

The Value of Faith  
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In his short story “The Rich Brother” Tobias Wolff delineates a tale of two brothers who have many external differences resulting from their differences in faith. The two brothers are Pete and Donald, and they live in present day California, where their lives are much different from each other. Pete owns a Century 21 franchise and has a wife and two children, and many highly regarded material possessions of which he is very proud. Donald is Pete’s younger brother, and he is single and has difficulty maintaining a steady job, and so most of the time he relies on his older brother Pete for support. Pete dwells on his external prosperity and has no involvement with faith, while Donald devotes his life to faith, and promotes the importance of faith to those who oppose or are indifferent to faith. In “The Rich Brother” the text’s theme accentuates the importance of a foundation of faith, and how true inner security cannot be feasibly attained without a basis of faith.

In the story, both Pete and Donald have appearances that are incongruous with their inner security, and these appearances can be deceiving to the reader. Pete is “stout and hearty and at home in the world” (613), and Donald is described as “bony, grave” (613), and he is constantly in debt to Pete because of the support with which Pete provides him. While at first glance the reader may believe that Pete is the successful brother, and he is a secure individual, as the story progresses this assumption is proved to be false. This is exemplified in Pete’s instability and his dependence upon circumstances in order to ensure his security and satisfaction. This can be seen when Pete and Donald are driving together and Donald asks Pete what he dreams about, and Pete replies, “Sex and money. Mostly money. A nightmare is when I dream I don’t have either” (617). This statement shows the reader that Pete is very much concerned about his material possessions, and his inner security is fully contingent upon them, because he is not involved with

an organized religion, or faith of any kind. Conversely, Donald appears to be weak as he is described as “bony, grave,” yet he is fully content and truly secure because his basis for living is faith, not external conditions, which can often be ephemeral or transitory. The text describes Donald as “obsessed with the fate of his soul” (614); he is not obsessed with his material possessions or external success like Pete, which makes Donald the truly secure individual.

Additionally, Pete’s absence of faith results in his ignorance of anything that lies outside the realm of external prosperity. Pete’s ignorance is exemplified when the text describes Donald’s involvement with several organized religions, including Hinduism and a Pentecostal Church, and how Pete “couldn’t make sense of it” (614). Not only does this description reveal to the reader that Pete doesn’t understand his younger brother’s involvement in organized religion, but it also hints to the reader that Pete cannot make sense of faith itself. Pete’s ignorance is also exemplified when Pete and Donald are driving in the car with Webster, the man whom they met at Denny’s and are giving a ride to. Webster and Pete are discussing Webster’s trip to Peru, and the text describes Pete as having “a voice low and innocent of knowingness” (620). This description of Pete is a direct message to the reader that because of his lack of faith, Pete is ignorant to many things not involved with his own material success.

Moreover, throughout the story Pete’s ignorance of faith and inability to attain security is symbolized by his blindness, and inability to see certain objects. While they are driving in Pete’s car, Donald asks Pete if he ever dreams about him, and Pete replies that he has dreamed about his younger brother. Pete describes the dream, and tells how there was something wrong with him, and how Donald was taking care of him. However, Pete failed to “tell Donald that in his dream he was blind” (618). Thus, Pete’s blindness symbolizes his weakness which results from his absence of faith. Also, when Pete meets Donald at an auto mechanic shop to give him a ride

home, Donald is wearing a shirt and Pete cannot read the letters on the shirt. Pete is curious about the shirt, so he asks Donald what the shirt says and Donald replies, “Try God” (615). The “Try God” shirt that Donald is wearing represents Donald’s faith, and Pete’s inability to read the shirt is an obvious sign to the reader that Pete has no knowledge or understanding of faith.

Furthermore, Pete’s lack of inner security resulting from his absence of faith is reflected in his proclivity to lie and hide the truth. Pete is generally a deceptive person; particularly his appearance as a successful businessman, and his inability to be truthful on a consistent basis. This can be seen when Pete goes to pick up Donald, and he asks Donald why he was leaving his “family of faith” (614). Donald replied that he knew the members of the “family of faith” had written a letter to Pete, but Pete denied such an event taking place. Also, Pete lies about trying to kill his brother when the two men were young boys. Donald asks Pete if he remembers punching him where he had had an operation when they were younger, and at first Pete completely denies the accusation. But after a brief argument, Pete then replies “It might have happened once or twice. Kids do those things” (618). This habit of hiding the truth is one that results from Pete’s absence of a solid foundation within himself, which is provided by faith.

