

Valedictorian: Levi Lebovitz '22

In 11th grade, I found myself in Honors Biology class, alongside 2 other Juniors, drowning in a sea of prepubescent freshman. In a class traditionally taken by 9th graders, I was the big dawg: two years older and two feet taller than most of the class. So I didn't take it too seriously. As anyone in my APES class this year can testify, in class, I can often be engaging, talkative, and humorous, some may even say "disruptive" at times, and Honors Bio was no exception, primarily because of one peculiar freshman. Let's just call him "David."

David was a year younger than the rest of his peers. He'd skipped a grade, already well read up on the works of Voltaire, Woolf, and Faulkner from an early age. Instead of playing video games, he programmed them. He was just a really, *really*, intellectual guy, but also very socially awkward and comical--often unintentionally. He was brutally sarcastic, oblivious to important due-dates, and easily infuriated by all assignments and most classmates. One day he actually threw a stool at someone--this was in response to a tease about his immaturity, ironically.

I saw David through this lens--short, awkward, too-young-for-his-grade, snarky, and hilarious--as did the majority of the class. So, at the beginning of some classes, I would shout: "Daviddddd what's up man!?" as he walked in the door. My friends and I would laugh at his snarky comments and I would jokingly challenge his ridiculous complaints to get a laugh. I didn't think much about my relationship to him until he sent me an email one day after class.

Email Subject: Idleness. I-D-L-E-N-E-S-S. Idleness.

Hi.

While audacity is certainly your strength (for better or worse), I feel nerve-racked by how you haven't utilized your talents and instead have held them captive to the thoughts of an idle mind. You are really funny. I'd request that you stop using that for the destruction of others, and instead reserve that for an organized purpose where that humor may prosper into something more than a silly distraction from biology class.

Have a good day.

David

When I received this email, not only was it humiliating to have someone three years younger criticize me (and do it very eloquently at that), but to realize that it was all true as well... that really struck a nerve with me.

Coming into Junior year, I was more self-centered after the isolation and reduced social sphere of quarantine. I also think I lost a bit of empathy in the relationships I kept after spending so much time looking at screens. Phones and social media have a way of marketing relationships like some sort of commodity or utility, and it takes the humanity out of social interactions--I'm sure many of you can attest to online connection feeling somewhat hollow or superficial.

So coming back to school, I had fallen into a pattern of treating people like no more than likes or notifications: some sort of means for validation or happiness. David, to me, was just a means to get a laugh from friends. I didn't really see the humanity in him, or imagine how the unwanted attention I gave him *really* impacted him. So it was a brutal reality-check when he pointed out that I *was* using my humor at the expense of others, and doing so for very shallow reasons.

Looking back, this taught me a lesson best expounded upon by the German existential psychologist Martin Buber. In one book, he discusses two different types of relationships: I/it encounters, in which we relate to each other as external entities or objects, or opposingly, I/thou encounters, in which we see the humanity in one another, with compassion rather than judgment or objectification.

It is so easy, these days, to view relationships as transactional--a means to an end; but at the end of the day, it's the deep, nurtured relationships--ones in which we see others as thou rather than "it"--that give meaning and happiness to life. I'm sure if you all reflect on any of your fondest memories from the past 4 years, you'll think of your friends, family, coaches, mentors--people you know (and who know you) most personally.

We are often striving towards some abstract western concept of success, one which revolves around money, luxury, achievement, etc. but what brings true happiness and fulfillment are relationships. And I don't say that to sound overly cliché.

I took an elective this year called How The World Works, where--thanks to the connections of our adjunct teacher--our class interviewed some of the most successful and impactful people in the world. CEOs, best-selling authors, entrepreneurs. These leaders had accomplished everything that it seems society encourages us to pursue.

But what shocked me was the uncanny revelation, interview after interview, that each person didn't find purpose or happiness through monetary success or the glamor of fame, but rather, through the parts of their lives where they impacted people and formed real connections. Where they invested back in their communities, fought for a cause near to their hearts, or strove to make the world a better place.

Desmund Tutu, the prominent anti-apartheid activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, once wrote: "...[My] humanity is caught up and bound inextricably with yours. We are created for a delicate network of relationships, of **interdependence** with our fellow human beings, with the rest of creation..."

As individuals and as a society, it's proven that we function best when we see the humanity in each other and drop the fantasy of self-centeredness to build a better, more-loving world, together. Yet, how often do we really try to see the humanity in *everyone* we encounter?

I didn't start seeing David as more than a humorous character in my life until after that email. So afterwards, every so often, I would try to ask him about his hobbies, or some of the literature we both read, or about his faith. Even then, he seemed reluctant to converse with me. I think he assumed that all the information was for some elaborate joke I was scheming rather than just being a genuine attempt to get to know him.

I found out later Junior year that David wasn't going to return to McCallie. He claimed non-social reasons, but I couldn't help but think that I was part of a larger problem on campus that refused to see David as human, and instead isolated and laughed at him, all in the spirit of good fun, until he decided he needed to leave.

Let's not use our talents and abilities for--as David wrote--the destruction of others. I think we'd all find a little more happiness if everyone reserved our capabilities for some organized purpose to benefit the community, and really made an effort to establish, nurture, and cherish the relationships in our lives--treating them as an end rather than a means.

We are all about to cross this stage and begin new lives, filled with new people, and new opportunities for connection. So let's go out in the world and strive to make real, meaningful relationships by seeing the humanity in everyone we encounter. Let's not be idle.