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At the Cost of Truth

Most of humanity places high value on social approval. We seek acceptance and admiration; in other words, we want others to like us, a quality that has significant and often unacknowledged influence on our personal decisions.

Not being exempt from this quality, I was painfully self-conscious when, at the beginning of a new semester of English Literature, I was seated at a table of unfamiliar classmates. These students were, in a school-girl sense, of high social standing: they were bright, socially competent, and generally well-liked, while I was of the class of laymen who seldom spoke even to their peers and would never have mustered the courage to converse with these elite had I not been thrown into their proximity involuntarily. Initially, I retained a vestige of self-respect while among them only by the knowledge that I could perform in the academic subject of the class with the same ease with which they climbed social ladders.

To some degree, I did not require this vestige: my classmates were vibrant, cheerful, and sought to include me in their group. This, which I considered as further evidence of their social prowess, served only to increase my awe of them. Unduly flattered whenever they spoke to me, I idolized their notice and the sense of inclusion it gave me. Thus, when our first essays were passed back and mine had received the highest score, the happiness I felt was not founded in academic achievement, but in that my table was impressed.

The following week, when we were to revise our essays, I occupied myself with alternative work while my classmates edited or restarted their papers.



Looking up from a physics problem, I found one of my classmates asking me to name the price he should pay me to write his essay for him. Pleased, I began to think that it would be easy to fashion sentences after his writing style to disguise my authorship. This act could solidify my belonging to this group by the heedless self-assurance it required and which they seemed to possess. Suddenly, ashamed of my own thoughts, I realized the implications of complying with my classmate: besides condoning bribery, it would be an act of dishonesty toward our teacher. Quietly, I responded that I would not accept a bribe, reflecting that I had perhaps lost the approval of the classmates I most admired.

To my surprise, rather than being shunned or mocked, I was treated with the same respectful amiability as before. Unknowingly, I had allowed my classmates' kindness and my admiration for them to foster a perceived ethical dilemma: a choice between the respect of newfound friends and personal moral integrity. I had learned that my first instinct was to reject the right in favor of being accepted by the popular. In fact, my choice to embrace honesty deepened my classmates' trust in me and led me to discover that self-respect founded in adherence to morality is more valuable than social approval at the cost of truth.