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Above Adversity

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First Place: 2016 Common Reading Program Essay Contest

Above Adversity

The duty to which fellow humans hold one another in the fight against injustice is perhaps the most important responsibility each individual possesses. The understanding that a threat to the rights of one is a threat to all is a motivating notion for many of history's activists. In her memoir, *I Am Malala*, the young Pakistani activist, Malala Yousafzai, demonstrates a deep understanding of her essential role in combatting the rising wave of injustice perpetrated by the Taliban in her valley. Malala's impassioned fight for every child's right to education is backed by the unwavering and outspoken support of her father, Ziauddin, a school director who refuses to allow the power of the Taliban to squander the value of education. Similar to the message of duty and responsibility found in Martin Niemöller's poem, "First they came..." which details the upsurge of discrimination in Nazi Germany, Malala's story illustrates the importance of fighting the human tendency toward complacency, as well as rising above adversity in order to protect the liberty of others.

Niemöller's "First they came..." highlights the systematic persecution of various groups in Nazi Germany, providing a poignant example of history's tendency toward appeasement of the powers of evil. As the Nazis began to persecute individual groups, the speaker let the injustice pass without taking action, until he became a victim himself, "and there was no one left to speak for [him]" (Niemöller). The guilt which the speaker in the poem seems to feel is caused by his complacent attitude toward the injustices being committed against his fellow Germans, eventually trapping himself, too, as a victim without an advocate. This urgent message of duty to fellow humans perhaps informed the brave decisions made by Malala and her father to combat the violent rule of the Taliban. Ziauddin demonstrates his understanding of the

importance of his role in the fight for education, explaining that amidst the incompetency of the Pakistani government, “one has to speak out [...] to educate my children and my nation” (216). Although Ziauddin faces threats of death, he views his own life as a tool which can be used to spur a campaign for justice, education, and peace. Despite being faced with the threat of violent retaliation, Malala chooses to continue her public campaign against the demands of the Taliban, stating that “our fear [is] not as strong as our courage” (138). Although the speaker in Niemöller’s poem failed to speak out against persecution, his regretful yet informative message lives on through the valiant actions of Malala, her father, and other activists who have made the protection of the rights of others a top priority.

The greatness of Malala’s daring selflessness is accentuated by her deep faith and understanding of the value of all human life. Each of her struggles is accompanied by hopeful prayers, illustrating her unwavering faith in the ability of God to lead her through the trials of evil. Her prayers often begin by asking for personal protection for her family, neighborhood, and village, but her remarkable love of human life leads her to then pray also for “all Muslims,” and then, “No, not just Muslims; bless all human beings” (237). The broad reach of Malala’s compassion contradicts the human tendency to concern oneself only with personal struggles rather than the struggles of all. Much like the speaker in “First they came...” finally grasps the necessity of a hero for all who are plagued by injustice, Malala understands that even a young girl from Swat has the power to be that hero for fellow men, women, and children seeking an education. Informed by the regretful mistakes of Niemöller’s speaker, Malala provides selfless empathy and concern for any and all lives faced with adversity.

In a world so parted by warring ideologies, Malala and Ziauddin’s indiscriminate efforts to reach a global audience in the fight for education provides a hopeful light for all of mankind.

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While history presents many disheartening examples of failed human compassion, the speaker in “First they came...” is able to provide a meaningful message about the responsibility of each human to one another. The contrite voice of the speaker in Niemöller’s poem serves as an informative motivator in the efforts of all who seek to live out their duty to one another as fellow humans and children of God. Malala’s inspired victory over the weapons of the Taliban offers a poignant example of the power of faith, compassion, and unwavering dedication over the forces of malevolent destruction.

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