Identity: Overcoming Differences

In my own experience, I have found that my personal identity is critically linked with the identity of my family and peers. Growing up as an only child, I’ve had a plethora of time to develop and reflect upon my own identity, without any relation to other’s identity. However, in the past few years I’ve been reflecting upon my identity with relation to my peers and learning more and more about myself. A few short encounters stick out with regard to my identity.

My high school consisted of a sharp class divide; we had the super rich and the super poor and only a select few who were genuinely middle class. Because of this, my school is my quintessential example of classism and racism. People of one race would sit in one section of the cafeteria and people of another would sit on the opposite side. Intermingling between the two sides seldom happened. Now, before high school, I never experienced such a class divide in a public place. I was utterly shocked. This sort of interaction with the new students of my high school caused me to reflect deeper about my own identity and how these very people affected my identity, especially since my best friend, Diana, was of a different race than me.

Diana and I had never felt separated because of race or class. We were interested in the same activities, we liked the same music, and we enjoyed each other’s company. However, that day, desperately scanning the ravenous jungle of high school student heads, I felt that we were worlds apart. She slowly gravitated towards the one side of the cafeteria, while I blankly stared out at the sea of people. Before this, I never thought about race as an element to identity. I thought of identity as a culmination of personality traits and core moral beliefs. After this encounter, however, I came to think about identity a bit differently. I realized that, although not exclusively important, race and background could be essential to a person’s identity. Connecting with your heritage and your past can help form someone’s character and thus her identity. Heritage, race, and identity are most certainly strongly linked together. However, it does not define a person’s identity by any means. In my high school, some people judge others based solely on race, assuming that the outward appearance of a person defines their identity. That day in the cafeteria, I did not sit with the people who looked more like me. I sat with the people that I identified with. The people that would help me grow and build upon my character and help me realize my own identity.

I’ve also become more in touch with my own identity by encountering sexism from my peers. The following conversation ensued between one of my peers and me. “So what colleges are you looking at?” said one of my peers.

“Oh, I’m going to Bryn Mawr College” I replied

“But isn’t that a girls school?” he said with utter disgust

“Why yes. It happens to be a women’s college”

“But how will you ever find a husband then?” I was taken aback by this archaic and ignorant idea about women’s education and the role of women in society. I came to realize that my identity as a person and my identity as a woman could be seen differently to some people. In my household, I was never treated differently based on my gender. I had never experienced sexism on an extreme level, but I was quite aware that sexism was alive and well in the world. However, even though I knew that some women were still unable to legally drive in some countries, I could not think of a response. I was shocked. How could he simply overlook my identity? My identity as a person stays constant whether I am a man or a woman and I had not realized that other people, like my peer, did not believe this.

Through encounters of classism, racism, and sexism with my friends and peers, I have realized that my identity, although independent of many of these factors, also depends on them. My gender, my race, and my class are at the very core of my identity, but they do not define me.

