How The City Bus Taught Me to Listen

by Keisha Anderson

There is a surprising place where cultures mingle: where people from many walks of life can be found sitting side-by-side. A place where tired souls slump after work, excited souls bounce on their way somewhere special, and a place where stories can be found. Where is this intriguing place? The city bus. Almost every time I ride the bus, I have some kind of unique encounter or interaction. Sometimes it is filled with laughter, sometimes it is uncomfortable, but it nearly always leaves me with things to ponder.

 I did not always live in a city with a thriving transit system. In my hometown of Merritt BC, there was one tiny bus that ran three times a day: if that. You could say that this tiny bus with it's patchy schedule is kind of like my mindset at that point in time. Five years ago when I moved to Kamloops I was much less confident, and much more closed off to strangers than I am today. I was friendly to strangers, though I usually kept our interactions brief, and I don't believe I often really listened. The reality is that I was often nervous. I was a young woman living in a relatively new place, navigating with a visual impairment, and new to this whole living on my own thing. Also, though I fancied myself quite open-minded to diversity, I know I had my stereotypes, and that probably made me fairly untrusting.

 The thing about being a woman or a visible miniority is that you do, to some extent, need to practice self-awareness and common sense when out in public. You could be an easier target, and I often had strangers running up, sometimes quite alarmingly, to interact with me on the street because of the sight of my white cane.

 As my time at TRU progressed, I had a lot of opportunities for growth. In my Tourism Management degree, I've been able to take a lot of electives that had us discussing and thinking critically about environmental, social, and political issues in local and global contexts. I remember really starting to learn about people's contexts through my Anthropology course in my first year, and the background studies of characters in my acting classes. I can remember someone telling me how you know you're growing when ideas feel uncomfortable, but you try to understand and learn anyway. That, is what it was like for me not only in these classes, but in my bus interactions. I began to notice the strangers who craved connection: to just exchange words and relate with the person across the aisle from them. How very human that need is. I also began to really learn that everyone has a story worth hearing, and to feel interested in the contexts of the strangers going about their lives around me. These observations might have began while I was riding the train between the campus where I studied abroad in Australia and the weekend adventures I would take. There was the man who sat next to me who proudly spoke about his enormous record-collection. There was the tired mom with her tiny, chatty son traveling to visit family in Sydney. There was the other man who worked on a racecar track in Melbourne.

 There was also still times when the unwanted attention that my visual impairment attracts would have me feeling anxious to get onto transit since sometimes I found myself just wanting to blend in and rest in the anonymity of that. With this though, I began to develop a personal philosophy. It is that I would start seeing the challenges for the adventures they were, and the interactions for the stories and connection they could bring. I would try to see the people for their contexts, and in the spirit of empathy. On anxious days, I still find myself thinking these thoughts. Soon, I was taking in the stories of people I never would've taken time to listen to so much before. The homeless man waiting at the same bus stop as me, telling me about his mother. The lady walking by on the street with advice about grooming my guide dog. And I never would've taken the time to listen to the woman I met on the bus a couple of weeks ago, who told me about some of her unusual beliefs and about her even more unusual life. She was the kind of person I might've written off as a bit odd and maybe not fully listened too when I was younger. This night though, on my way home from school, I listened with wrapt attention and an open heart to the wisdom and stories this woman had to tell. I asked her questions, we laughed together, we wondered together. I could feel a connection building. I took her hand to introduce myself at about the middle of our conversation, noting the roughness of that hand and knowing her daily toils of cleaning houses for a living. She said to me that she believed that we are on this Earth either to be teachers or stchdents. That we hold both roles at different times. I think that that piece of wisdom encapsulates my lesson in becoming a better student to all the diverse teachers that exist in this world.

 As a future tourism and hospitality professional, people are at the forefront of all that I will be doing in my work. It is the experiences of people that we cater to as an industry. To be able to listen and connect with these people that I hope to provide experiences for is critical. I have learned that listening and engaging in the spirit of empathy is the best way to give people the service and connection that they need and want.