Reflection on Dan Barry’s “The Boys in the Bunkhouse”

Abuse does not discriminate; it can happen to anyone and anywhere. Hell-like living conditions, harsh toil, limited rewards and constant abuse, these are what the Henry’s boys — men with intellectual disabilities — had to endure for thirty-five years working in a turkey plant in Atalissa, Iowa.

The book “The Boys In The Bunkhouse” by Dan Barry documents not only the darkest moments of hardship, but also the most beautiful memories the men had throughout the years. It not only inflicts many emotions, but it also reminds me of the encounters I had with the intellectually disabled in Saigon, Vietnam, and it certainly is eye opening. The book is a solid reminder that every human being deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.
As Dan Barry takes readers on a journey of the men toward salvation, Tommy Johnson constantly reminds me of a classmate back in fifth grade. His name was Nam Le and I was not nice to him because of his learning impairment. Inevitably, he was teased and made fun of. I would laugh along and experience zero remorse. Reading the book has made me realize that there could have been serious consequences: he could have committed suicide, etc., and Terry Senn’s experience with Alford Busby has confirmed that “You should not, ever, ever, ever, be mean to the clients... You should always treat them with dignity and respect” (Barry 144). Nam deserved someone who would stand up to fight for him like Sherri Brown did for her brother, Keith Brown. She was the reason Robert Canino took the case fighting for the men against Henry’s Turkey Service, which he won. Her persistence has helped and I have missed my chance being Nam’s Sherri Brown, and for that I am deeply ashamed.

Aside from suffering, the boys had such beautiful memories with the fellow Atalissans. I had one, too, with a guy from ninth grade: Hyun Lee, intellectually impaired. He was the only “special one” lucky enough to be included in a regular school. In a nutshell: he could learn, but slowly, and rumors had it he was weird. One time we were paired together for a group project and I wanted to make it right this time. It was awkward, but at one point I saw a Hyun whose true self was
just beautiful and caring. He, like everyone else, wanted a good person to be friends with. We talked and I later received a thank-you from his mom praising me with Hyun saying I was a nice person. Lesson learned that if you open up to him, treat him nicely, you are in his heart forever. It felt as if I was an Atalissan “... if you danced with one of them, you danced with all of them” (249). I got my chance to fix myself this time. I will not forget my encounter with Hyun.

Nam and Hyun are not unique cases and it goes without saying there are thousands more who are suffering from much more terrible abuse that no one knows about. During an interview with Mallary Tenore, Dan Barry was asked what he had learned during the reporting process and Barry said: “That Atalissa is not unique; that we need to see outside ourselves; that, in a way, we are all Atalissa” (Tenore, “Dan Barry explains...”).

Visiting an orphanage in Saigon that shelters orphans and the mentally disabled has confirmed just that for me. All the kids seemed happy when our group visited and there was not any reason to doubt it. It was not the Atalissa schoolhouse, but how do people know if they were mistreated when there are no visitors and what about the hidden ones where abuse reigns and have not been uncovered yet? Like Barry has said, we have to start looking around because there might be another Atalissa.
The “boys” of Atalissa were finally brought to salvation thanks to Sherri Brown, Robert Canino and many others. The book has not only made me look back and open my eyes to the current issues in my country, but also set a great role model of what one should do when someone is being abused. Furthermore, more people need to be informed and educated to uncover hidden abuse and most importantly, to not make the same mistakes that I did. All in all, dignity and respect are the most basic things a human being, despite any differences, deserves.

Works Cited


"Dan Barry Explains the Reporting behind His Latest Powerful Narrative."