

*First-Year Writing Seminar: The Podcast, Season 2*

Episode Transcript: Audrey Novinger on “Demonstrating Empathy and Respect for Difference”

[“Jupiter” music]

Intro and welcome: Hello, and welcome to *First Year Writing Seminar: The Podcast*. In this episode, writer and student Audrey Novinger will read her “This I Believe” essay where she argues the importance of empathy and respect in building relationships. In her essay, Novinger relays personal anecdotes to describe how empathy has improved her relationships with others. She talks about practicing open-mindedness to understand her friends’ backgrounds and explains how she has benefitted from receiving other people’s empathy. Please welcome our guest and her essay to the podcast.

AUDREY: One of my favorite things to do is make others smile. Since a young age I have enjoyed making cards for family, and I have a gift for providing my friends with emotional support. Like most people, I want what is best for humanity and feel compelled to make a difference during my lifetime (even if it is small). When I look out at the world, however, I see problems ranging from racism and climate change to sexism and poverty, and I often feel overwhelmed and powerless, especially as a young adult with limited time and resources.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I analyzed and reflected on existential questions and confronted my place in the world. Specifically, I thought about how I could use my strengths to address global issues. After learning about the American Association of College and University’s third dimension of global awareness (“demonstrating empathy and respect for difference”), I realized one of my biggest strengths is empathy. It dawned on me that many of society’s ills stem from a lack of compassion, understanding, and acceptance among groups and individuals.

While I may not have extensive wealth or power as a college freshman, I believe collective empathy has the power to remedy and prevent many of our world’s problems.

An example of empathy in action is when my family and I sought to educate ourselves on the use of pronouns. I have many friends who are transgender and use a variety of pronouns including (but not limited to) they/them, she/they, and she/he. Everyone in my immediate family identifies as cisgender and, especially for my parents, the idea that gender identity could be fluid or different than one’s biological sex was somewhat novel. After explaining some of my friends’ preferred pronouns, I observed how my family made an effort to correctly identify them in future scenarios. There were times when my family and I made mistakes, but we practiced accepting different people’s identities nevertheless. I personally practice deep listening when I meet people who challenge my ideas of gender, and I have found that this helps me better relate to them as people. Employing these traits associated with empathy has helped me find similarities among people with whom I differ. I have learned that regardless of identity, many of my friends enjoy the same foods, movies, and crafts as me. I am even beginning to question and better understand my own gender identity. Challenging ourselves to

listen and hold space for people's differences not only helps us eliminate internal biases, it creates a safer community for everyone to express themselves.

Another way I practice empathy is by supporting my friends and family during difficult times. Often, friends come to me for emotional support with issues I have never directly experienced. An example is financial insecurity. My family is not rich, and I grew up learning to care for my personal belongings to ensure they had long lives. I have not, however, been on food stamps or faced financial burdens related to my basic needs. Unfortunately, many of my friends do not have parents or relatives supporting them through college. Some of them work several jobs in addition to doing their homework and caring for relatives. It is difficult for me to give these friends advice or assistance when I have not shared their experiences and when I do not have the means to sponsor them monetarily. Nevertheless, I always offer to learn about their situation and help them look for resources that they may need. Listening is a powerful tool because it allows others to feel seen and understood. This form of empathy prompts us to ask questions to better support our friends rather than blaming them for their situation, thus reducing conflict.

Finally, I appreciate it when others extend empathy to me. As an individual with a chronic pain condition, I have several needs that aren't always apparent. My condition, erythromelalgia, is a rare neurological disorder that causes me to experience burning pain, redness, and swelling in my face and extremities. Extreme temperatures, physical activities, stressful situations, and spicy foods all trigger flare-ups. In high school, I explained my condition to friends, family, and teachers, yet I sometimes felt excluded from group projects and activities. Innocent people commented that my hands looked sunburned or laughed when my face turned red.

It is understandably difficult for anyone (including myself) to picture the exact experience of another person's body. However, you do not need to be in someone else's body to take them seriously and offer support. My college friends and professors don't know what erythromelalgia feels like, but they frequently send me texts and ask me how I am doing. I have also had many people ask whether the temperature is comfortable for me or if I need any accommodations. The fact that these people actively listen and care about my wellbeing makes me feel safe and included. The empathy I receive allows me to express my needs without fear of judgement or intrusive health questions.

All of the dimensions of global awareness are essential to creating fair, ethical societies. The third dimension, which deals with empathy and respect, is the most important because it provides the resources we need to help and understand others. Many people, including college students like myself, do not have extra money or time to give. We want to help the world, and we forget that empathy is a powerful tool we can use to connect with others and make room for our human differences. I think of empathy like a bridge between the first two dimensions of self-awareness and learning and the last dimension of collaboration. Without empathy, people ignore and mistreat each other both intentionally and unintentionally. We cannot effectively create change if we don't honor and include everyone at the table. Empathy is a skill we can all cultivate, and putting it into practice is the only way to move toward larger structural changes.

Thank you.

["Stokes" music]

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