

GABRIEL

I finally am getting around to writing my short story.

My name is Gabriel. Three years ago, I had a real problem. I was failing language arts. I liked the short stories and the novels that we read in class and at home, but I just couldn't write any stories of my own. And you had to write short stories, if you were going to pass language arts.

At the beginning of the semester, Mrs. Carlson told us we would have to write a short story every two weeks. At first, I was only able to write a paragraph. When Mrs. Carlson returned my paper to me, she had written at the top of my paper in red ink; "Gabriel, this is not a short story. Why not read some more of the stories in our anthology and see if you can do better next time."

"Heidi, what if I can't tell what makes a short story a short story? Do you think I'll fail language arts?"

"I don't know, Gabriel. It would be awful if you didn't move on to the next grade with the rest of us."

The idea of having to leave my classmates was so horrible to me that I couldn't even bear to think about it. In the next few months, things didn't get any better. I continued to get the same remark on my assignments, "this is not a short story. It doesn't satisfy any of the criteria, Gabriel."

There were so many times when I was tempted to tell Mrs. Carlson, "Look, I just can't write short stories. I can write short essays, and I can write little poems and I can write letters, but I can't write short stories."

One day I decided to talk to my grandmother about my problem. My grandmother lived near our home and was a very good friend of mine. We were nearing the holidays and she had invited me to stay with her for a few days to make our own Christmas cards. I liked being at her home. There was always a fire burning and wonderful smells filled the rooms.

"How are things going in school, Gabriel?"

"Okay, I guess, except for language arts. We have to write short stories and I don't seem to be able to figure out what makes a piece of writing a short story. Everything I've turned in so far has been rejected. I'm just about to give up."

"Don't do that, Gabriel. Your grandfather used to say there are many ways to plant a garden. I'm sure with time you'll find a way. I can remember when I was your age, I was having difficulty passing history. We had a very large textbook and although I tried very hard to understand it, I couldn't make any sense out of the readings. My history teacher was very intelligent, but he would talk about all sorts of things in a very quick way. We were supposed to take notes as he talked, and I could never quite get the listening and the writing together. As a result, when it came to examination time, I wasn't prepared. I had no notes and the very idea of trying to make sense of the textbook would cause me to shiver."

"What did you do?"

"My mother suggested that I go to the library and ask the reference librarian if he had any books dealing with the time period I was studying. I discovered many such books written in such a way that the history seemed more like an adventure story. By the time I had to take my final examination, I had read six of these story-like books. While I was reading them, my classes seemed to make more sense to me, and I was able to take a few notes."

"Did you pass history that year?"

"Not only did I pass, but I got a very good grade. Somehow that grade meant more to me than all my other grades combined."

"You didn't give up?"

"No, I didn't give up. But I did find another way to get the job done. I bet if we give it some thought, we can come up with another way for you to learn how to write a short story."

"The first thing we have to do is figure out what makes a piece of writing satisfy the criteria for a short story, grandmother."

"We can do that too. You'll see. Now, why don't we go into the kitchen and have some blueberry muffins and milk."

Immediately I started to feel better. Then I thought to myself, "I don't just want to write short stories. I want to write good short stories."

When I told this to my grandmother, she said, "that's very wise of you, Gabriel. But it doesn't surprise me. I've always thought you were a person of good character. That's exactly what makes you so very special to me."

All this happened one year before my grandmother died. But I still remember her words and I remember saying to myself, "someday I'm going to put those words down in a short story."

In class yesterday, Mrs. Andersen, our teacher, went to the blackboard and wrote the following: Compare these two groups of activities.

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|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. Raising you arm | 1. Deciding who will be your next friend |
| 2. Swimming across the lake | 2. Knowing your homework assignment |
| 3. Running around the block | 3. Doubting whether it will rain tomorrow |
| 4. Walking to school | 4. Understanding a story |

"Well, class, what do you think? How is the first group of activities different from the second group?"

"Mrs. Andersen, are we doing language arts now or thinking?" Tomas asked.

"Both, Tomas," Mrs. Andersen replied in her matter-of-fact way. Mrs. Andersen was a good teacher. She said what she meant clearly and she meant what she said. When I first met her, I thought she was angry with all of us in the class. But very soon I realized that although she looked as if she might be angry, she wasn't. It was just her way.

Molly raised her hand. "Mrs. Andersen, I think the first set of activities are things we can choose to do, and the second set are things we can't choose."

