

“First-Year Writing Seminar: The Podcast,” Season 1

Episode Transcript: Morgen Burnett on “Contributing to a Larger Community”

Hokey radio announcer voice: how can taking a little time out of your day impact someone else’s life? In this episode, Morgen Burnett reads her essay titled “Loiterers Aren’t Serial Killers”, where she talks about how the accidental death of someone she’d never even met taught her why it’s important to contribute to a larger community.

I believe in the importance of contributing to a larger community.

When I was around eight years old, I was half asleep in the back of my mom’s car, driving home around 1 AM. A couple blocks down from our street we pass a woman walking in the middle of the road, wearing a green tank top, with long dark hair and camo jogging pants. I remember this because my mom had to slam on the breaks, which took me out of my half-slumber and made me hit my head on the seat in front of me. The sight of a woman slowly walking in the middle of the road in the middle of the night was bizarre, to say the least, but the stranger thing was that she was completely oblivious to a car being behind her and nearly hitting her. My mom and stepdad considered stopping and asking her if she needed help, but it was late and we lived in one of the “bad” parts of town, so my mom was reluctant to let a stranger into her car with her 8 year old daughter. So we drove home. The next day, on the news, we see that that woman matching that description had been hit and killed by a car not very long after we drove away. This isn’t something I’d necessarily call traumatic, but it has always stuck with me.

Before I could drive, I walked anywhere, anytime, any distance, for any reason. If my Grama heard about this, she’d lecture me on how dangerous it is for young women to walk by themselves: “Morgen, even if you wear something reflective a drunk driver could hit you. People can be real freaks, Morgen.” In retrospect, she was right, I shouldn’t have been doing that much solitary walking as a 16 year old girl, and now when I think of taking a walk alone at night I get incredibly anxious. I also think about that woman we passed in the car when I was 8. Realistically, that could happen to anyone, and it could’ve happened to me with my penchant for walking alone. It could’ve happened to any of my friends, and it still could in just the wrong place at just the wrong time. The thing I disagree with my Grama on is this inherent fear of people being “freaks”; a maladaptive and constantly running internal monologue I’ve had to reckon with as I’ve gotten older is this belief that all people, by default, have your worst interests at heart.

I understand why my mom didn’t stop and ask that woman if she was ok that night; I’m not trying to say that was a wrong or unjustified decision on her part. But when I’m out driving late at night and see someone walking, or sitting cross-legged in front of a gas station staring at nothing, I think about that woman. How many people lose their lives to total accidents that could’ve been avoided with a simple act of kindness? Why do we assume vagrants are serial killers in disguise, piano wire at the ready to get us whenever we’re at our most vulnerable? I think about shark attack statistics, and plane crash statistics, and how we view these incredibly rare things as the most prevalent risks in our lives. [The amount of people that were murdered in the US in 2017 is roughly 2.6%](#) of the amount of people [who](#)

[died of the leading cause of death, heart disease, in 2017](#). Why are we so scared of these horrible, almost cinematic deaths to the point where we can't help another person get from point A to point B?

I'm not a sociologist, and even if I were it would take a long time to explain the ins and outs of risk perception and all the things that determine it, but my point is this: not everyone is out to kill you, so just help someone once in a while. I'm not saying that because of this particular life experience I now help every person I see walking around, because, like anyone else, my paranoia about getting murdered is occasionally piqued. However, if it's within your means, if you see someone walking alone, or sitting alone looking aimless, just ask them if they need a ride. Yes, maybe this thought process is just me projecting my own paranoia about getting murdered onto other people's lives, but does it ever hurt to have good intentions? Holding onto these baseless fears of how evil other people may be is selfish, and it inhibits us from helping one another.

Imagine you finally get a job, but it's three miles away from your house and you don't have a car. But you need the money. You get the job, you walk the three miles, you spend 8 hours working on your feet, and now it's time to clock out and go home. You just need to sit outside for 20 minutes to rest your feet, and then you're going to pull yourself up by those proverbial bootstraps and trek home. Imagine how much relief you would feel if a random person asked you if you needed a ride somewhere. On the reverse of this, the vast majority of people's first thought when put into a situation like this wouldn't be to seize the moment to begin their career of serial killing; when put into these terms, this fear sounds even more ridiculous, because most people would simply be grateful for this act of kindness. This is the kind of social awareness that more people need to harness; sure, helping people doesn't directly benefit your life, but what's the harm in doing good for the sake of doing good?

I don't know anything about that woman that we passed that night when I was 8 besides her being there one moment and gone the next. She's been somewhat venerated as a martyr in my subconscious, because her dying was one of those formative experiences in my life where I really realized how fragile the "balance" is, and how we all are a part of that balance. I feel guilty about learning from her bad luck, but I'm still glad I did. This experience showed me how stepping into someone else's shoes for a moment can impact your decision making and open you up to helping them, even if it's something as miniscule as a ride home.