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The People as One Malala

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Third Place: 2016 Common Reading Program Essay Contest

The People as One Malala

I was first attracted to this book by the colors on the outside cover. But as I cracked it open, there were even more within. I was instantly transported to the lush lands of Swat and bustling city of Mingora. I felt as if I saw firsthand the delicate swish of the scarves and smelled the sweetness that wafted from the cups as the morning tea mingled with milk. As I broke into the spine, I felt as if I broke away from the stigmas associated with the Islamic ways, and all from the eyes and music of Malala Yousafzai.

In Chapter 11, Malala inserts a famous poem by Martin Niemöller. This poem demonstrates the deadly danger silence can have – not just silence, but intentional passivity. Once one group is targeted, the surrounding peoples turn a blind eye. And like dominos, the silence catches. As “they” came for a new group, the repeated silent party of “I” habitually does not act. And when they come for the speaker, no one is left to come to his rescue. Niemöller uses the literary technique of anaphora with the repetition of “Then” as well as “and” to start each new line within this poem. This repetition is symbolic as it represents how monotonous this passive nature is. Instead of occurring once, it keeps on happening until there is no one left to speak out. This becomes a cycle of violence, inactivity, and injustice, and it just takes one word to stop the cycle from going on perpetually. There is also poetic justice occurring within the poem. The silent party has received their fate ironically by the end. Just as they didn’t speak out for others, no one was left to speak out for them.

This poem demonstrates the threat silence holds. Malala’s activism was so influential because it contrasted to the passivity of the people surrounding her. As the Taliban grew in power, many turned a blind eye and even conformed to stay out of their line of fire. When Maulana Fazlullah set up his courts and used the Quran as a means of justification for his horrific

actions, many stayed quiet because they were not the ones in danger. The majority of people succumbed to the oppression and abandoned everything they used to enjoy, now labeled harmful and un-Islamic. Even the government-funded armies bowed to their feet! But Malala still spoke up with her father, Ziauddin, as her shining example. Both of these figures represent the necessity of action in the face of challenge and conformity. Malala championed the rights of females all over to receive an education, deeming it a “basic right.” She spoke up against every Taliban action, in support of every group that was targeted, hoping that maybe some would be left to speak up with her before it was too late. Therefore, this poem is in direct contrast to Malala’s actions throughout her life but is a direct representation of the danger the world can face if this silence continues.

What separates the active from the passive is the ability to be brave despite the odds. To be brave despite knowing and witnessing what happens to those who don’t lay down their voice along with covering their eyes and turning away; to be brave even if it means putting your life in danger as well as all those who stand around you. This is the decision a key figure must face, whether or not they are willing to risk it all to stand up for what they believe in. If that figure believes, without a doubt, that their cause is worth more than their comfort, they will act. This epitomizes all that Malala has strived to do. When she got shot, she did not wish for revenge or retribution; instead she wished for the chance to speak her beliefs before the bullet had reached her.

There are always challenges that come with being the minority. Once one identifies as separate from the mass, they are leaving themselves vulnerable to scrutiny and discrimination. But without those willing to stand up, there will never be a world with peace. Another fellow activist, Martin Luther King Jr., remarked about the danger of silence and passivity. He stated that those who follow this path are “more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who [prefer] a

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negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” We must have a voice for those who choose to be mute to show that it is possible to change the world we are in. We all must speak. We all must be Malala.