the room at all the different types of people in the room. He looked as though he was scanning the room and downloading information, people's faces, the mixture of smoke and sweat that filled the room. His gaze finally reached the entrance of the room where he spotted me staring. Our eyes locked and instead of it being one of those situations where you are caught staring and you try and look away as quickly as possible while trying not to blush, I

just kept staring at him. It's not that he was incredibly good looking or anything, he was decent with wavy brown hair that was pulled back and a beard to match. He was relatively taller than I was, maybe a foot taller, and he was definitely older than I was, maybe not by much, but still, older.

We must have stood there staring at each other for ten minutes when he smiled at me, and next thing I knew I was dancing over to where he was, my friends questioning where I was off to. I knew that their faces must have expressed confusion, but I wasn't concerned. Suddenly, I was standing next to him and listening to myself asking this strange person to dance, he nodded in agreement and then we were on the dance floor.

We dove into the dancing and the intensity of the loud, moving world rushed all around us like storm waves in the middle of the ocean only they touched everything but the two of us who hadn't taken our eyes off of each other. Each touch between us was like an electric charge, and I half wondered if it was a good idea to have electricity near this body of water around us. Since he was tall I had to look up at him to look into his eyes, which seemed to be both smirking, and burning with some weird, subtle fire in him. As we moved around each other in circles, there seemed to be a kind of energy that began to manifest itself around his face, like a glowing energy that mixed with the smell coming from him, which was an earthy kind of smell mixed with the sweat of dancing and soon it was all I could think about, this energy that was keeping its hold on me as we danced.

I felt like we had been staring at each other for hours, yet at the same time, every look was just as strong as the first one. I then realized that I didn't even know his name, and our only conversation had been me asking for a dance. How is it possible to make such a connection with someone and hardly know them? I began wondering things about him, like his favorite color, his favorite band, how long did it take to grow that beard? Unfortunately I would never find the answers to these questions, or even find out his name, but as I was being pulled back into reality by my friends, all I could think about was that burning smirk in his eyes and the energy it came with.

Memory 3.

My grandpa was a painter, I remember being five years old and going down into the basement to look in the cluttered rooms. I would spend hours down there looking through all of the stuff that my grandpa had collected. There was his office that held the old-fashioned washing machine contraption on one end, and on the opposite end, there was his old metal desk next to the food storage pantry that held prune juice from 1989 and other various expired foods. The room past the foyer of the basement was my grandma's small workplace for making her jewelry complete with all the power tools you wouldn't want an old lady to have her hands on, and the room after that was my grandpa's studio. His studio was the biggest room, and it had little openings to the rest of the rooms in the basement, and it was complete with a little counter for a bar that held sculptures, my grandpa's tilted drawing desk which was cluttered with empty bean

and fruit cans that were filled with paint brushes of every size, and the rest of the room was filled with paintings.

They were everywhere, stacked against benches, piled on chairs, there were multiple stacks jutting five feet out from the wall. They were mainly landscapes and portraits and there were a few still-life paintings here and there. I would sit and stare for hours at these landscape paintings and dream and wonder about the places he had gone to paint these. There were some that were obviously marked with his realistic geometric like style, and then there were others that flowed with bright electric colors and were purely abstract, and he signed every single one of them. There were books filled with random doodles by him, on everything from business cards to napkins. I would flip through these books, studying every single pen mark he made on the paper, where he applied a certain amount of pressure to get a certain affect. His consistency and love of being exact showed in everything he did, even the abstract works.

When I was done marveling at the genius of my grandpa's work I would retreat from the basement into the house that featured at least one work of his or my grandma's on every single wall. I remember my grandpa sitting me down at the kitchen table which was the first thing you were greeted with when coming up from the basement, and giving me a pad of big paper, pencils, pens, and water color and putting a vase of flowers in front of me and saying, "Paint." I began working right away, using my imagination to paint everything from the flowers on the table to my family to New York City which I had visited the day before, all the while trying to gain the skills my grandpa had, and somewhere deep down inside knowing that one day I would reach it.

Both my grandparents would smile at this, telling me they had no doubts that I would get those skills, but at the same time encouraging me to find my own style of painting and drawing. Being five years old I brushed off these comments with a simple "yeah sure!" as my mind raced ahead to my paintings being featured in galleries. Now, ever since the stroke, I would give everything to be that little girl learning to paint from her grandpa again, but I guess there are some lessons you have to carry on.

No matter how people come into our lives, they will always affect us. Whether they are people we have known our entire lives, like family members, or if they are old, childhood friends, or even a stranger we only had one dance with, people have shaped us into who we are today and who we will be in the future. Hearing these interviews, I couldn't help think about my own relationships with people in my life, and as they told their stories and recited their memories, I couldn't help but notice that my own similar memories were brought to the surface of my mind, where they mixed together to create a scene in my head and I felt as though I was watching these stories as if they were on a television screen. Conducting these interviews, I have begun to notice just how great of an impact we as people have on each other. If we were to be truly separate from one another, we would not be able to converse with each other, no one would go outside, and nothing would get done. We are meant to be social beings; in order for us to

thrive, we need to work together and by doing this we always have an affect on each other. But what we make of the interactions we have with people determines how we as individuals are shaped. It is true that the people we choose to be around rub off on us, but the truth is that if we are willing to give anyone this chance, and we let those interactions affect us on an emotional level, even a stranger can shape us into who we are. With all the wars, climate crises, and current revolutions going on, it is clear that the world around us is quickly changing, and for us young people it is more important than ever to be aware of how we affect one another and how we work together to continue creating our world. Ultimately, the way we affect each other will determine how we communicate and what actions we take to shape our future, our drastically changing world, and even ourselves.

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