

## The Power of a Stranger

I was attacked by a wildcat. I was an unsuspecting victim just visiting this special room because my mom insisted. So I sat down amidst the bookshelves and oversized desk and awaited this wildcat, otherwise known as a Northwestern University professor.

The conversation started in such a benign way. He simply asked, "What are you looking for in a college?" However, my response was far from what he hoped to hear.

"Nothing," I replied.

When the silence felt too thick, I added, "I don't want to go to college."

I was a junior in high school just wanting OUT of school. My dream was to pursue theater and dance in Chicago, and I somehow was convinced along the way that my youth was critical to these fields. In my mind, I couldn't possibly delay another four years.

He then said, "Can I say to your face what I would say about you behind your back?" What a great line. I should probably use it myself sometime. Well, my curiosity was peeked, so I nodded in agreement.

He launched in, "If you are such a snot-nosed kid to think you can make it in this world without a college education..." And then I tuned him out. Seriously tuned him out. I was not about to hear the rest of his attack on me. Regardless, he informed me that I couldn't leave campus until I witnessed a class, so he excused himself in order to make such arrangements.

I don't think either of us were fans of each other at this point, but my mom's steely glance let me know that I would be following any directive he gave upon his return. Within minutes, he was back telling me about the acting class I would attend and then introducing me to the student who would guide our way.

And there it was. A brief interaction that was far from pleasant, but that launched me in a completely different direction.

I loved everything about that class. The vulnerability of the student actors in the scene, the professor who whispered guidance into each actor's ear even as they said their lines, the student audience who sat captivated and then gave powerful feedback. It all felt

slightly dangerous and entirely exciting to me. It was so different from my high school classes where safety and reputation were of highest value...I was unfamiliar with such charged relationships. I knew then that I didn't want to miss out on such experiences.

It was because of this man, Les Hinderyckx, that I applied to college. There is no way he could know how much he changed the trajectory of my life, but he did. I went from a student trying to graduate from high school early to one who pursued multiple college paths. I went from trying to avoid high school halls to becoming a high school teacher roaming those very halls for a living. I went from dismissing education to believing in its transformative nature.

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As I then started to investigate schools, one of our family road trips led us to the East coast. I was there to explore Boston University and a few other options. On this trip, we stopped at Yale...not because I had even the slightest chance of getting in, but because my dad wanted to see the campus. We were there around Thanksgiving so the campus was quiet, hushed in its beauty. As we walked by some of the dorms, we ended up meeting a lone student out for a twilight stroll. We asked him some questions about his experience there, trying to pull back the veil of this Ivory school that mesmerized our midwestern sensibilities. Then he asked me if I was applying. I quickly and sheepishly said, "Oh, no, I could never get in here."

And his reply was, "Let *them* tell you no, don't say it for them."

Now he didn't know that I was a girl who had been trying to dodge academics for the last two years. I stopped taking science after my sophomore year and then stopped taking math after my junior year. My transcript would be laughed away by their admissions committee. His advice was not about serving me in that particular season of life (I never applied to Yale), but his advice has served me many times since.

Here is how it showed up in my life. It was auditioning for a role that I loved even when I didn't completely fit the character description. It was walking up to a guy I found intriguing rather than sitting glued to my seat. It was applying for a job that seemed out of reach and coveted by far too many others. It was signing up for adoption even though I was 46. I only have to look at my daughter's face to be reminded of how thankful I am for this advice.

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Then once I graduated from college and was working in Chicago as an actress and waitress, I was hit yet again with words that would drastically influence me. I was in the midst of doing theater workshops for Chicago public schools when a young boy said, "Will you be here again tomorrow?"

I replied, "No, we are only here for the day."

Looking utterly surprised, he said, "Then how will you know if I have improved?"

This young boy was so eager to take our suggestions, mull them over, and show us something even better the next day. Yet we would be on to another school.

We were a traveling show that performed a play and then held a workshop or two afterwards. Although I loved the blend of acting and teaching this job gave me, this young boy's words made me realize what I wasn't experiencing. I was missing out on deep, cultivated relationships with students that only time can bring. And I was missing out on the opportunity to witness and celebrate students' growth. So as I let his words sink in, I decided to return to school for a teaching degree.

These three experiences have revealed to me that the power of a stranger has little to do with age, education, or class. I went to undergrad because of a university department chair's words and I went to grad school because of an elementary student's words. I learned to take risks from a student at a highly esteemed school and I learned to choose sustained relationships from a student at an under-resourced school. There isn't a trend or thread here.

The thread is simply this: they were all strangers to me. We had no history or prior knowledge of one another until each fateful day. I had no real reason to trust them or treat their words with great care. But, somehow, they were the ones who said the very thing I needed to hear in each precious moment.

I don't want to lose track of the truth that as strangers we can change each other's lives. Our words can truly alter one another. And there is a unique beauty to the fact that we won't even know the full impact of our words.

I just know that each stranger I meet may change my course for the better...and if I am lucky, I may just change theirs, too.