

I remember being about ten years old, attending a month-long summer camp in Colorado. It was the first time I had ever traveled within the United States and the first time I had ever experienced real, authentic American culture. It was parent day, and all the campmates' parents came to have lunch with their children. Since Colorado was thousands of miles away from home, mine couldn't attend. I recall feeling jealous of all the other children because they had the opportunity to see their parents. Fortunately, a friend I had made during camp had invited me to eat with his parents. Unbeknownst to me, Americans had a different way of greeting each other. I recall him introducing me to his mother, and instinctively, I greeted her just like my parents had taught me to greet older women- with a kiss on the cheek. As I leaned backward after greeting her, I heard my friend scream: "DUDE, YOU JUST KISSED MY MOM!". I felt the red spread all over my cheeks. I felt the stares from the other children in their families as I nervously and frantically tried to explain that that was the way you were supposed to greet someone.

In Mexican culture, it is customary to greet people of the opposite gender with a kiss on the cheek and greet those of the same gender with a simple handshake. This was normal to me. That is- until that fateful day.

I had never felt anything like that in my life. I spent the first part of my life living in Calexico, California, a small border town north of Mexicali, Baja California. Despite being across the border from Mexico, it wasn't like living in the States. It was like another Mexico. Everyone spoke Spanish. My classmates were Hispanic, my teachers were Hispanic, *everyone* was Hispanic. At school, our teachers sometimes would teach in Spanish rather than English when they were not supposed to. I remember having only two actual American English-only-

speaking friends from middle to high school. I would also cross to Mexico daily, contrary to the usual flow of people crossing into the United States. This was mostly because my dad was a tennis fanatic- He enrolled me in two-hour tennis lessons in Mexico that took place every day. I also took Spanish lessons in hopes of not losing my native tongue while studying in the States. I never found myself in a situation where being of a specific culture affected me.

My transition into college in the United States was not as harsh as that horrible parent day in Colorado, but it still took some getting used to. Thankfully, I now knew at least how to greet people without having to endure embarrassment and stares. At first, I was timid and worried because I was different from everyone. I kept my culture tucked away during the first few months in an attempt to pass off as just another person from the States. I would intentionally soften my accent or use a nickname when asked my name. As time passed, however, it was evident I was not the only one who was different. Many other students came from all types of backgrounds and had their own unique stories to tell, just as I did.

For so long I was attempting to be someone else, putting on a mask every single day because of my irrational fears of not pleasing others or fitting into their idea of who I should be. I sought to be like those others like me, who instead of being hesitant to show the small characteristics that reveal their culture, wore their background on their sleeve for everyone to see.

My background was a source of power, a repository of fresh perspectives, instead of something to hide. I realize now it is a shame to my culture that I ever even thought of

suppressing it. It is calming to know that being authentic not only sets me apart but also gives me something to leverage to my advantage. Whether in class discussions, interactions with friends, or even solving problems, my diverse perspective is a valuable asset. We all have other ways of thinking and processing, formed by years of distinct experiences our minds face, forcing us to find solutions. My experiences and problems have allowed me to form unique thinking patterns I use every day to tackle my obstacles. Gone are the days of concealing my background; instead, I proudly celebrate my diversity, knowing that it only acts as a tool in my vast collection of skills to succeed.