Conversely, Donald’s inner goodness and his magnanimous nature come as a result of his faith, and essentially his inner security. Donald’s altruistic nature is shown when the text describes that “Donald couldn’t content himself with worrying about his own soul. He had to worry about everyone else’s” (614). This description conveys to the reader that Donald is more concerned about other people’s well-being than he is about his own well-being because he has already come to realize the importance of faith and spreading goodness to others. As a result of his faith, Donald is not concerned with his own material success or possessions.

Additionally, Donald's generosity is exemplified when Donald is living with the "family of faith" and it is his turn to buy groceries for the house. He takes the money the "family of faith" gives him and he goes to buy the groceries, but he returns with no groceries. On his way back to the house, he passes a few poor immigrant workers and he decides to give the groceries to them because they have families whom they are not able to sufficiently feed. Donald takes the liberty of giving away someone else's food which was bought with someone else's money, and some people may argue that it was ill-advised for him to do so. These people may also argue that he is an ignoramus and he just gives away possessions that are not his because of his stupidity, but Donald's generosity with other people's possessions is not a result of stupidity. Donald is such an altruistic person that when he saw the poor immigrant workers who needed the groceries much more than he did, he was so focused on helping other human beings and aiding to their well-being that he failed to consider the consequences of giving away someone else's possessions. It is almost as if Donald is so enthralled with helping others and ensuring the well-being of those in need that he is not capable of considering the possible consequences of helping these individuals.

In addition to his magnanimity and inner goodness, Donald also establishes strength and security from his foundation based on faith. When he was a young boy, Donald had an operation on his stomach and had stitches on his abdominal area where the operation took place. Whenever Pete had the chance, he would punch his younger brother where the stitches were on his stomach to try to kill him. Donald never retaliated against his brother; he had the strength to refrain from engaging in the violence brought forth by his weaker older brother. As author Leo Buscaglia once wrote, "Only the weak are cruel, gentleness can only be expected from the strong." Donald's strength is also observable in his frugal lifestyle, and his indifference to

external circumstances. This lifestyle and indifference to external circumstances signifies that Donald has established inner strength as a direct result of his indomitable foundation of faith.

Furthermore, because of his unwavering faith Donald is portrayed throughout the story as a superior being in regards to his brother Pete, and to others who lack faith. When Pete tries to convince Donald to stay at his house because of Donald's inability to provide for himself financially, Donald replies "Just until I get my feet back on the ground" (614). This statement implies that Donald is superior in the sense that his feet are not on the same ground as Pete, or others who lack faith. Also, prior to the final conclusion of the story Donald and Pete are outside of Pete's car alongside the road, and Donald is standing above Pete while Pete is on one knee in front of Donald. This is an explicit hint to the reader that Donald is indeed higher than Pete, and superior to him because of his immense faith.

As a result of their differing stances on faith, Pete and Donald have nearly entirely different characteristics and sources of security. Pete is dependent on circumstances and having faith is not one of his priorities, which is the reason for his lack of true inner security. Moreover, Pete is precisely the kind of person Oscar Wilde was referring to when he said, "A cynic is a person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." Pete knows the price of faith, and the restrictions it may seem to place on people, but he is not aware of the value of having faith. However, Donald is fully aware of the value of having faith, and he is cognizant of the fact that true inner security results from a person's impenetrable inner core based on faith.

In "The Rich Brother" the text reveals the theme to the reader which emphasizes the importance of faith, and its direct correlation to a person's true inner security. The text provides the reader with the juxtaposition of Pete and Donald, and how their outward appearances are not

congruous with their inner security. Pete and Donald take different positions when it comes to faith, and the text shows this through symbolism and subtle hints to the reader. Pete's lack of faith results in his ignorance, his deceptive nature, his lack of security, and his selfish attitude; while Donald's unwavering faith results in his strength, his generosity, and his abundant inner security. Throughout "The Rich Brother" the significance of faith is displayed, and although one may achieve external prosperity without having faith, faith is essential for the maintenance of true inner security for those who wish to make the most of their human experience.