

***Think of the relationships that will be created as you enter this new chapter. How do you plan to show your love for your neighbor through each of these specifically? Think about the following: professors, classmates, roommate, etc.***

Spending Christmas in the hospital isn't as bad as it sounds. A tiny, potted tree bedecked with battery-powered lights, religiously sanitizing your hands between presents and touches...when your younger brother is hooked up to more machines than you can count and you can see every beat of his reconstructed heart on the monitor, you learn to celebrate the little successes in life. Ethan, now 11 and recently recovered from his third open-heart surgery, was born with 22Q and a myriad of related complications. His birth pulled me through the grief of losing my sister Anna months before, at just 80 days old, to an unrelated congenital heart defect — grief that felt like it would gnaw through me before I could push past it. Ethan's journey helped to teach me how to rise from the ashes, to do everything I could to be helpful, self-sufficient, and understanding when he needed more than I did.

Ethan couldn't come home — for nearly four months after he was born — until he had surgery to place a tracheostomy tube and a feeding tube. When your brother is being looked at because he's hooked up to oxygen in his stroller, you start seeing the world very differently. When you're close to someone with special needs, you notice someone struggling to learn something, you don't dismiss them or tell them just to figure it out. You have to find new ways to explain it, to change the context and try to remember that their brain doesn't work exactly like yours — helping Ethan with pandemic schoolwork made that abundantly clear. These lessons require you to be adaptable, compassionate, and willing to see other perspectives. You realize how other people are quick to dismiss someone who they don't understand right away. You recognize that being considerate is a skill that too few hone.

When you spend time in the hospital, it becomes very clear who is underappreciated even as a young kid. When you say, "Hello" to someone cleaning the room I guarantee you'll have a different impression of that person after talking to them for 5 minutes. They're more than their job. They're bigger than their task. Most likely, they are more like you than you would have ever imagined. In Matthew 25:40 Jesus says, "The king will answer, "Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me. (CEV)" I know this introduction has been a long way to get to the prompt question but this is the journey that has led to my answer: Treat others as you would want to be treated.

For your professor this might mean showing up on time, being organized and prepared. It means treating the Teaching Assistant as someone who deserves your respect and who is probably working very hard to do their very best. It could be something you'll never know — a professor's pride in something you accomplish long after you leave their classroom.

I read an article that said research showed that people think they will regret talking to a stranger on a train or airplane but that the opposite is often true. Sometimes conversations go much deeper and are more fulfilling than expected. This could be more accurate for a classmate! Ask a classmate who looks lonely to study with you for a test. Just ask them, "How are you doing?" Even "just a smile" can speak volumes especially when everyone is trying to find their place at a new school, away from home, maybe for the first time.

You'll probably learn pretty quickly if your roommate would appreciate a cupcake or some other "thing" you might give them. A more meaningful gesture would be to try and be neater if that is important to them. Being there for them when they're having a bad day or just listening even if you really aren't interested in the person they're talking about. Not being judgmental and making your room a safe place.

Professor. Classmate. Roommate. Important? Yes, but are these "the least of them?" Always be kind to the custodian – clean up after yourself, learn their names, talk to them – treat them with dignity. Don't write someone off who works in a low paying job. Also, to be clear, not everyone needs "help" but if you treat all people like people – that's rarely going to be wrong. (It **is** important to remember that everyone's different, too!)

Showing your neighbor love might simply be giving someone the benefit of the doubt. Being patient walking behind someone "in your way" when you're late to class. (I could have left early.) Letting someone go around you who is honking. (They're on their way to the hospital and someone needs them.) At summer camp they summarized it: Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself.

Maybe we'll be that person who makes a difference to someone else at just the right moment. One person can, without a doubt, change you fundamentally. My expectations for what a 'happy life' is have been irreversibly changed, and Ethan has taught me that perseverance will allow you to get through that which seems impossible. Maybe sharing my experience would help someone else cope with a challenge they are facing. I've experienced plenty of obstacles — from losing a sister to my brother's unique cognitive and medical needs — but all that I've faced has made me a more compassionate, understanding, and well-rounded person. Ultimately, when you're showing kindness to someone else, you might benefit from it equally as much.