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### *The View from My Seat*

*April 19, 2011*

*Royals' Record: 10-6*

*My Record: 2-1*

*"Funny,*

*You look back,*

*Didn't make no sense.*

*Racism.*

*No sense*

*What people do to each other*

*'Cause of something dark*

*In their hearts."*

*—Buck O'Neil*

How do you eat sunflower seeds?

I have one friend who eats her sunflower seeds one at a time. She holds the shell and gently cracks it open with her front teeth. Then, she eats the seed and tosses the shell on the ground, never tasting the salty goodness.

I have another friend who loves the flavor of sunflower seeds. He grabs a handful of seeds and funnels the whole thing into his mouth. He then chews the seeds like a large wad of gum. The seeds and shells crunch together into a flavorful mess. After all the flavor is gone, he spits out the whole disgusting gob, similar to a lump of chew, into a cup or a relatively out-of-the-way place in the grass.

Another friend of mine uses a combination of the above. He eats a couple seeds at a time, chews the mess together, *and then swallows the entire wad, shell and all*. Every now and then, he'll cough and tear up, saying something about a shell going down the wrong way.

With the arrival of flavored sunflower seeds, I've seen kids at the stadium lick all the salty, flavorful goodness off the shell, never to crack it open and eat the seed it protects. This reminds me of my friend who likes to lick all the cheese off of Doritos Nacho Cheese Chips before eating them.

I learned to eat sunflower seeds in the dugout. Placing a handful in my mouth, I store the salty gob in my cheek. I crack open one shell at a time, eat the seed, and then spit the shell out in front of me. It doesn't take long before a pile of shells starts to develop. On some days, those of us learning to eat seeds in the dugout would have contests to see who could spit the shell the furthest (un-cracked shells did not count). Other times, we'd have target practice with our shells. For me, sunflower seeds quickly became associated only with baseball. They are the perfect food for an anxious observer looking to dispel nervous energy.

My friend Eddie bought a large bag of ranch-flavored sunflower seeds on the way to the game. Before the night was over, we had left piles of shells all over Kauffman Stadium.

It was colder on this night of Holy Week than it was on Open-

ing Day. I had on four layers of clothing, plus gloves and a thick jacket. Even through the layers, the wind was biting.

My seats for the season were up high, behind home plate. I knew how to watch a game from here. I surveyed the middle infielders as they positioned themselves for each hitter and pitch. I observed the graceful wind-up and delivery of the pitcher and had a pretty good idea about what was a strike and what wasn't. After each pitch, I glanced at the scoreboard to check the speed and compare it with the previous pitch. I knew where the pitch-count monitors were and could get a good read on a ball hit deep off the bat. I didn't bring a glove because I'm too high for a foul ball to reach me—and I was okay with that.

From these seats, we could see how far Alcides Escobar had to run to field the first ground ball of the game. Heading towards short right field, he made the catch, turned, and threw on the run. The ball beat the runner by a step for the first out, and the small crowd cheered loudly. Multiple replays lit up on the big screen.

On this particular night, no one was seated higher in the stadium than my friend Eddie and me. We cheered and ate seeds for the first three innings and then decided to change seats. With a wind-chill near the freezing line, only about a fourth of the stadium, which holds close to 40,000 spectators, was full.

If I were the owner of a baseball team, I would place workers in the stadium with a number of passes. After the third inning, if the crowd was particularly sparse, workers would be asked to distribute passes to people throughout the stadium for a free “seat-upgrade.” The people could then choose to accept or decline the offer, realizing that they would be permitted to sit in designated sections on the field level. (They wouldn't be allowed to upgrade to the “all-you-can-eat-seats” or the dugout suites—that would just be crazy).

Our first choice of “new” seats was poor. We headed to the left-field foul pole. We were the only two people seated in the entire section. After one pitch, an usher asked to see our tickets. We graciously told him that we had tickets, but they were not for these seats. He smiled and said, “I’ll have to ask you to move.” Eddie and I laughed and politely obeyed. We started walking around the stadium, when four young men seated in the left field seats shouted, “Hey, you guys stayed there the longest so far, good job!” They encouraged us with high fives.

We decided to walk to the Party Porch, where the standing-room-only seats are, and watch the game from right-center field. I’d never watched a game from right-center field before. We were almost directly under the giant screen where I usually obtain all my in-game information; but the angle was too steep to easily read it. There are mini-scoreboards around the stadium that also display pitch speed information, as well as balls and strikes, but the game looked completely different from here. One guy close to us harassed the centerfielder for the opposing team the entire game. In the top half of the innings, after the Royals outfielders had warmed up, the people in the Party Porch would scream for the outfielders to toss a ball in their direction. Jeff Francoeur and Melky Cabrera obliged the fans, each flinging a ball into the stands. The outfield looked enormous and the grass was perfectly manicured, a close resemblance to my dandelion-covered front lawn. It was easy to see the location of pitches, even though home plate seemed a long way away. A couple of batters hit the ball in our direction, and it was amazing how fast it traveled.

