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Mer•cy (ˈmɜrsē), v., the act of putting on an oxygen mask

“If cabin pressure should change, panels above your seat will open revealing oxygen masks; reach up and pull a mask towards you. Place it over your nose and mouth, and secure with the elastic band. The plastic bag will not fully inflate, although oxygen is flowing. Secure your own mask first before helping others.”

Secure your own mask first before helping others.

The first time I heard this phrase was as an overly excited elementary school student on a plane ride to Korea. Eager not to miss a single word that exited the flight attendant’s mouth, I listened carefully to her instructions, finding each exit in the front, sides, and back of the plane, locating the two bathrooms, and quickly testing the tightening and loosening of my seatbelt. But when she said this sentence I stopped. How could she say something so insensitive? Having lived all of my 7 years of life in Sunday School and in a Catholic elementary school, I had been taught to serve others. “Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, wash others’ feet as Jesus washed those of his disciples.” Were these not applicable on planes? I quickly asked my parents why this was and learned about the need to, well, breathe if you want to help others. This revelation preoccupied my mind for the entire flight and soon found its way into my thoughts again and again in the following years.

We now live in a world that is rapidly becoming more community oriented and one that praises the value of selflessness. Heroes in the news consist of people putting themselves in danger for others and of those who do acts of kindness for others. As we are bombarded by these countless acts of selflessness, we begin to adopt a mindset that to be “good” is to help others. However, what media and society fails to explain is that you need to “secure your own mask before helping others”. It is impossible to show mercy to others without having received mercy yourself first. I understood the true meaning behind what the flight attendant had said at the age of 16, when I accidentally bumped into a lady on the corner of Stevens Creek and Winchester.

I had been rushing to get to a store before the closing time and had run-walked around a corner. A lady and her son had also been walking around the corner in the opposite direction and we bumped into each other. I immediately apologized, made sure they were okay, and went on my way. Two steps later, I overheard the mother mutter, “Walk like you drive.” My step slowed and I began thinking about what she had said. After a few more steps I began to feel anger. How could she make an assumption about me simply based on my appearance? She didn’t even know my name. After another couple steps, I began to feel sad, as I remembered the importance of

loving your neighbors. I decided to forgive the lady and move on. In my mind I had said that I had forgiven her, but for some reason I was unable to. It was not that I was still angry, but that I had felt a small sense of guilt that prevented me from forgiving and forgetting. It only later dawned on me that the reason for this was because I was trying to forgive someone before asking for forgiveness myself; I had reciprocated hurtful feelings back to the lady. My thoughts, although not verbally spoken, was a fault as well. As soon as I realized that I needed to ask for forgiveness as well, a weight lifted from my heart. Relieved and aware of an increasing closeness with God, I began to feel grateful towards the lady.

It was through this experience that the multiple facets of mercy really manifested in my life. Mercy is something given and received. It is an act of understanding, forgiveness, but most importantly awareness. It allows us to become aware of ourselves, and through this self-awareness, we able to take a step closer to not only God, but each other.

Sometimes, we do have to secure our own masks before helping others.