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Taking Notes from Molly

 When I was little, bedtime was a special routine. I still remember my mom coming into my room along with by our old tabby cat, Toby, to read me any book I picked out for the night. I was always excited for my mom’s dramatic reading which brought the stories to life and dreaded when Toby started to bite my mom's ears because I knew that he was signaling the end of storytime. Most of the time, I chose the book *Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon* by Patty Lovell. I know that this book isn’t one of the famous bedtime stories like *Where the Wild Things Are* or any Dr. Seuss book, but it was famous in my house. Growing up, my mom had two very important lessons for me to learn and live by. The first one was that independence is the most important characteristic of a person because you only can rely on yourself to make things happen. And the second lesson was to be confident in yourself because the only opinion about you that matters is the one you hold. These lessons have become invaluable to me as I grow and meet people who grew up differently that I have.

 As I was preparing to leave for college, I thought of Molly Lou Melon often. I think I loved Molly Lou Melon’s story because she was both of those things I was taught to value, independent and confident, even in a time when she felt unsure about herself. Molly Lou Melon went out into the world proudly and unafraid to be completely herself which is something I try to do too. She took notes and lessons from her grandmother as I have learned from my mother.

 I am fortunate to have learned those values just from lessons my mom has told me. A lot of other people have to learn them through hard situations. The women in my family before me have had difficult lives filled with turmoil and trauma. When you are raised by parents who had to drag themselves from nothing and who give you everything, it’s only right to listen to their wisdom. I’m the lucky one, the one who can learn from other people’s lessons. And maybe because I was lucky and did not have to learn these things through hard times is the reason why sometimes I stumble in my beliefs.

 Before I went away to college, I was pretty set in my outlook on the world. I was confident in myself and knew what I believed in. But I had lived a sheltered life; I went to a Catholic elementary, middle, and high school where the majority of the time we were excited if we got one new classmate a year. My high school graduating class did not even have fifty people in it and now that same high school I graduated from three years ago is closed due to low enrollment. My schooling did not expose me to others who were different from me financially, religiously, and socially.

 Growing up, there was an idea that anyone who went to my school was rich, spoiled, and had a dad who was a doctor. While I can’t say I’m rich and had a dad who was a doctor, I can admit that I’m fortunate compared to a lot of other people. I remember my best friend at James Madison was introducing me to someone she knew from high school during our freshman year. The first thing he talked about was how much it annoyed him that this guy he knew got a brand-new Jeep for his birthday and he didn’t even have to pay for his gas. I started to blush and laugh because it seemed like he was describing my life. I knew he didn’t say it maliciously, but it was a reminder of how I was lucky. This conversation shook me. I was starting to see how my new environment was different from my home. In high school, my classmates were receiving Mercedes and Range Rovers for their sixteenth birthday, so my Jeep was average compared to that.

 As I started to view my new environment with fresh eyes, I noticed that most of my college friends' parents were divorced. I knew the statistics said 50% of marriages ended in divorce, but in my world growing up, divorce wasn’t prevalent. All of my childhood best friends’ parents were still together, and we didn’t think twice about it. The nuclear family unit of married parents, two kids, and a dog was the norm. I remember calling my mom one day while walking back to my dorm and telling her about my new friends. I told her how I thought it was weird that before all of my friends and classmates had parents that were still married, but the new people I was meeting didn't fit that mold. She asked me, “Well, how many of them are not together anymore?” I went down the list. One’s parents divorced when she was eight, another just divorced three years prior, another's parents were married but “hated each other” and the other's dad was on his second marriage.

 My beliefs about divorce came from a multitude of places. In religion class, we were taught that the Catholic church looks down on divorce. But even though I went through twelve years of Catholic school, I don’t fully believe everything the church says. I mean why would I? They taught us animals don’t go to heaven, which is something I can never agree with. Most of my beliefs about divorce came from my family. I was taught that marriages are something you have to work at. Life isn’t perfect and people don’t always get along but if you try hard enough, your marriage can last. I thought that a divorce was the worst thing that could happen to a family because it rips away the foundation. Now that I have met people who have been in different situations, I realized that sometimes divorce is the best option. I realized that not all divorces are messy and end horribly. I still believe that marriage is like all other things worthy in life, you have to work for it. But some marriages last and some don’t and that’s just life.

 Another difference between my new friends and I that made me realize my outlook was different than theirs was our schooling, all of them went to public school where I had not. They made fun of me because I was nervous to pick out my first day of school outfit. I remember sitting in the dining hall the night before classes started asking my newly found friends what they were going to wear. I asked if they were dressing up or going casual, dress or jeans for the first day. They just laughed at my nervousness and said, “I don’t know whatever I throw on tomorrow morning.” I’m not sure if they realized it or not, but my first day of freshman year in college was the first time I was ever allowed to pick out what I wanted to wear to school. In my mind, this outfit would set the tone for how people perceived me all year. I know that it seems trivial, but that outfit was a big deal to me. I was finally able to choose what I wanted to wear after twelve years of not being able to. The dress code at my elementary school was so strict that I could not even wear chipped nail polish on my fingers without being sent to the nurse’s office to take it off. I remember going to high school excited that I could get a manicure and not have to take it off as soon as Monday came. So, leaving my restricted life and going away to college four hours away from home was an adjustment to say the least.

 People say that how you grow up has a major influence on who you are as an adult. Sometimes I wonder if my sheltered childhood has shielded me from the realities of the world. I was blind in my ideas of divorce so what else do I hold stunted ideals on due to my background. When meeting new people, it is important to keep in mind that just like myself they all have intricate unique experiences that made them who they are. I can learn from those around me like how my college friends have taught me about their family structures. I don’t have to take lessons solely from my mother or books I’ve read.

 I don’t think who I was before I went to college is all that different from who I am today. I still try to keep the lessons my mother engrained in me so long ago alive. I am independent and confident like Molly Lou Melon but being those things doesn’t mean I am close minded. I realized that even minimal differences can create divergent mindsets. Divergent mindsets lead to different opinions and that is not a bad thing. Being open to other people’s viewpoints and lessons they have to share can help me evolve in my understanding of the world. I hope others can learn from me as well. Perhaps if people were more willing to accept that their way of thinking is not the “correct” way or the only way then our society would be less divisive.