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I Am Paper

BETTYE GOLDSTEIN

I am paper, made from rags and the pulp of trees. Without me there would be no civilized world, for I hold in my possession all human knowledge. All people, all times, all places know me. The poor grind me underfoot and the rich bow before me. Young and old respect me. Nothing is permanent until it is recorded on me, but I am the most permanent thing on earth, for I exist in an endless cycle of destruction and rebirth. I could easily be permanently destroyed, but everything else would be destroyed with me. I am paper, concrete and intangible, unique and indivisible, myriad and unchanging, existing in countless paradoxical forms.

I exist in luxury and in poverty. Coarse, brown, I wrap food and humble packages; I know the arms of housewives and freckle-faced delivery boys. I enter the kitchens of rich and poor. I cover walls and wipe food from the lips of eaters. In thin, soft tissues, I caress silks and satins and velvets, exotic flowers, beautiful jewels, purchases bought with toil and misery, presents offered with joy and generosity, objects valued at fifty cents and objects worth five thousand dollars. I give added glamour to beautiful things. The women of the world associate my rustle with the pleasure of new possessions. The men of the world associate my rustle with the bills they will have to pay for new possessions. My inevitable destination is the wastebasket.

I am with man from his birth until his death. His birth is recorded on me. In rough tablet form I endure the first aimless scrawling of his babyhood, his labored writing as a tortured schoolboy. As the years pass by, I feel his hot, moist hand grow more skilful and soon I offer a smoother surface for the quick movements of his pen. I help him learn to spell and to figure. On me he first creates thought. I stay by him throughout his education. I accompany him into the business world, where file cabinets are built to house me; typewriters to pound on me. What he wishes to remember, he jots down on me. He uses me to communicate with his business associates, to bargain and contract, to hire and fire. I bear his intimate talk to his wife and his children. I make and break friendships, arrange rendezvous, carry sad news and glad news, tragedy and happiness. Before he leaves life he uses me to record how he wishes his earthly possessions to be divided. And I bear the certificate of his death.

I am the carrier of the news, the molder of public opinion. Hundreds of millions of people know the touch of my coarse black-and-whiteness. Kings and beggars heed what I bring. Small boys herald my approach on the streets of towns. Men digest me with their breakfasts. I am as important to them as the air they breathe, for I tell them what is going on in the world. I form their thoughts for them. Through me one-half of the world knows how the other half lives. I bring life condensed.

I know the working of man’s mind—the ecstatic inspiration of his poetry, his great philosophic thoughts, his labored scientific research, his pure reasoning, his pondering, his genius. I am history, science, litera-
ture, music, art. All the facts and
fancies of all time are contained in
me. I am the sheets musicians must
study before they make music.
Through a century of time I bring
the music of Beethoven and Wagner.
Composers and singers need me; Ben-
ny Goodman and Arturo Toscannini. I
bring beauty to lives without beauty.
The common people can see on me
the masterpieces of Rembrandt and
Titian and Leonardo da Vinci. To
those who know not the ocean, I
bring the ocean. To those who live
on Main Street, I bring the world. I
bring romance and adventure and
great emotions and transcendent
beauty. I am the bearer of the
thoughts of man to his fellow-men
and to posterity. Without me human
knowledge would only be as great as
one man’s memory.
I am progress; I have made mod-
ern civilization what it is. The key
to the difference between the earliest
barbarians and their modern off-
spring lies in me, in all the words I
contain, in all the discoveries record-
ed on me through the ages. If a great
fire destroyed every vestige of me,
all human knowledge would be irre-
covably lost. Within a few genera-
tions the world would again be in-
habited by barbarians. And so, be-
cause my destruction would bring
chaos, I am the most important thing
in the world. I rule the world.
I am paper made from rags and
the pulp of trees. I am paper, con-
crete and intangible, unique and in-
divisible, myriad and unchanging,
existing as long as the world exists.

More excerpts from seniors’ autobiographies

Life As I See It

A few months before Nancy’s thirteenth birthday, her beloved
grandfather died. She didn’t seem to realize he was gone for many weeks.
Then one night she woke up out of a sound sleep and cried harder and
longer than she had ever cried before. Grandmother heard her and came
into the room. She sat by Nancy’s bed and, after a few minutes of
thoughtful silence, told the sobbing child this story: “Nancy, your grand-
father is not gone forever. You must be an extra good child now because
he knows everything you do every minute of the day. Three weeks ago he
decided that it would be best to submit himself to God’s care, so he stepped
out of his tired old body and entered a new world, a world where every-
thing is light and sunny, where there are no cares or worries. We will miss
him, but remember, child, some day we, too, will grow weary of these
bodies and go far away. Grandfather will be there to meet us.”

It was a beautiful thought and the child always remembered it.
She does not think of death as coldness or stiffness—but as a time when
we simply step out of our material bodies and join our spiritual bodies.
Cemeteries are places where the tired, worn-out material bodies are laid,
and way up in the sky in eternity go the spiritual souls of people.
—Nancy Lusk, “My Story.”

I still have idle and foolish dreams. Because I tingle all over when
I hear a violinist play gypsy melodies, I should like to join a band of
gypsies for one month. I want to learn their customs and hear their wild,
care-free music. As a sharp contrast to this smoke-dream, I should like to