

Submitted by Choua Yang - February 23, 2015

As a first generation immigrant, I was lucky enough to migrate to the United States as a young child; I was under a year old at the time. Although not generally exposed prior to my school years, I was fully immersed in the English language and in the Western culture starting with kindergarten. Because of this, there was a deep disconnect between my parents and me: culture, ideology, and finally, language. As I grew older, the language barrier widened. While my parents emphasized the importance of an education, it was the very same thing that drove the wedge deeper in our relationship as I surrounded myself in Western culture Monday through Friday, from 8 am to 3 pm. I loved school because learning came easy to me and so did making friends.

Spending time with my friends meant going over to their homes and I saw for myself how very different their lives were from mine. It made me wistful for a life free of conservative and patriarchal traditions. I did not get to wear the same clothes as my friends did, I did not get to eat the same foods, I could not even cut my hair! My mother forbade me from doing so and then one day, I rebelliously chopped off my hair; I mean, what was she going to do to make it long again?

I became resentful of my immigrant heritage and did everything possible to distance myself from my culture and my family, that which defined me. I hated talking about my culture and I often pretended I was not an immigrant; I even gave myself an American nickname. A few actually; I changed my mind every few weeks but I guess that's the perk of not having it be your real (legal) name.

Growing older, I remember people hearing my name and asking about the background of it and what it meant. I would bristle because I hated talking about my culture. I hated the life that restricted me so much. I married young and "escaped" the culture that bound me so that I did not despise it as much (but only to eventually return full-circle; see, we never really do escape that which defines us). Yet when others would ask questions, I could feel myself clench up at the very thought of discussing it and I would dismiss others' curiosity. Then one day, the tables were turned on me.

In high school, I had a lovely friend with a magnetic personality and everyone just loved her, including me. She was warm, friendly, smart and cute (this meant a lot to the immigrant girl who did not look like the people she wanted to be). It was my understanding that her parents were raised Jewish but as adults, had decided to convert to Jehovah's Witnesses and that was the religion in which they were raising their children, my friend and her siblings. Because of my love of school, I was savvy enough to understand that being Jewish meant something cultural as

well as religious. The fact that they were Jewish but not practicing Judaism blew my mind; I found it fascinating.

One day, in a conversation, I remember asking her if she was Jewish. Her demeanor changed, her jaw tightened and she tersely responded, "You mean if I were alive during World War 2, would I be dead, then yes." And she walked away. I stood there, flabbergasted, utterly speechless. I did not know what to say, what to think. As my senses came back to me, I became angered by her reaction; how could she fault me for being curious? I just wanted to know more; I wanted to be educated. I was not in any way insinuating that she would have been dead during World War 2. How did that even enter the conversation? I valued her as a friend and I wished no ill will toward her or her family.

Of course, I never brought up the subject again. And as I continued to ponder the conversation, my thoughts became introspective and I started to reflect on myself. When I finally shook off the shock, I was able to honestly ask myself, is that what I looked like? Is that was I sounded like when people asked me? Somewhere in there, I decided that I would no longer punish others who were curious and wanted to find out more. I would answer their questions, truthfully and with enthusiasm. How were they ever going to learn more about our culture if we were not the ones to educate them?

Just like that, I shed the "baggage" that had defined me for so long. Instead, I let my life experience define me: my family, my culture, my Western education, and the influences of my friends. I finally embraced my name; it's actually kind of pretty. I am still not completely happy with my culture. In fact, there are many things about it that I dislike. But now I have learned to accept that it is what made me who I am today, even if I do not actively practice all the customs and traditions the way my parents did, and still do. There are still disconnects of my own doing, but it can also be attributed to the family dynamics. Aren't all of our families just a bit dysfunctional? And if you ask me questions about my culture, my body will not stiffen, my demeanor will not change and I will candidly answer your question because I know your curiosity comes from a good place, not one of ill will.