

The Mirror

Anecdote by Robert Fulghum

On a trip to Greece, Robert Fulghum attends a seminar given by Alexander Papaderos, a philosopher, teacher, and politician. Dr. Papaderos runs an institute dedicated to human understanding and peace, and especially to healing the rift between Cretans and Germans caused by World War II. The institute is located on the island of Crete, where during the war the populations of whole villages on the island were lined up and shot by Nazi troops.

At the end of the war, Papaderos came to believe that Germans and Cretans had much to learn from one another. If they could forgive each other and construct a creative relationship, then any people could. Papaderos succeeded and the institute became a reality.

During a session at the institute, Fulghum asks a profound question.

“Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?”

The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go.

Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was.

“I will answer your question.”

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter.

And what he said went like this:

“When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

“I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one, and, by scratching it on a stone,

I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine—in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

“I kept the little mirror, and, as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light—truth, understanding, knowledge—is there, and it will shine in many dark places only if I reflect it.

“I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world—into the black places in the hearts of men—and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”

1. Exploring Meaning

- a. Who is Dr. Papaderos?
- b. Do you think Dr. Papaderos answers the question, “What is the meaning of life?” Explain.
- c. What is Robert Fulghum’s attitude toward Dr. Papaderos? How can you tell? Discuss your views with a partner.
- d. List some concepts and world events that could be represented by the following phrases: “dark places of this world” and “black places in the hearts of men.” In another column, list people or agencies who are helping to shed light in these dark places.
- e. What is the anecdote’s message?

2. Media *Representing the Selection* Reread the anecdote in order to find phrases or sentences that contain the main meaning or message in the selection. Find photos or illustrations to represent these sentences. Using these words and images, create an essay or presentation to represent your interpretation of the anecdote. Present your work to the class and explain your choice of words and images.

3. Writing *An Anecdote* For Robert Fulghum, Dr. Papaderos is a *mentor*, the one wise person who can answer his most important questions. Who is your mentor? What is the most memorable and insightful answer that you’ve ever received to a question that was really important to you? What was the question? What was the answer you received? Why do you still remember it? Recount this event in a short anecdote.