"I'd say the first group involves action words and the second group does not," Heidi said.

"I don't agree with Heidi," I said. "Deciding and doubting are activities."

"Are they, Gabriel?" Mrs. Andersen asked.

"They're mental activities," Kenny said.

"Suppose I were to say, 'make your heart beat!'" I asked turning to the whole class.

"I'd say it's not something I can choose to do," Jean Paul responded.

Mrs. Andersen started pacing up and down the front of the room as if she were thinking. Then she turned around and said, looking at the two groups of activities on the board, "You know, I'm not sure we decide who our friends will be. Maybe I better select another activity."

"Why do you say that?" Maria asked.

"I know," Kenny added. "Because we don't control who comes into our lives."

"But we can decide not to be someone's friend," Maria added. "And that's a choice."

"Suppose I say, 'I promise you.' What would you say?" Molly asked.

"I'd say that it's something I can choose to do and what's more if I say those words,

I'm doing it at the same time," I said.

"But isn't there another difference between the verbs in the first group and the verbs in the second group?" Mrs. Andersen persisted, still looking at the board.

"Well," said Josep. "The first group of verbs are things we do with our bodies. And the second group are things we do with our minds."

When Josep said this, Mrs. Andersen walked over to the window and began to water the plants on the ledge. Then she turned to Josep and said, "I've never thought of it like that, Josep."

"Why not?" we all shouted back in chorus.

"I don't know. I guess I just don't talk that way," Mrs. Andersen said.

A little later that day I noticed Heidi was sitting in a corner very quietly. She wasn't reading and she wasn't writing. She wasn't doing anything. So I went over to her and said, "Heidi, is something the matter?"

"No," she said, pulling her arm away from her chin while at the same time motioning for me to sit down by her.

"Would you like to share it with me?"

Heidi just looked at me but continued to say nothing. I was starting to feel a little sad when she said, "Gabriel, I was thinking about how some things we can choose to do and some things we can't choose to do. Like understand. I can't choose to understand something. It just happens to me or doesn't happen to me."

Kenny came over and joined us. Heidi and I told him what we were talking about and he said, "I know what you mean. I can't tell myself to know or to doubt."

"Why does that bother you though?" I asked.

"How can I be responsible for the things I do, but don't choose to do?" Heidi responded.

"I don't understand you," Kenny said. "Everything you do makes you the person you are. It's all a whole."

When Kenny said that, I thought Heidi would understand. But she just stared at both of us for a long while. Then she said, "All I do does not make up me. It depends on whether I chose to do it or not."

I could tell by the way she talked that she was getting a little upset. So I decided to try another way of explaining things to her.

"Look, Heidi, wouldn't you say that every difference makes a difference? Otherwise, it wouldn't be a difference. So everything we do makes a difference in who we are."

"That's not so, Gabriel. The things I don't choose to do don't make a difference in who I am," Heidi said.

"You know better than that, Heidi," Kenny said in his soft tone. "If you find yourself doubting something our teacher told you, or your parents told you, or not understanding a movie that you go to see, that makes a difference to you."

"Are you both trying to tell me that we don't choose to be the person we want to be?" Heidi asked rather loudly.

"Not entirely. We choose some things but not all things," I said.

"Well, why should I be responsible for someone I didn't choose to be?"

Kenny leaned over and looked at us both very seriously. "I don't know."

But I didn't want the conversation to end there. So I said, "Heidi, haven't you ever done something and right away you know you shouldn't have done it?"

"Yes," but how do you know whether something is not all right for you to do unless you try doing all different sorts of things."

"I'm not sure," I said. "Maybe you can imagine what will happen if you do

something. For example, you can imagine how you will feel. Or you can imagine how it will affect your mother or teacher. Maybe you can't imagine what will happen all the time. We all make mistakes."

When I said this, Maura started walking towards our little circle. Maura was a new girl in our school. She came from another country and I liked her very much. In a very short time, we had become good friends. As she neared us, we all made room for her at the table and told her what we were discussing. "Oh," she said, patting her long auburn hair, "Heidi is wondering how free we are. I think about that a lot."

"I guess so, Maura," Heidi responded. "If I'm not free many times, how can I be held responsible for what I do or think?"

"Maybe if people would think carefully about the reasons they have for doing certain things before they do them, they wouldn't be so likely to make bad judgements."

"But, Maura, I don't choose to do many things that I do. It has nothing to do with thinking."

