

Reflections

The Power of Words

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Do you believe in time travel? I do. In my defense, this pertains to the travel in mind, and not the body. Nostalgic triggers have the power to take you down the memory lane, though only mentally and momentarily. A place that reminds you of the town you grew up in. A smell that reminds you of your mother's cooking. A song that reminds you of someone very close to your heart. And for that brief moment, you are reliving your past.

Today, I'll choose words to take you back in time when yours truly was only a teenager. Intentionally omitting the year, this refers to when I had just turned fifteen.

The Matriculation examination had just ended, with a long vacation ahead. I jotted down a long list of things I was planning to accomplish in this handful of months. Learn a new language, develop photography skills, and excel at painting strokes. These were the top goals in the exhaustive list that I wrote every year but never followed because procrastination took over without fail. But that particular year, procrastination was not the reason for leaving this list unfulfilled. It was sickness.

Honestly, I did not mind the fever. Bitter medicines and tasteless food were compensated by the love and attention I was getting. But soon, my entire body was embedded in countless itchy blisters. My face was studded by the rash and my eyes looked like fine horizontal slits created by my swollen eyelids. I had chickenpox.

The disease sounded naïve to me. Even though I was labeled as a severe case, I knew this was merely infection and would ultimately subside. All it needed was patience; the patience of not prodding and poking into the spots. I was strictly prohibited from scratching and letting the vesicles take their course. It was challenging but I complied.

Eventually, I started recuperating. The fever had left and the appetite had returned. But what remained, were these dark brown stubborn scabs from tip to toe. I was told that these will eventually fall off. So I held on to my patience.

Looking retrospectively, I realize that the disease itself was not as disturbing as the reactions I received from



the people around me. I recall an incident when some guests visited our house and gasped when they caught a glimpse of me. "What is wrong with her face?" I heard them ask my parents. I felt a twinge of embarrassment. I turned to the mirror to fathom what exactly was wrong with my face. They were right. I did look different, but in what way? I tried to understand from their point of view. Ugly? Scary? Pitiful? I wondered what came to their mind when they saw me. The patience had started to run thin, but I hung on. And this is when the real struggle began for me, especially as a female teenager.

In the next few days was my follow-up visit to the family doctor. This person was someone I looked up to as a child. A great personality on top of an extensive list of degrees comprising of almost every English alphabet, from every corner of the world. The waiting area of the clinic was as pleasant as his persona. The walls were beautified with vibrant paintings and the tables were garnished with new and old magazines that no one really read. The waiting time was getting longer and the room was getting fuller. Needless to say, my mother

was asked multiple times about my condition by other women awaiting their turns. They even suggested home remedies for me, to which she respectfully nodded. Finally, my name got called and we went in. I seated myself on a sturdy steel stool next to the doctor's chair, hoping to hear him remark how well I am recovering. Instead, he turned to me and said, "You look like a horror show!" I was in utter disbelief. I waited for two hours to hear this from the man I looked up to? Not knowing what to say, I displayed a brief, insincere smile. If that was meant to be a "joke", I was not in a state of mind to digest that sort of humor. I don't remember what was said and heard after that sentence. And it was at that moment, I let go of the patience that I was holding on to for so long.

When I reached home, I locked myself in the room and plucked on my scabs; one by one. Big and small, deep and shallow. And too many to count. Despite the pain, I kept going until all were removed with blood oozing from several points, especially my forehead, nose, and chin. I pressed a towel hard against my face till it stopped. When I was inquired about the scabs, I said they fell off naturally. At last, I had a scab-free face. But just like every crime leaves some evidence behind, I was left with a face full of scars. That sudden amalgamation of frustration and agitation cost me a life-long consequence, with no one to blame but myself.

This whole ordeal was a big blow to my self-esteem. I was a young girl going through a transition into adulthood. I was already wrapped in much insecurity regarding my appearance. The pox made the deal harder.

And the insensitive attitude of people was the last nail in the coffin. As if constant curiosity, never-ending questions, and uninvited home remedies were not enough, I had to deal with the persistent bullying by other girls. To avoid thoughtless comments and heartless behavior, I stopped going out. For two years, I did not step out of my house! Having no friends, I was a teen with a scarred social life. I was so lost in others' perspectives of myself, that I lost my own. As an adult, I feel dejected and regretful for the precious years I wasted due to self-deprecation generated by other people.

From that year on, every time I wrote down the list of things to accomplish, "Getting my scars fixed" was written on top of the list and in bold. Interestingly, I never got them fixed. I chose not to. My flaws taught me to look beyond appearances. How can something that teaches you such a beautiful lesson be horrific?

My scars may not be as deep, but the depth of the impact they have left on me is immeasurable. They may have disfigured my self-esteem for many years but shaped me into the person that I am today. It took me decades to truly understand the real reason behind these scars. It was not me, it was the words. My experience made me value the true power of words, especially in a profession as noble as healthcare.

The numbers of degrees under your name are as useless as the old magazines lying on your table if you blurt out venom to your patients. Choose your words wisely and don't be a "horror show" for other people.