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“Principle is Something that Only Has Value in the Performance of It.”

“I have a great friend in Syracuse who's very active against all forms of war, the training for and financing of war, and he went to jail for deliberately trespassing on Griffiss Air Force base in upstate New York. He had a couple of kids and my initial reaction was, you have a debt to them, and there is something irresponsible in your indulgence of your ideals at their expense. But as time went on, I realized what an extraordinary example he had given his children on how to actually live according to your principles” said Tobias Wolff (2014) in an interview. Everyone has their own opinions to right and wrong. Since we own have our own principles when evaluating a problem, it is hardly possible for one to say that there is a correct answer to a question. Tobias thought it was right for the father to stay with the children, and the father thought it was better for the kids by giving them real life experiences by growing up independently. It is the outcome of our performance determines whether a principle is valuable or not.

In “Smokers”, Tobias Wolff created an nameless narrator who was uncaring and envious. The narrator, Eugene and Talbot were all accepted by the same boarding school -- Choate. Eugene was talkative and nice to the narrator. However, the narrator only wanted to be friends with the rich kid Talbot who did not really care about the narrator or pretty much anything. Rules are quite strict at Choate with Big John monitoring all the students. “No teacher will ever bleed into every facet of your life like the teachers at your boarding school did” (Vize 2015). And this was a foreshadowing to the story that happened later.

At the climax of the story, Eugene was expelled from Choate because Big John smelled cigarette smoke and found numberless cigarette in his dorm. However, it was the narrator and Talbot who had committed the crime. The narrator just watched as Eugene cried and leaved. “I went to the mirror and combed my hair until I heard the door of the taxi bang shut” (Wolff 9). We can see from the narrator’s gesture that he did not feel good when Eugene leaved the school, and that he felt guilty and uncomfortable. He continuously combed his hair until Eugene leaved probably to find a way to relieve his anxiousness. Maybe he was also scared that Eugene would say something to the headmaster and Big John in the last minutes so that it would be him and Talbot standing in front of the school saying goodbye. From this we can see that the narrator only thought of himself and would not stand up for a boy that had been nice to him from the first day of school, even though it was his obligation to have done so. The narrator did not follow the principles of the school nor did he abide by morality. His actions show his own principles towards life. Though I do not respect his principles or point of views, I can understand them. And by illustrating my point of view to his actions, my standing point is my own morals.

However, in the story at Choate, the narrator did not tell the truth and fix the problem at the end. He found many reasons for himself. He once “almost went in and told him (the headmaster) everything” (Wolff 9), for another he thought, “the rules didn’t set forth different punishments according to the amount of smoke consumed”, and he “even considered sending an anonymous note, but I doubted if it would get much attention”. Though his actions seem tell us he was about to tell the truth to the headmaster, what he really meant was the opposite. He “almost” turned himself in, but he didn’t. The word “almost” implies conflicts between his mind and his action, which complicates his feelings. This shows that part of him thought that it was morally right to turn himself in, and the other part of him was fearful for the outcome, the later won at last. He stayed silence and watched as everything happened. He was afraid to be punished since he was considering whether smoking just a little bit would make a difference, and he gave up admitting the truth as soon as he found out he would be expelled as long as he smoked. This sentence deepens his moral conflicts, and we can gradually see his choice of principles now. I think he was also blaming “the rules” slightly by using it as the subject of the sentence. He also doubted whether an anonymous note would call on enough attention before even doing so. The word “consider” is a much lighter word than “wanted” or “almost”. It suggested that his early will to commit his mistake is drifting away, and that he did not think that the problem was as serious as before. These all showed that he did not want to take responsibility of what he had done because the consequence was too much for him. What he did not think about was this was also too much for the innocent Eugene, who got himself expelled just because he was trying to be nice to the narrator. Moreover, he considered the attention he might be able to get, and gave up when he found out that not “much” attention would be received. Though from his previous conflicts and thoughts we know that he would not send an anonymous note even if he would get much attention out of it, it still implies his wish of getting attentions from others. This is also in accordance with how badly the narrator wanted to make friends with Talbot and fit in. These all showed the narrator’s selfishness when it comes to Eugene, the boy he didn’t like from the beginning. Each time he found a reason for himself, it was a debate within his own morals and principles.

“Sometimes letting go of things that you aren’t inclined to let go of, that you may even have attached the name of principle to, to justify your fear of bending” (Wolff 2004). The narrator did not let go of his fear of the shame being expelled from school.

It is obvious that now that the narrator had picked his side, the side of Talbot and himself, as he always did. The narrator was fond of the fancy rich life that Talbot lead, and had always wanted to be friends with Talbot. He couldn’t believe that Talbot would chose Eugene over him. So when he knew that Talbot invited Eugene to stay with him for Christmas, he burst out of surprise, “Talbot? You’re going to be staying with Talbot?” (Wolff 5) He mentioned Talbot twice in this sentence, so it’s not hard to see that he was jealous of Eugene being able to stay with Talbot for Christmas. The narrator hoped to spend more time with Talbot badly. He envied Eugene since although in his mind he was cooler than Eugene, Talbot always thought of Eugene first.

Like Tobias Wolff mentioned in one of his many interviews, “Principle is something that only has value in the performance of it” (Wolff 2014). Our performance show our principles and attitudes toward something.

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