"I'm not so sure about that, Heidi," I said. "Look, I think it has something to do with character."

"What's that?"

"It's a word my grandmother used a lot. Once I asked her what the word meant and she said, "It's the most important thing to consider when judging people but the hardest thing to put into words."

"That doesn't help me any," Heidi responded. "Besides, I'm not so sure we should judge people."

"Sometimes we have to, Heidi," I said. "Suppose you were choosing a partner to go on a safari? You'd have to judge whether you could trust that person. And suppose you were choosing a person for a job? You'd have to judge whether the person would be able to do the job well."

"Yes," Maura added. "Or suppose you were choosing someone to be your friend. You'd have to have some criteria with which to judge whether the person would make a good friend."

"Remember," I said, "what Mrs. Andersen said this morning. She isn't sure we choose our friends."

"Gabriel, you still haven't told us what your grandmother meant by the word 'character.'" Heidi persisted.

"I know. When I asked my grandmother again, she said, 'I'm afraid anything I say will be problematic.'"

"So she never told you?" Kenny inquired.

"She tried. She said it had to do with a certain seamlessness, as if there were just one piece of cloth with no seams. Everything fits together and makes up a whole. She said it wasn't a matter of how much cloth but the quality of the cloth. Then she asked me, "Does that help?"

"Did it?" Kenny asked.

"It didn't help me at all. I told my grandmother I knew nothing about material."

"It's only an analogy," she said softly. "But at the time, I didn't know what an analogy was. So I was no better off than when I asked my first question. But my grandmother did say something more. She said she thought that when people choose to do something good, they do it more out of habit than character."

"But we can choose our habits Gabriel. We can choose not to smoke and not to overeat. We can choose to brush our teeth every morning and to do our homework every evening after supper," Maura said.

"Yes, and we can choose not to be mean to our classmates, even though he has been mean to us, and we can choose not to sleep in, even though we want to," I added.

"And we can change our habits," Kenny said. "I mean if we see that certain habits are causing harm to ourselves or to others, we can try to develop new habits."

"I used to love German chocolate cake," Maura added. "My mother used to make it all the time and I would bring it in my lunch. Then I started to put on a lot of weight. One day I told my mother, "please put an orange in my lunch, instead of my cake. Now I eat fruit regularly at lunch time. In the beginning it was very hard. When I'd finish my sandwich, I could see and almost taste the chocolate cake. But in a few months, I didn't think about it any more. I even began to like the fruit."

"I don't think we can choose all our habits," Heidi said. "I don't choose to wake up or to fall asleep or to be hungry or thirsty."

"Maybe not," Kenny responded. "But you can choose when to wake up by setting an alarm clock and when to go to bed. And you can decide when and what to eat and how much you are going to eat."

"Maybe what I'm trying to say is that if I don't like the things I do, I don't like the person I am," Heidi said rather slowly with a very sad expression on her face. I was tempted to put my arms around her, but didn't.

Instead, I said, "I like you, Heidi. I'm not sure you have to like everything a person does to like the person. It's like I said before, we all make mistakes sometimes. Otherwise, we wouldn't be human."

Heidi said nothing. Nor did anyone else. I was almost sure the conversation was over now, when Kenny asked, "Gabriel, is it possible that your grandmother just didn't know what character was?"

"Oh, no," I responded. "She knew what it was alright. She must have known because she often used the word in a sentence, and she made sense to me. She just had a hard time explaining it to me, because I didn't know about analogies. But I did ask her once if she knew many people with character, and she said, 'all people have character. But not all people have good character.'"

"I wonder why she said that?" Heidi asked, pulling her chair closer to the table.

"That's what I asked grandmother, and she said that becoming a person of good character was very hard work. It isn't something you do in a week."

"Is it something we choose, or something that just happens to us if we're lucky?" Heidi asked.

"I think it has something to do with making good judgements," Kenny said.

"If that's true, we choose it again and again," I said looking right at Heidi. And to myself, I thought, "we probably have to take a few wrong turns, before we realize the right turn."

"Gabriel, you never cease to amaze me," Heidi said. She must have felt a little better because she was smiling very broadly and her eyes were twinkling.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"I can't imagine anyone not knowing anything about material."

When Heidi said that, Mrs. Andersen came over to all four of us and said, "Would you four like to join the rest of us now?"

Mrs. Andersen can be so understanding. She's really a very good teacher. Don't you think so?

Ann Margaret Sharp