

Changing Awareness

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I was born in Portland, Oregon. I am a third-generation Japanese American. And I identify myself as Sansei, which literally means third generation. My parents were born in America, but both sets of grandparents came from Japan in the early 1900s. Though we lived in Japan for a short time when my dad was in the military, I was too young to remember. So for all intents and purposes, I grew up in the same house in Portland and stayed there until I was eighteen years old and went off to college.

I would say we were pretty middle class. Not upper, not lower, just sort of right in the middle. My father, however, was a surgeon. And so in some ways, our income was probably better than others in the neighborhood where we lived.

Perhaps part of the reason we lived in that neighborhood was because my father, and especially my mother, had grown up having to make do, never having quite enough. I think this may have created a feeling of not wanting to overreach and making sure we lived where they could afford.

Our neighborhood was very homogeneous ethnically, almost all Euro-American. I can only remember one other family of color in my elementary school. They were African American and their house wasn't on our block, so I didn't really know them. I feel like I grew up with what one might call an all-American kind of life. I was Campfire Girl. We celebrated Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and all those traditional American kinds of holidays. And, until high school, all of my friends were European American. My father grew up in Hood River, which is about an hour from Portland, up the Columbia River. He was one of nine children and his eldest brother had stayed on the old family farm. We would go there frequently in the summer. At holiday times other family members would gather too. That was pretty much the only time I can remember being around lots of Japanese Americans. So really there was no contact with a Japanese American community. Unlike cities like San Francisco or even Seattle, Portland didn't have a very large Japanese American population, and what it did have was pretty dispersed.

I feel like my parents really wanted us to be American, to fit in. I know that it was important to my dad that we know the history of our

family, and also about the history of Americans. From the time I was really little, he told us about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. My parents were interned when my dad was, eighteen and my mom was about sixteen. Most third-generation Japanese Americans don't know a whole lot about the internment, but my dad wanted to make sure that we knew about it. I've since learned that this is somewhat unusual. I've been surprised to hear that parents and grandparents remain silent about the internment, because my experience was just the opposite.

Because I knew about the internment so early, I think I had feelings about injustice from a very young age - that something could happen to you because of your ethnicity. As a child, I probably thought about this only in terms of my own personal ethnicity. I can remember that in grade school the most typical taunt would be using your fingers to slant your eyes up and then down and chant about "Chinese, Japanese, Americanese." I remember it so clearly, knowing that those kinds of comments were made to me because of my ethnicity. I don't know when I realized that it happened to other people too, but I have a hunch that I was probably pretty young.

Even though our family did the traditional American cultural things, we also had a lot of Japanese American customs. We would go mushroom hunting every fall, and I'd always take a ribbing from my friends. They'd say, "Mushroom hunting? What kind of gun do you use for mushroom hunting?" or "Do you need a license for mushroom hunting?" We also ate rice with every meal. Even if we were having spaghetti for dinner, we'd have rice too. So I would say I grew up a bicultural person, with elements of both Japanese and American culture.

I'm the eldest of three. I have a younger sister and a younger brother. For some reason, I have a stronger cultural identity than either of them, though I'm not sure why. It might just be my personality. It might be because I was the first born and so people told me more. I remember always liking show-and-tell at school. I never hesitated to bring something from my culture. One New Year's I brought rice cakes, which are called mochi. My sister would never have done something like this. I also remember bringing leftovers for lunch, often Japanese food. My sister would get so upset. She would say, "If they see you eating that, then they'll know that I eat that too." She used to be embarrassed when Mom would come to school, but I can't ever remember feeling that way. Looking back, I think what she felt was just part of growing up - you really want to fit in and be

accepted, and you don't want to be perceived as being different. She's changed now and feels comfortable with being Japanese American.

I was first around large numbers of Asian Americans when I went away to college. It was the 1970s, the height of the civil rights and anti-war movements. And though an elitist kind of school, Stanford had a lot of Asian Americans. At that time, most of the students of color were organizing into affinity groups, and I was very involved with the Asian movement. I liked being around other Asian Americans and got more and more involved. There were some anti-war components involved because of the Vietnam War, but mainly it had to do with being able to identify with other Asian American students. A dorm was established where half of the students were Asian American, and I lived there for two years, first as a resident and then as a resident advisor. I was also involved in an Asian women's group. We started a teahouse on campus – The People's Teahouse - where we would sell noodles and char sill bao (a Chinese barbecued pork bun). All the proceeds would go back to the community. College was a wonderful experience, and in many ways, it was my big awakening.

I did not experience a lot of discrimination before I went off to college, but this was the time when I became acutely aware of the discrimination that my people had suffered-especially during World War II and the internment. I also became somewhat aware of what was going on with the Vietnam War - how most Americans perceived Asians as subhuman or not really people at all. I could also see it didn't matter to many people whether they were talking about Vietnamese or Japanese Americans because most weren't able to tell the difference. So if they were saying things about Vietnamese, they probably meant me too.

The women's movement was growing at the time and I became aware of stereotypes about Asian women that I really didn't like. I was a psychology major and had been required to take child development. I really liked it, and the professor was wonderful. But I didn't apply any of my new awarenesses of racism and sexism to my early childhood practices or thinking. They were separate, and it wasn't until I was in graduate school that I started to see how they could come together.

By the time I graduated, I was feeling more Asian than American. I had studied Japanese and very much wanted to go to Japan to experience living there, so I got a job teaching English as a second language in a Japanese preschool. I was there for about eight months, and though I loved it, it made me realize how American I was.

I came back to graduate school - Oregon State University, a small town school, not very diverse. So I transferred to the University of Washington, which was much more diverse, and got my master's in early childhood education. During that time I really started to put multicultural and early childhood education together.

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