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## Behind the Beautiful Forevers Connection Paper 2

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Brook Tracy

*Behind the Beautiful Forever's* Connection Paper 2

The theme of the worth of life is present throughout the book *Behind the Beautiful Forever's*, by Katherine Boo, especially in the chapter “Something Shining”. A young boy living in the poor slum of Annawadi, named Sunil, comes to the realization that every life is worth something and matters, especially to the person whose life it is. Throughout the passage, many ideas are brought up, including the idea of who decides if a life is meaningful; that even a “bad” life is valid; and that the caste system ingrains the feeling of being worthless upon those deemed an untouchable, members of the Dalit class (Boo 199).

Boo writes:

“Even the person who lives like a dog still has a kind of life. Once my mother was beating me, and that thought came to me. I said, ‘If what is happening now, you beating me, is to keep happening for the rest of my life, it would be a bad life, but it would be a life, too.’...Sunil thought that he, too, had a life. A bad life, certainly-the kind that could be ended as Kalu’s had been and then forgotten, because it made no difference to the people who lived in the overcity. But something he’d come to realize on the roof, leaning out, thinking about what would happen if he leaned too far, was that a boy’s life could still matter to himself” (Boo 199).

In the first line, Sunil says “Even the person who lives like a dog still has a kind of life”(Boo 199). This brings up the idea that every life has value even if that value is not always clear. Many of the citizens in Annawadi realize that they are at the bottom of the caste system and feel that their lives are not meaningful. This breakthrough moment that Sunil has is unique

as he is one of the few Annawadi citizens that has realized his self-worth. Even though he is an untouchable, and will not be able to work his way up in society, he knows that his life has meaning because that meaning comes from within himself.

Sunil also compares his life to that of a dog (Boo 199). This is dehumanizing and displays that Sunil knows his place in society, but he is able to recognize that even a dog is alive, and with life comes value. Sunil can see that an animal that lives on the street, and has even less rights than himself, deserves its life, and the value that its life holds, to be recognized. This also plays into the idea of “a caste within the caste” system (Boo 199). Even though Sunil is the lowest ranked member of society, he is still a step above a dog. Although Sunil knows that he is above a dog, he does not let this position of power let him think that his life is any more valid than that of a dog. Unlike the many members of society that are above him, Sunil is able to see that he is ranked higher than a dog, but this does not cause him to devalue the life of the dog. Every life is worth something regardless of the ideas and opinions of others, no matter what societal rank they hold. The worthiness of one’s life comes from oneself.

During Sunil’s moment of realization, he makes it clear that he knows that his life is not a good one, yet it does not take away his value of his own life. He says :“If what is happening now, you beating me, is to keep happening for the rest of my life, it would be a bad life, but it would be a life, too” (Boo 199). Sunil lives in extreme poverty, has to fight for his life every day, and is regularly beaten. He is surrounded by death, often the death of his peers, and he is looked down upon by all of society above him. This brings up an interesting point: just because a life is “bad”, it does not mean that it is not important. Sunil is proof to the readers that a bad life

is still a worthy one that has value. No one can justifiably say that someone else's life has no worth or purpose, regardless of the quality of that life.

As the passage continues, Sunil says, "A bad life, certainly-the kind that could be ended as Kalu's had been and then forgotten, because it made no difference to the people who lived in the overcity"(Boo 199). The idea that his life and the lives of those around him do not matter because they are not significant to the wealthy citizens of Mumbai is an idea that is shown throughout the book. The people of Annawadi are the lowest ranked members of society and they are continually reminded of this (Boo 199). The caste system works to keep the highest members of society in positions of power. This moment where Sunil explicitly says that he knows his life could be easily forgotten shows how he has been taught that he is less important than the wealthy members of society. However Sunil is unique in realizing that he should not be treated in this way because his life is valid. Being able to recognize how he should be treated, shows that he knows the value of his life. All of the citizens of Annawadi know that they are ranked at the bottom, but few are able to keep from internalizing this dehumanizing rank. The idea of being a less important human has an obvious negative effect on the members of the untouchable caste, causing many members of the community to commit suicide. Each of those who took their own lives — whether it be Sanjay who killed himself out of fear of the police (Boo 172), or Meena who ended her life as a way to have control (Boo 188),— the overlying idea that they are less human than those of wealth played a role in their fatal decision (Boo 199). This message that they have internalized influenced the way they saw themselves and their lives. Continually being told that they are lesser beings caused them to lose the ability to see the value

that their lives hold. Sunil on the other hand was able to keep hope despite these circumstances and avoid internalizing the idea of being worthless.

As a citizen of the United States where this caste system does not exist, it may seem hard to relate to the ideas of this passage, but the idea of feeling less than another person is a common one. In the United States, there is no system of law that organizes society into specific classes in which people cannot escape, but that does not mean that some individuals are seen as less important than others. Many people can relate to the feeling of being less important than the popular kids at school, or those with outstanding intelligence, or conventional beauty standards. In American society, celebrities are treated as gods, leaving many non-celebrities feeling unimportant. The feeling of being less than others, for whatever reason, is deeply ingrained in American society, even if this ranking is not law. The realization that Sunil came to that every life has worth and that worth comes from within oneself can be a lesson to all. He can feel that his life is valuable in the most difficult scenarios, so anyone can find their self-worth and remind themselves that their life is valuable, because it is a life after all.

Works Cited

Boo, Katherine. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014.