

ASK A STRANGER

A story by Helice Bridges

Jack Canfield, *The Aladdin Factor*, (New York NY: Berkeley Books, 1995), pp. 237-239

We awaken in others the same attitude of mind we hold toward them. —Elbert Hubbard

I sat quietly, relaxing and breathing in the rays of the sun on a park bench two hundred feet above the Pacific Ocean. Sitting on a bench only fifty feet away was an older woman. She was frail and bent over from the weight of her shoulders. She had a large, witchlike beak nose, but despite her appearance, something about this woman drew me to her.

I walked over to where she was seated and sat down beside her, keeping my focus on the ocean. For a very long time I didn't say anything, and—then, without thinking, I spontaneously turned to this old woman and quietly asked, "If we never saw each other again, what would you really like me to know about who you really are?"

There was no answer—silence lingered in the air for what seemed an hour. Suddenly, tears rolled down her cheeks. "No one has ever cared that much about me," she sobbed.

I placed my hand lightly on her shoulder to comfort her and said, "I care."

"Ever since I was a little girl," she whimpered, "I have always wanted to be a ballerina, but my mother told me I was too clumsy. I was never given the chance to learn how to dance. But I have a secret. I've never told anyone this before. You see, ever since I've been four years old, I've been practicing my dance. I used to hide in my closet and practice so my mother wouldn't see me."

"Isabel, show me your dance," I urged.

Isabel looked at me in surprise. "You want to see me dance?"

"Absolutely," I insisted.

That was when I saw the miracle. Isabel's face seemed to shed years of pain. Her face softened, she sat up proud, head erect, shoulders back. She stood up, turned and faced me. It was as if the world stood still for her. This was the stage that she had been waiting for all of her life. I could see it in her face. She wanted to dance for me.

Isabel stood before me, took a deep breath and relaxed. Only moments before, her brown eyes were sunk deep into her skull; now they were bright and alive. Elegantly she pointed her toe forward while gracefully stretching out her hand. The move was masterful. She took my breath away. I was witnessing a miracle before my eyes. One minute, she was an ugly, old, miserable woman; the next, she was Cinderella wearing a glass slipper.

Her dance took a lifetime to learn and only a moment to do. But she had fulfilled her life's dream. She had danced!

Isabel began to laugh and cry almost at the same time. In my presence, she had become human again. We continued to speak about math and science and all the things that Isabel loved. I listened and hung on her every word. "You are a very great dancer, Isabel. I am proud to have met you." And I really meant it.

I never saw Isabel after that. I still remember smiling and waving good-bye to her. Since that day, I have taken the time to stop and acknowledge people everywhere. I have asked them what their dreams are. I have rooted them on. Each time I do this, I witness a miracle.