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3/3/2021

The Awareness in Survival

According to Laureen Nussbaum, survivor of the Holocaust, “Surviving... takes a combination of two things. Number one is luck... But, the other thing is awareness. You have to be alert and aware of what the possibilities are” (Laureen Nussbaum, Holocaust Center Seattle). As I have struggled to recover from an eating disorder, I have realized that I am both literally and figuratively surviving. Nussbaum’s story is an inspiration to me that even when I am at my weakest, overcoming major challenges is possible. And, more than anything, survival is possible.

It is very difficult to imagine the shock of the Holocaust. At first, Nussbaum’s idea of society was riding on her bicycle alongside Margot Frank to religious school. In a shocking flash of a moment, Nussbaum and her friends were talking of where they might hide from society itself. Although my life differs from Nussbaum’s in many ways, I can relate to the feeling of the world turning upside down. I have always strived to please others, and to simply make people satisfied. As a child, this trait always seemed to benefit my life and those around me. However, my urge to please has become so predominant that when my doctor advised me to eat smaller portions of food, I did so. In an effort to please, I focused on eating smaller and smaller portions to the point of starving myself. It seemed like a positive change, as people around me and the media encouraged that this lifestyle was “healthy”. After many years of a simple day to day life in school and sports, believing that I was flourishing through a healthier life, it took one doctor’s appointment for me to realize I was severely underweight, and necessitated to go straight to the hospital in order to prevent my heart from failing. This created such bewilderment, as I was just doing what I was told, and suddenly that was the wrong thing to do. I can relate to Nussbaum over such confusion, and I am inspired by Nussbaum’s ability to be gracious during such a drastic change, influencing me to try to focus on a mindset of graciousness myself. After transitioning from a typical middle class life to a world of antisemitism and lack of basic necessities, Nussbaum never proved to be inappreciative. Life gives many opportunities to think pessimistically, and I admire Nussbaum’s gift of optimism during unimaginable times of animosity. Nussbaum shows me that there is always something worth living for, even when living seems insurmountable.

In addition to her gratitude, I aspire to have Nussbaum’s selflessness. For her, living a fulfilled life is not living a life for only herself or even to only keep herself alive. For example, “Passion is to live for the sake of life... Passion, that is, forgetting oneself” (Laureen Nussbaum, *Shedding Our Stars*). In this quote, Nussbaum describes what passion means to her and what life means with passion in it. For instance, after Nussbaum shed her Jewish star due to her religious ambiguity, one may predict she would avoid any opportunity for Nazis to make her wear a star again. On the contrary, she cared for and delivered food to Jews in hiding. This represents the importance to Nussbaum of helping others. With awareness of those around her who are struggling, she continued to survive.

Nussbaum inspires me to realize that change is always possible. After years of war and devastation, Nussbaum never gave up and instead created a happy life for herself and her husband, also a holocaust survivor, Rudi Nussbaum (Holocaust Center Seattle). This encourages me that even now, when I feel like the arduous process of fighting for my health will never end, change will happen. Possibilities are endless,

even when in the moment of despair such ideas seem to be far fetched. With a new life in Portland, OR, Nussbaum continues to share the stories of her role model, Margot Frank, and the person who saved her family and thousands of other Jews, Hans Calemeyer (Seattle Times). It is incredible to realize how far Nussbaum has come from her hardest battles, and how she recognises those who have made this outcome possible for her. Although I am not at the end of my own battle yet, Nussbaum's story reminds me of the importance of reflecting on how far I've come, and how my family and friends have supported me towards where I am today.

There is not one formula for survival, and every Holocaust survivor had their own way of strength. For Laureen Nussbaum, survival was being aware of life's possibilities. Laureen had a passion in life, and passion gave her perseverance. Knowing this, I am inspired to fight through my most difficult days and greatest challenges, seeking a growth mindset. The society that we live in ruined Nussbaum's life, and in a different way, it ruined mine too. I was brainwashed to believe that losing weight to change my own body would be the best thing for me, when in reality it was what nearly killed me. After this experience, I despise many parts of the society that I live in. However, Nussbaum shows me that even when one can think of one hundred reasons why living isn't worth it, one can also think of a thousand reasons why it is. Nussbaum survived one of history's darkest times, and she proves that I have the ability to survive too.