

Take the Leap

My first friend at school was Asian. Her questionable fashion choices and outgoing personality put me at ease and we clicked immediately. She sat behind me in class, and I spent more time than I should have speaking with her. She instantly made me feel that I wasn't alone. Over time, though, we understood each other better, including both our differences and similarities. It turned out that she was more shy and less confrontational than I was. But, more importantly, it became clear that she had low self-esteem. She firmly believed that she would never be the object of anyone's affections, but all of her standards of beauty were based on White people. My friend, who was undeniably Asian, hated herself for not being White. And it especially hurt when I stumbled on the realization that in this way, we were quite similar.

My mother is Japanese and my father is Jewish, but their ethnicities never occurred to me until I moved to the United States at the age of 4. Northern California is well known for its diversity, but there are invisible divisions between its people that stunt growth as a community. And, unfortunately, I feel these divisions more than ever in my predominantly White high school. Even when simply observing something as small as a group of friends, self-segregation is clear. Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White students often sit separately. So, while this kind of self-segregation may be understandable, I'm hopeful that we can move past our natural defensive tendencies and instead, come together in celebration of our differences.

It still saddens me when a minority aspires to be like the majority. In many ways it makes perfect sense – everyone seeks acceptance by their peers, which often means looking and acting like them. Even I find myself wearing “basic” clothing, pausing before speaking about my Asian heritage, refraining from eating Japanese food in public – hoping and training to conform to

White standards. Unfortunately, this social pressure can and has caused children and young adults to repress their own ideals, which has led to an unhealthy self-image. The pressure can be intense and inescapable. Surely, my own struggle has been milder compared to many other Asians due to my mixed heritage, but I understand. I've noticed that especially as high schoolers, we tend to define ourselves by the people around us. Our self-images are products of our environment, but they don't have to be. Asians and our cultures should be regarded as equal to White ones so that Asian children, like my friend and I, don't feel ashamed. I look forward to a future where different races not only coexist, but deeply integrate in all forums, including media and politics. I'm not saying to be blind to our ethnic differences – that would be a small step in the right direction. But understanding and appreciating those differences – that would be a leap.