

Essay: The Others besides Me
The Wind Permeating Through by Nadya Netcheva

There is a surprisingly cold breeze this morning in the city. It keeps ruffling people's hair and permeating through their thin clothes. Despite the early hour, the center of the town is bustling. As I push through the crowd of people, the wind decides to brush by me. Turning my face the other way in order to escape it, I notice the old Communist buildings peering at me from their dusty windows. Their outsides are covered by glitzy posters trying to sell the latest product or convince people to go to a band's concert. But behind all the layers, there is something brewing at the very core. And while the new tries to cover the old, it can only camouflage it so much before the weathered buildings rear their ugly heads.

Today, tolerance has become a word that is overexploited. People pepper their speech with it; they constantly demand it from others. But what does this word really mean? To tolerate is merely to endure. To me, that definition is skewed. When I hear the word tolerance, I picture a fly on a sticky and hot summer's day. It keeps landing on a lucky person as they try to enjoy a peaceful afternoon in the park. For a while, they try to get rid of it, but after it has landed on their bare legs time and time again, they just give up and let it be. They *tolerate* it and focus their attention on something else, like the delicious sandwich in their picnic basket. This exemplifies why tolerance is not enough – it does not truly tackle the issue; instead, it merely tries to go around it or ignore it. Something bigger, something more is needed. And that is acceptance.

Sadly, acceptance is a concept that does not seem to come easy to most people. In fact, it appears to be inherent for human beings to focus on and discriminate against anything that is different from what they are. This starts from an early age, as kids make fun of whatever seems to be odd and strange to them. It is often dismissed by people, who say that youngsters are like that and will eventually grow out of it. But in high school, nothing changes much, except that now the kids have become taller and are more cunning when discriminating against others. The notorious formation of cliques ensues. Teens stay in their own group, where they feel safe from judgment and from prying eyes. Those that are not in their clique are outsiders. They are better than the others, who simply do not matter. This behavior is again dismissed as insignificant. People claim that when the teens become adults, they will grow out of this. They will start accepting people; they will stop judging others so harshly before getting a chance to know them. And with their convictions and attempts to make the problem insignificant, the people do what was done to the old Communist buildings. Instead of tackling the issue, they tried to cover up what was, and still is, wrong with elaborative posters of the new.

Accompanied by the latest cold wind, I recently went to the movie theater to watch one of the many contemporary Bulgarian movies. One scene in particular that would normally

not have made much of an impression on me actually did. Why? *Because of the reaction of the audience.*

The scene merely showed a man talking on the phone. The shot then proceeded to encompass another man who was sitting next to him. The two men were then shown to be holding hands. Considering that the movie boasted plenty of raunchy sex scenes, the audience's reaction to something as innocent in comparison rather shocked me. First, there was an enormous roar of laughter. Then, there were the derogatory comments from some people behind me. Somebody even thought it would be a "laugh" if they began to boo.

Two potential problems grabbed my attention when this incident happened. Was the movie doing this on purpose in order to get a comic reaction, thinking that this was a great way to make a "joke"? The movie's subject matter was pretty heavy and it appeared as if every time the gay couple was shown on screen, they were deliberately portrayed in a comic light. If those were not the intentions of the movie, the reaction of the audience must be put to question. In this day and age, their blatant hatred and misunderstanding was quite, if not extremely, unsettling. Even more so, the majority of the people in the audience were not kids, nor were they teens. They were adults. And they had not "grown out of" laughing at things that are different from what they are.

Strolling home from the movie theater, the wind seemed to be have become even colder as I pondered about things such as acceptance. My thoughts were consumed by one of my ethics classes at school. A girl had given a presentation about discrimination towards gays. Her report focused on all the gay suicides that had happened around the world. She talked to our peers about the campaign "No Hate" and proceeded to play a series of videos about bullied gay teens who had committed suicide. The whole class felt shaken up after seeing the disheartening scenes. I recall the discussion we had as a class after that. The responses of my peers ranged from appall to despondence. Then the bell rang, indicating the end of the period and the looming beginning of the next class of the day.

It was as if the presentation had not occurred and had not evoked such emotions in them. Someone made the latest comment about how something that had happened was "so gay." A bunch of boys in the hallway were teasing another boy for acting like a homosexual. Everything they had learned from the presentation, all the emotions it had created in them, had evaporated. But where to? I decided to ask. And I got shut out with the latest excuse – it was merely a joke and I was being too sensitive.

But the fact is, in Bulgaria, especially in most schools, there is not enough exposure to different cultures, to different races, to people that are openly gay. So we cannot practice what we preach when we claim how we will take a stand against this issue. *We* can simply feel sorry and believe that the way these teens were bullied would never happen in our class and at our school. Because *we*, unlike the rest of them, are tolerant. *We* would defend someone being bullied and discriminated against. *We* would do that. Wouldn't we?

It is another windy morning in the bustling city. A young woman is sitting on a bench looking through a newspaper. Suddenly, the wind decides to show its power - it picks up

what she is reading and carries it away. The woman runs after it. When she finally reaches the newspaper, she sees that the wind has opened the paper to an article about a boy who killed himself because of being bullied for being gay. The woman reads with interest. She looks visibly upset. The woman then proceeds to turn the paper to the gossip column she was reading.

Across the street from her, a worker is putting up the latest posters advertising glamour and luxury on the old Communist buildings. The woman gets up to leave, as the wind is getting colder and colder. She leaves the newspaper on the bench and walks towards the traffic light, where she waits so that she can cross the street. While the woman stands there, she overhears the conversation of a group of teenagers making fun of someone for being gay. The woman turns around. It appears that she is about to say something to them when the traffic light turns green. She turns towards the old buildings and crosses the street.