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English IV

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“Solitude amid Community”

Community is a powerful thing because it often exists despite so many obstacles. People are so naturally diverse and nuanced that it seems incredible that we form so many communities in our lives. The best communities are the ones that appear without much effort, the ones we stumble into. A very special moment comes with these communities; it's the moment you realize it exists. A moment so serene and filled with self-assurance, it’s difficult to describe. It's the moment Jhumpa Lahiri writes about in her short story "In the Sun."

In her story, Lahiri describes a morning she spent in the neighborhood outside her Italian home. The area is full of people; it's "the first warm day," and "it feels like a party effortlessly organized at the last minute." Lahiri gets a sandwich from a local shop and sits all by herself in the park, watching all the people, but she doesn't "feel even slightly alone." It's this moment that's so special. The realization that you are a part of such a strong community, that even when you are by yourself, you are never alone.

When I first read this short story, my mind immediately went to day four of my wilderness trip in Utah. We were 50 miles into our 80-mile backcountry white water rafting journey. There were 13 of us, 10 campers, and 3 leaders. I had only known them for a few days, but paddling all day in the hot summer sun, sleeping in our often too cozy tents together, and spending just about every minute with them had a way of bonding us together.

That fourth morning I woke up very early, and without really thinking, I tiptoed out of the tent, slowly unzipped the entree flap, and crawled out into the brisk morning air. I grabbed my Nalgene, fleece jacket, and camp chair before heading towards the rocky canyon wall. My hands and feet carried me up the boulders and rocky terrain formed over millions of years of erosion until I found a nice spot to sit. I set up my camp chair and got comfortable.

It was 6 a.m. by the time I got situated. I could see the whole campsite from my resting spot: each tent like an island in an ocean of rock and tall grass, the fire pit we spent hours talking around just the night before, and our rafts resting on the rocky beach like sleeping sea creatures. Everything was still and quiet except for the soft hum of the river. I stayed there for a while just staring, not at anything in particular; I just absorbed it all.

Later, the sun began to creep over the opposite canyon wall, and its rays shot through the thin nylon tents and onto my sleeping friend's eyes. I observed each person stumble out of their tents, search for their warm layers, and stretch out. I watched that day's cooking crew make their way to the kitchen area, fire up the camp stove, and rummage through the dry bags to get their ingredients. I oversaw the groggy conversations that became more lively as the sun crept higher into the sky.

It was then that I felt it. I was just sitting up in my perch, completely unnoticed by those I was observing. A small part of me wanted to be down there with them, but I was genuinely content to be removed. I was secure in the fact that I was a part of something larger than me; my solitude was not a testament to any loneliness but instead to the human connections I had made. I didn't "feel even slightly alone."

That morning has always been meaningful to me because of how beautiful, serene, and peaceful it was. However, it wasn't until I read Lahiri's story that I understood why that morning had stayed with me. The beauty of the moment is by no means unimportant or unremarkable, but I've seen a lot of beautiful nature scenes before, and they don't all stick. It was the sense of community I felt; it was that moment when, even if I couldn't name it and call it what it was, I knew I was deeply connected to that group of people.

Lahiri knows that people make the same mistake I did all the time. We have these incredible feelings of community but often attribute them to other factors, like our surroundings. Lahiri wants us to recognize the rare and elusive moments we find in communities and learn to appreciate those moments and the groups they stem from. Lahiri doesn't want us to forget the beauty and power found in human connection.