

Every day, do you think about where you are from? I'm Korean. I always think about that.

When I was a child, I used my father's surname, "Jung," instead of my current surname, Taniguchi. One day, at my daycare center, I was asked by a classmate, "Yuri-chan, where are you from?" Of course, I answered, "I am Korean." "I hate Koreans," she said and she ran away to tell all her friends about it. Fortunately, my friends consoled me by saying, "It doesn't matter where you are from." Even though I was very young, I felt I was different from everyone else. When I talked about this at home, I was told the sad story that my parents and grandparents were discriminated against because they were Korean, and that they always had to hide this fact.

When I was older I read an article in a Korean newspaper. The article said that Korean schools in Japan would not be recognized as regular schools for compulsory education or higher education. I wondered why Korea was not accepted in Japan and why I had to live my life hiding my Korean identity. From then on, I began to think a lot about who I was. What makes me different from everyone else? Is it my culture? Is it my experience? Maybe it's the way we think. I didn't really understand any of it. But, despite this, I decided I would never judge, exclude, or bully anyone by the way they looked. I knew well from my own experience that treating someone as different could hurt them a lot.

When I was in elementary school, I often fought with a friend in the same class. One day, we were arguing about something small. In my own anger, I said, "The reason you are so aggressive is because you have a disability just like your brother!" Everyone heard me say it. Smack! From nowhere, she punched me in the face. I was shocked! Not at the punch but at the fact that I'd done something that I'd promised to myself I would never do. I had hurt her by discriminating against her and her brother. I regretted saying it so much and wondered why I'd said something so terrible. I realized then that I should never discriminate about things I cannot see about people, like their personalities and situations, not just the things I can see about them. We make assumptions about people based on the differences we can see and hear like their skin color, looks, and gender, but we also discriminate on things we cannot see, like people's cultures, values, and personalities. I realized that I had said this terrible thing to my friend because I did not have enough knowledge to understand her and her brother's situation well enough. I think it is important to know each other better to stop discrimination.

After that fight, I had many discussions with my friend and I learned that she hit me not to protect herself, but to protect her brother. Just as my family and I value our pride in being Korean, she has things that are important to her as well. When I thought about this, a certain phrase suddenly crossed my mind. "Everyone is different, everyone is wonderful." What makes us different is our individuality. I want to accept myself and I want others to accept me as I am. Also, I want to acknowledge the people around me for who they are. I decided that I will never discriminate again. There is no need to hide who you are. I believe that everyone deserves to be loved, respected and accepted. Together we can create a society where everyone can live their life as they are and be celebrated.

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