

FOREVER A STRANGER

An Oration

by
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I saw happiness the other day. Standing at the window, feeling very alone, I caught sight of three small children playing in the yard. They were frolicking and tumbling and squealing with such delight that I envied them. I remembered back to the time when I was little. My parents used to take me for a walk in the evening. We'd watch the street lights, look into store windows, and then buy a bag of pumpkin seeds. Everything was simple then; I was walking with my parents. I was secure, and I was content.

I no longer have a feeling of security and belonging. Somewhere between the time when I was little and now, something has been lost, as it was lost for each of you. You know what that something is--you've been lonely, too.

My message today concerns loneliness, the search for contact, the fear of not belonging; yet, in reality, it isn't mine. The woman responsible for this oration isn't here. I can remember the day I first decided to enter this contest. I went home and I said, "Mama, what's the most important thing I could write about?" Her answer surprised me a little, but I liked it. Others with whom I spoke liked it too, and this speech began to take form. She said, "Tell them about loneliness. Tell them how people need each other."

Today I fulfill that wish--and ask you to consider with me the reasons behind our drawing away from each other. It is my opinion that man has stopped trying to make real contact with his fellow man. We have contented ourselves with a substitution for the warmth of human association. I speak of the role we play, the masquerade we assume in our dealings with other people. We are not ourselves, as ourselves. We seek only to be the persons others want us to be.

How many times have you heard a student say, "I had coffee with my teacher. He's so different than he is in class." That's true because he's two different people. Somewhere along the line someone has convinced that teacher that he must remain apart from his students. "Don't get emotionally entangled. That's not your job." So the teacher hides his real self under a mask of approved aloofness. It's not all one-sided either. The students assume their roles, too, when they come into class. "Look attentive, appear interested, laugh at his jokes." The actor speaking to the actor, but the real people behind the masks seldom make contact with each other.

Adults are afraid to give of themselves as children do so freely. A child has no use for false enthusiasm or a prescribed personality. A little boy, if he likes you, will tell you so. If he doesn't, you'll hear about that too. But regardless of the situation, you can always be sure that you are communicating with the real person.

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