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I Am a Part

Josie De Jong

November 22, 2021

“I am a part of all that I have met.”

-Alfred Lord Tennyson

This academic semester has been one for reflection, and from reflection, action. Such a thing might be unsurprising for a student’s last year on campus—yet, entirely surprising if you know me personally for who I am, a woman of little action. At this point, it’s more of a self-deprecating joke than hard truth, but at the very start of this school year, I made a conscious decision for myself. I decided that I wanted to be a student, woman, and human being of action. I wanted to say yes to once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. I wanted to be vulnerable, unapologetic in my relationship with the world and the people who walk beside me on the sidewalk. I wanted to lend myself to the experiences of life, to make time for the unexpected. I wanted to cast aside my identity as the outsider.

Like a machine barely used, my capacity for experiencing the unknown left much to be desired—it required an uncomfortable amount of willpower to kickstart. But the rewards of doing so have been cautiously fulfilling; for once in my academic career, I feel connected with not only my peers, but also my professors and the surrounding community of Sioux Center. My eyes are open, eager for the new, for things they’ve never seen, for the intimidating and unfamiliar.

Let me tell you about one of those things.

A couple months ago, I went volunteering with my professor Bob De Smith and his wife, Rebecca. Through their church and connections with others in Sioux Center, Rebecca was introduced to an organization called Sack Pack, and she’s been involved on the board for eight years with Bob’s occasional assistance. The program does exactly what the name implies, but with a pretty neat twist: by working with the local food pantry, Sack Pack provides food for school children in need who can freely sign up for the program while having their participation remain confidential. During the school day, a student signed up for the service receives a “sack” of carefully packed food items discreetly delivered to their backpack—the process is kept confidential with only a few adults involved: one person delivers the pack,

possibly the school nurse, and a classroom teacher directs the delivery to the recipients' backpack, protecting the recipients' privacy.

When Professor De Smith asked for evening volunteer "sack packers" from the students in his English classes, I jumped at the offer. It was one of those *things*—things I probably wouldn't have the opportunity to do otherwise, a thing that required "capital 'A'" Action.

And maybe action was an understatement. The three of us showed up to the Sack Pack building and were immediately thrown into a very organized chaos: De Smith and I, tiny blips tucked within a tide of bodies, buoys in a shifting sea of sweat and shared oxygen, and his wife Rebecca the experienced sailor. It was crazy, really, and unpredictable for me in a way that was inherently thrilling. In those first few minutes of arrival, I was set to task in a line of packers, participating in the most extreme form of trick-or-treating known to man. We grabbed ramen packets, granola bars, juice boxes, string cheese, meat sticks, and mac and cheese, making sure each individual bag had enough for the child that would one day bring it home. I was shoulder-to-shoulder with complete strangers, people that I'd shared Sioux Center with, yet never seen or acknowledged.

It wasn't a long task, but by the end, each volunteer in the building was sufficiently sweaty, wearing exhausted half-grins and looking bedraggled in the way that meant they'd accomplished something. A good tired. Hard fought.

As the sack bags were packed into boxes bound for an assortment of local schools, we circled around one another to conclude the process. The event organizers led the group in prayer, encouraging each volunteer to lay their hands on a box to bless its oncoming journey. Even if these actions were outside my realm of comfort, it was rewarding to witness the down-to-earth goodness of people who believed entirely in what they were doing. That kind of goodness, filled with absolute determination and belief past the bounds of practicality, was alien, but endearing. Further than that, it was humbling. Quieting.

I went home that night feeling contemplative but fulfilled. Maybe the people I volunteered with weren't like me. Maybe if they knew the degree to which I felt like an imposter amongst them, they'd regret my participation. But these questions and insecurities were only "maybe's," not the solid, real-life experience of it. My fear of the unknown was undue, my perceived identity as the wolf among sheep imagined. By throwing myself into the action of life, I'd lost nothing and gained everything.

This year is a time for reflection, and from reflection, action. I find that the more I acquaint myself with the unfamiliar, the less likely I am to shy away when it reveals itself further. Making time for those revelations, even in small things like an evening of volunteering for the community, can make all the difference. You are, after all, a part of all that you've met. So, go out and meet more.