Out on the Party Porch, there are lots of high fives with the people next to you, and lots of people dance and sing in hopes of getting on the big screen. Eddie and I never made it on the big screen, though we did leave some sunflower shells on the warning track.

In the top of the seventh inning, the Royals were leading 5-2. Cleveland's Lou Marson was on second base with two outs, and Michael Brantley was hitting. Bruce Chen, who had pitched a beautiful game thus far, was nearing the end of his night. Brantley lined the 1-1 pitch to left field, and Marson attempted to score. Marson was on third base as Alex Gordon scooped up the ball. The perspective from the Party Porch made it difficult to tell if Alex had a chance to throw him out. Alex rifled the ball on a line, arriving at the plate on one hop. Brayan Pena had the plate blocked and Marson was tagged out. Screaming and high fives were abundant at the Party Porch.

In the top of the eighth inning, I suggested we move once again. We decided to go for broke and walked up the first base line. We arrived at section 140, almost even with first base. It was late in the game, and there were still plenty of seats open. Eddie led the way as we hopped a row and tried our best to blend into the crowd around us. The guys to our left said the seats were open and welcomed us into "their territory."

From here, the players seemed huge. Kila Ka'aihue and Wilson Betemit looked larger than the 6'4" and 6'2" listed in the program. Even through the wind we could hear the ball pop in the catcher's mitt. From here, I could see that the strike zone disappeared when Royals' closer Joakim Soria came in to pitch in the ninth. From here, I could see the odd angle and hop that the ball took as Ka'aihue stretched for Betemit's throw. From here, I felt like I was part of the game.

In the top of the ninth, with two outs, bases loaded, and the Royals clinging to a one-run lead, clean-up hitter Carlos Santana stepped up to the plate. Soria completed the save with a three-pitch strike out—the Royals won. More high fives and some fireworks were followed by our quick dash to the car to turn on the heater.

On this night, Eddie and I enjoyed a game from multiple perspectives. Each perspective was unique and different, contributing to the enjoyment of the spectator. From up high, we could see everything that happened. From the Party Porch, we got a sense of what it would be like to roam and patrol the outfield. From first base, we could see the details of the players and hear the sounds of the field.

There are approximately seven billion people on the planet. That means that there are approximately seven billion different perspectives on life. Our perspectives are influenced by our cultures, our personalities, our ethnicities, and our preferences. As humans, we tend to label perspectives in order to better understand or control others: Liberal. Conservative. Rich. Poor. Red. Brown. Yellow. Black. White. Insider. Outsider. Creative. Analytical.

There is something to be learned from each perspective. Pain and injustice result when only one perspective is seen as “right.” When we whole-heartedly support a biased perspective, genocides occur, the poor die of starvation and thirst, and young girls are trafficked around the world.

Humility is born when we acknowledge our biases and the limitations of our perspectives. I will always see the world as a white male. I have always been rich compared to the majority of the world. I have never been persecuted for my religious beliefs or had to walk miles to obtain drinking water or wondered from where my next meal was coming.

An important part of life is learning to see things from different perspectives rather than simply judging those who don’t agree. The grade-school fight starts with, “My dad is better than your dad.” International conflict starts with, “My country is better than your country.”

Many missionaries who travel to foreign countries are more

concerned about correcting cultural practices than learning the ways of the people. Politicians and priests alike preach a party-line propaganda that discourages dialogue and creative exploration.

I am a person of faith. I believe that we are supposed to learn to cooperate with each other instead of comparing ourselves to one another. I believe that each person on this planet is unique and different—a Masterpiece. The hues of melanin add beauty and the myriad of philosophies and perspectives make me consider and evaluate what I most deeply believe. Faith is supposed to encourage me to courageously explore all of life, not to fear the unknown. Faith is supposed to teach me to trust that God is with me wherever I go, not to rely on sight alone. This means that there are times when the perspectives and schemas I've developed to process life must be completely torn down and rebuilt when new and challenging viewpoints are presented.

It is good to change seats every now and then, to learn to watch the game from a completely different angle. I'm not saying you have to root for the other team, just be willing to continue to explore, to ask questions, to know that there is more to learn than can be learned, and to be okay with a little mystery in life.

After all, there is not a bad seat in the stadium.

And there is no wrong way to eat sunflower seeds.