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English IV

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“Solitude amid Community”

Community is a compelling force, often emerging in the face of countless obstacles. The diversity and nuance in human nature make it even more remarkable that we come together to form these pockets of belonging. The most impactful communities assemble themselves effortlessly; they are the ones you find yourself part of before you even realize it. There's a moment full of peace and self-assurance when you recognize this belonging. It's a sensation illustrated in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "In the Sun."

In her short story, Lahiri paints a picture of a bustling morning in her Italian neighborhood. The air is thick with the promise of spring; it's "the first warm day," and the mood is joyful as if the community has thrown "a party effortlessly organized at the last minute." She walks into a local shop, where the smell of freshly baked bread fills the air and buys a sandwich. Then she settles into a park bench, alone yet deeply connected to the world around her. As she watches people of all ages enjoying the sun, she realizes she doesn't "feel even slightly alone." It's a serene and comforting moment, one where she grasps the unspoken strength of her community, a strength so potent that solitude feels like an embrace rather than isolation.

When I first read Lahiri's story, my mind instantly transported me back to the fourth day of my wilderness adventure in Utah. We were navigating the white-capped rapids 50 miles deep into an 80-mile journey through steep canyons. Our group had 13 people: 10 campers and 3 leaders. Even though we had known each other for just a few days, the unrelenting sun, the intense paddling, and the often too-cozy tents had bonded us into a community.

On that fourth morning, I woke up while the rest of the camp was still deep in their well-earned sleep. Tiptoeing to avoid waking my tentmates, I slipped into my fleece jacket, grabbed my Nalgene bottle and camp chair, and began my solitary trek toward the towering canyon wall. My hands felt the coarse texture of ancient boulders as I climbed, each rock a testament to millions of years of erosion. When I finally found a spot that felt right, I unfolded my camp chair and settled in. By then, it was about 6 a.m.

From this elevated perch, my eyes took in the full view of our temporary home, the tents like tiny islands in a sea of stone and long grass, our fire pit surrounded by a ring of chairs, and our rafts beached on the rocky shore like slumbering sea creatures. I sat, enveloped in the stillness, the only sound being the distant murmur of the river. As the sun began to rise, casting golden rays of light over the opposite canyon wall, the camp started to stir. One by one, my fellow adventurers emerged from their nylon homes, donning jackets and stretching limbs. I watched as the day's cooking crew moved toward the kitchen area, the first sizzle of breakfast mingling with the crisp morning air. Gradually, the hushed tones of sleepy conversation filled the camp.

At that moment, perched above yet deeply connected, I felt it, the same serenity Lahiri describes. I had physically removed myself from the group, but some part of me was right there among them. I was by myself but not lonely, content in my solitude, full of the knowledge that I was part of something bigger. I didn't "feel even slightly alone."

These moments of profound community connection are rare and elusive, often going unnoticed even as we experience them. It's easy to overlook these fleeting moments, to brush them off as byproducts of the situation or setting. But they're far more than that; they're what it means to belong, to feel part of and apart from a group.

I never fully understood the emotional weight of what I felt that morning on the canyon rocks until I read Lahiri's vivid depiction. Her story served as a lens, bringing into focus the hidden truth of my story. It made me realize that these moments are more than just nice experiences; they are milestones in our understanding of ourselves and our communities.

Lahiri's intentions go beyond just description. She wants us to be more observant, to cherish these moments and the unique communities that create them. In doing so, we not only gain some wonderful and serene moments, but we also advance our understanding of community. These moments, these brief bubbles of peace and self-assurance, remind us of the beauty and power in human connection.