

Perspective from a Young Korean American by David Kim

I was a second grader and happened to be within arm's length of a classmate who fell, hit his head on the ground, and was crying hysterically. It did not take long for a crowd of other students and teachers to gather around the boy and investigate. He was not a native of this country; that was apparent when he could not understand the teachers' trying to assist him. The teachers at the scene then beckoned me to come to the boy's aid. They wanted me to translate. I tried to explain that he was Chinese and that I was of Korean descent. Nonetheless, they demanded action. In spite of my protest, I was forced to use the only Korean I picked up from my parents when I was hungry or when my parents were too angry at me to think in English. Which much reluctance, in Korean I said, "Ya! Ya! Ya! Study! Study more! Eat your rice and kimchi!" Neither the teachers nor especially my classmate understood why I took such a parental tone. Though the situation was hectic and my efforts futile, it raised many profound conundrums. It was one of the many experiences where I was confronted with being different. I became aware not only of the fact that I was different from non-Asians, but also that I knew little of my Korean identity.

I went to Korea for the first time not long afterwards. I felt a sense of security knowing I would not be mistaken for a Chinese boy. It would also be my chance to finally see the land of my roots. As ecstatic as I was to visit my extended family and the many cultural sites, and even though I looked like everyone in the homogeneous land, I felt strangely alienated. I was called many deprecating names associated with white GI Americans. The native Koreans also made me feel ashamed that I could not speak Korean. Ironically, some also felt jealous because I could speak English fluently. When I left Korea, I became even more confused, with a greater sense of loneliness than before. Many more questions flew through my mind. Why was I so easily ostracized in both countries? Why did I feel so ashamed about not knowing Korea if I pledged allegiance every day to an American flag at school?

When I started going to church, all of these issues and my anxieties began to settle. My church is a Korean-American Catholic community. Every week, we had Mass in both Korean and English. In many ways, it was the best of both worlds. Our church organized fellowships and festivals where the elders would acculturate us to our many Korean traditions; meanwhile we, the youth group, would congregate together, much like the rest of "hip" America. It was a setting where I not only could turn to God but also could turn to others with similar "spots." I no longer felt self-conscious about my Asian

features or my pidgin Korean. Yet I was impressed to see others who were especially well-balanced in both cultures. I also noticed that there were new members who just came from Korea and who had many trepidations about being here. Nevertheless, we all shared similar experiences and anxieties.

Recognizing these commonalities in each other made it easier to accept them in ourselves. Even though I felt at times pressured to be either more Koreanized or more Americanized, I was in a setting in which I was constantly exposed to both cultures. Over time, I came to realize that I, too, could juggle both. Our church still has its share of differences and turmoil. Some could even attribute them to the worst of both cultures. Nonetheless, I was not alone. Having seen others like myself gave me the self-esteem to be comfortable with myself in the midst of so many other people stereotyping me.

Having encountered racism from both fronts, I realized I represented a type of "gray area." I stood out in a way that made it awkward for some to accept me because of my appearance or upbringing. As a youngster, I tried to fit in. Yet all I needed was a greater sense of self-esteem. I believe that seeing others who share common experiences and backgrounds makes it easier to build that fundamental first step towards building your own identity — which is the ultimate goal of any individual. We are all confronted with that strange paradox of the human condition: we strive to be independent spirits yet must acknowledge that we are inevitably shaped by our environment. I belong to a world with two cultures, yet I strive to build an identity that has not yet taken form. As a youngster, I went through life being labeled by others. I allowed myself to be stereotyped because I lacked the self-esteem to understand myself. I realize I must be aware and educate myself of who I am so I can be in control of the person I want to be. I feel that's the strength of being American — we have the choice to define what our own identity may be.

My parents tried hard to acculturate their children into an American way of life. They reasoned it would be easier for us to assimilate if they shielded us from Korean culture and encouraged us to conform to the American norm. As well-intended as it was, it was more inhibiting than protective. Now times have changed. As a Sunday School teacher, I notice the second graders in my church do not suffer the same problems I did. At a younger age than was true in my case, they are aware of their heritage while simultaneously looking forward to their membership as part of this younger generation of

American students — an awareness I did not acquire until much later in life. They embody the enormous potential that can be gleaned from growing up in a world of two cultures. A plethora of choices awaits them. I strongly feel that the greater number of Korean-Americans contributed to alleviating the ignorance of others and ourselves, which made such potential possible.

Europeans Americans and African Americans have a longer history in establishing their own place in the "melting pot" of America. Some would even contend that the term was coined and defined by them. I would argue that the term is not set in stone and that it is constantly subject to reinterpretation. From an Asian American point of view, cultural ties are defined and strongly-rooted by family overseas; ethnicity and racial pride

are powerful elements in building an identity in a land founded on the diversity of immigrants. Regardless of background, however, our diversity is our strength. By exploring our roots, we expand the choices we may have for ourselves and others. I believe there are yet more aspects of ourselves to discover which, in the end, open countless possibilities for the future.

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