The Stillness Movement

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

The auditorium wasn't built for silence.

It was meant for lectures—loud ones. Debates. Buzzing conversations between students clutching iced coffees and half-formed convictions. But on this Thursday morning, the room held its breath. No rustling backpacks. No throat-clearing. Just stillness. A rare and potent thing.

At the front of the room stood Professor Rafael Ortega, fifty-three years old, lean and composed, dressed not like a man demanding authority but like someone entirely unbothered by it. A soft gray button-up. Rolled sleeves. Scuffed boots. His salt-and-pepper hair was cropped short, his eyes steady and kind. No notes. No PowerPoint. Just presence.

“Empathy,” he said quietly, the word almost swallowed by the size of the room. “Is not a performance. It’s a posture.”

Some students glanced up from their phones. Others were already captivated.

Rafael took a few steps forward, slow, deliberate.

“It doesn’t require you to understand everything about someone’s experience. It requires you to stay when you don’t.”

He paused, letting the silence settle again.

“When someone is in pain, your job is not to fix it,” he continued. “It’s to sit beside it. Witness it. Let them know they’re not alone.”

Reading sample — continued

The fluorescent lights above him flickered, but no one looked up. Every pair of eyes was on him.

“Most of us,” he said, voice steady, “were taught to be experts. To solve. To diagnose. To give advice. But I’m asking you to unlearn that.”

A student in the second row—Callie, trans, journalism major, always a little skeptical—lowered her pen slowly.

“We rush to fix because discomfort is terrifying,” Rafael said. “But healing doesn’t come from being fixed. It comes from being seen.”

Someone in the back whispered, “Damn.”

Rafael smiled faintly.

He stepped to the edge of the stage, close now. Personal.

“When’s the last time someone let you fall apart without trying to tape you back together?” he asked.

The silence deepened. For some, it hurt.

“And when’s the last time you offered someone that same gift?”

No one answered. He didn’t expect them to.

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That night, a five-minute clip from Rafael’s lecture landed on TikTok.

A sophomore named Jude had filmed it, mostly for himself. But something in Rafael’s voice—the calm, the grounded intensity—made him post it. No filters. No hashtags. Just the caption: