

Questions Without an End



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*11 Personal Essays by ACES Students
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Preface

The eleven essays contained in the Reader pinpoint specific moments in students' lives that contributed to a greater realization: That every single person on earth is different; the importance of connection and community; that fitting into your own box rather than everyone else's is a process; how hard it is to overcome language barriers. Realizing that we are different from others can sometimes be a reason for an existential crisis, but after reading the essays by these students, it gives me hope that we are getting closer to accepting that maybe the fact that we are all different is the best thing about being a person.

In my short amount of time on this earth, I have definitely felt the need at times to "fit in" or have felt that I need to change something about myself for no real reason. Whether it was feeling like I needed to buy the expensive leggings that everyone had and I knew I couldn't afford or being embarrassed that my parents didn't speak English well or not wanting to have friends over because our apartment was so small, I realized that the things I felt made me different from others were actually what just made me the person I am. There is nothing wrong with feeling like you need to fit in, but the most important part is knowing that eventually you will have to make your own box to fit into.

Accepting yourself in any capacity is a hard thing to do, especially when you are made to feel that there is only one way to be. But it seems that doing all that, mostly for other people, is nothing but a waste of time. As Barbare Sturua wrote in her essay, "It might all be easier to start from looking around and acknowledging the very present moment, because that is all we have." I agree with Barbare that life is only worth living with a glass half full because a glass half full means hope—it means opportunities and it means you're making intentional choices.

Many of these essays show students coming to terms with the contradictions between their beliefs, their family's beliefs, the traditions they grew up with and who they have ultimately chosen to be. What they all have in common is the fact that each student showed determination, through living with these contradictions, no matter how big or small: whether it was the religion you were raised in that you no longer believe in or if you want to wear a dress that maybe your mom doesn't like, what matters is being aware that these contradictions and differences are what make you, you. I hope we all continue to learn and accept ourselves.

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Language and Unexpected Connection

by Hatouma Doucoure

The blaring ring of my alarm went through my ears. I gently opened my eyes and a fresh breeze from the window hugged my skin. I was here in the great city of New York. It wasn't my imagination or the TV or even the dolls I used to play with anymore. There were people with white skin and sky blue eyes shining like topaz, millipede buses, and people rushing everywhere. I saw a couple of stop signs, which I was familiar with, but most of the other street signs and the store signs were written in two different languages: English and another, which I later understood was Spanish. It surprised me that Spanish speakers don't have as hard a time as me in this country because it is the second major language translated on most documents and forms, but French is nowhere to be seen or heard.

Down in the tunnel of the 5 train, I kept hearing "Stand clear of the closing doors, please" at every single stop. I knew it was about the doors, even though I

didn't understand the beginning of the sentence. I stayed at the window for a while, admiring the view that is the complete opposite of where I'm from. Then, this question popped into my mind, "How will I adapt to this environment? I don't even speak the language. Will I even speak this language one day?" It was like a riddle in my mind.

I had barely begun to discover the surroundings of my neighborhood when the first day of school was quickly approaching. A week before classes started, I went to register my name and had to take a placement test. After validating the test, the technology man who was also the person in charge of testing told me I was going to 9th grade due to my weak understanding of the language. I was demoralized and disappointed; it felt like someone cut down the tree I was on top of. Being in the same grade as Ba Kama, my younger brother; graduating high school at 20; and saying bye to my dream of becoming a young graduate was not what I expected at all. I thought about dropping out, but I knew that wasn't a solution. I knew my dreams were going to take more time than planned to be fulfilled, but I had the confidence to believe that one day they would come true.

That first day of school, I woke up at 6 a.m., took a shower in my white bathtub, got dressed in my blue uniform, and tied my pink hijab over it. My smile extended to my ears like a bride. I was excited to learn new things, meet new people, and more, until reality hit me. "I can't even understand the random sayings of others," I thought, but there was no going back, so I took a deep breath and got on my way to school with my dad.

While walking, I was focused on remembering every single building so I

would not get lost when classes were over.

“Don’t worry about what other students are wearing or looking like here. Just be yourself,” my dad said to me, tapping on my shoulders. It was like he knew that this point was my number two worry, with language still holding the number one spot.

I arrived at the gate before everyone else. I looked around this big public high school clueless, wondering what was going to happen. I sat in the back, on my own, staring at the teacher, and overhearing my peers' voices. It was winter, and I was freezing, while the other students were comfortable in their short-sleeve shirts and shorts. The majority of them were Latinos and immigrants like me, and they had already acquired the language. Their racial background created some sort of mutual bond between them, despite not knowing each other before. This made me feel more disconnected from the group. But the whole class was not Latino; my teacher was white, I am African, and, luckily, there was another African girl, Mali, who was from Guinea, a country that borders mine, and that took some of my anxiousness away. I was by myself in the school yard when she approached me. We started questioning each other in French and, eventually, we realized we have a lot in common. This was the beginning of our friendship.

On this same day, the worst thing that could have happened at the moment did happen! The teacher gave the class an assignment to write a poem, and I used Google to translate the instructions because I did not understand what I was asked to do. She then called on three people to share their writing. I put my bag in between me and the teacher and pretended to tie my laces but, unfortunately, I

was called on to read anyway. My legs were shaking as I walked to the front. I shared mine in French, and my good friend translated it for everybody else. The whole class clapped for me, including the teacher. She was impressed. She was the kind who always cheers for her students.

I raised my head from shame and, pitching my chin, I thought to myself, “Hum! This wasn’t that bad after all. A well-done poem? The teacher’s appreciation? Well! Maybe I can do this after all.” I instantly went from negative and desperate to confident and hopeful. In this moment, I knew I was capable of overcoming this barrier. If I can do it in French, then why not in English? So, Google Translate and my friend became my best resources and support.

Later on, I started feeling comfortable at school. I was a pro in English on paper, and no one could tell that I didn’t speak English. But in real life, I didn’t make much progress at all. I learned the writing part before the oral part of English. Eventually, I put my shyness to the side, and I started verbally engaging with my peers. I was speaking the worst English that ever existed, but my peers were understanding and made extra efforts to include me in the conversations, making me feel more comfortable. They pointed out my many mistakes, not to make fun of them, but to help me correct them. From then on, I stayed assiduous, and I kept growing consistently over the next year. Slowly but surely, I stopped turning to Google Translate, though I admit I still sneak a peek from time to time.

Being around people from all over at my high school made me feel more comfortable about daring to explore new things and new interests. This experience probably led me to choose St. Joseph’s, and was the reason why I joined ACES, a

program for international students whose native language is not English. I wanted to further develop in this sense.

Throughout my high school journey, I realized that the community you're in can be your biggest source of support regarding the challenges you're facing. This support can range from emotional support, to social support, to providing important resources and connections. Opening myself was not easy in the beginning, but when I did, it really helped me and shaped my personality.



Why Do I Feel Different? by Jill Van Eijsden

As a kid I moved around very often, from one country to the next. Since coming to the U.S. and hearing other international students talk about missing home and their country, I noticed that I have never really known these feelings. I don't feel connected to my home. I started thinking about why I am not familiar with those feelings and the reason I came up with was that I moved away so much when I was young that I never had time to become attached. Did moving around a lot when I was young affect me, and, if so, in what way did it affect me?

When I was born, I lived in this place called Hoorn, in North-Holland. Hoorn is a really small village with nothing to do there. My dad worked in Amsterdam at that time, which is quite a long drive away. Two and a half years later, my brother was born. With two kids and my dad's commute being so long, my parents decided it was better if we moved to Amsterdam. I remember my house in Hoorn, but I don't miss it. I think this is because I was so young.

Moving to Amsterdam was a really big change. We now lived in a city, and I started making a lot of friends. We lived in a different type of house. This one was connected to other houses and had multiple stories. I lived in Amsterdam for about six years. Living in a city, especially Amsterdam, is very busy and can be stressful at times. My dad didn't really feel an escape from work. He decided he wanted to live in nature. Since my brother and I were small, we could not really comprehend or decide if we wanted to move. My mom also wanted to leave the city, so the decision to move elsewhere was made quickly.

We moved to Blaricum, which is only a twenty-minute drive to Amsterdam. We first moved into a rental while we were renovating the house we bought. After about six months, we moved into our new house, which again was pretty different from the previous ones. It was a big house with the same sized garden. It was next to quite a busy road. I remember feeling super comfortable in this house. It's the one I remember actually growing up in. We lived in this house when I was in middle school. I didn't like middle school at all; I didn't have many friends. After two years of living here, we moved to another country. I didn't feel sad leaving this house because I didn't have that many friends and I was super excited to move to a different country.

My family and I used to always go on vacations. It was normal for us to be abroad. When we moved to Blaricum the first time, my dad was struggling with his work stress. He wanted a sabbatical from his work. My family noticed the stress my dad was feeling, and we wanted him to feel better. I don't remember much about

how the decision was made to move, but I do know that all of us were okay with it. This resulted in my family moving to Marbella, Spain.

We moved there when I was ten years old. We rented a beautiful house there. It was located next to a golf course and was just outside of the city. The house was probably the most special house that I have lived in. It was a one-story house with a basement, which I never went into because of the spiders. Located in the middle of the house was an indoor patio with an open roof and a fountain. This house was also special to me due to all the big family dinners we had outside. There was a typical Spanish porch with a view of the pool, and we always had dinner there. I attended an international school, where I learned English and Spanish. I had a lot of fun there, and I made many friends. I knew we were only going to live there for a year and a half, so I was trying to not get too connected to the surroundings. I don't really remember much about how I did this, but I think I just didn't get really attached to my friends that much. This was a decision already made before we moved to Spain because my dad wanted to try and work again after a little bit longer than a year. My friends were almost all international. The chance of them moving away was really big. Since we knew we were only going to live in Spain for a short period of time, it wasn't unexpected to move back to the Netherlands. We went back to the Netherlands when I was twelve, just in time for me to start high school there.

We came back two years later, right before I had to start high school, and we continued to live in the same house we lived in before Spain. I started high school while living in this house, and I met a lot of my close friends, with whom I'm still

friends. My close friends and I would always hang out at my house. That would be a reason why I associate this house with my friendships.

After about a year since we came back from Spain, my parents noticed that they wanted to live in a quieter area in Blaricum. We visited many houses, but my parents ended up buying an old property that they were going to renovate. My parents spent a little over a year renovating the house and turning it into their dream home. This house is my favorite house I have lived in so far. It is quite closed off because it is next to the woods and heath. This house is really big and has an even bigger garden. We have a pool and a pond. I lived here all through my second year of high school until now. In this house, I feel super comfortable because the neighborhood is really quiet. I have made many amazing memories with my best friends here too. I can't explain the feeling, but this house really does feel like my home. I think part of that is because I live on the top floor alone and have my own space there. In the houses we lived in before, I didn't ever have to share a bedroom, but I would always be next to my brother's or parents' room.

Now we go forward in time a bit. I was in my final year of high school, and I knew I wanted to study in another country for my first year of college. I always wanted to come to New York, so that's why I pursued St. Joseph's. I got accepted, and when I told my friends and family, they were all super excited and nervous for me. I remember not being nervous at all, but I also expected that the feeling might come later. The weird thing is that feeling never came. I was excited, but not nervous, to move here to a different continent all by myself.

A Dutch friend of mine moved to Massachusetts for field hockey the same time as I did. She was really struggling with anxiety about moving. I thought to myself that I was quite lucky to not have those feelings because they can be so hard to deal with. I heard of another, different experience in my freshman seminar. We all had to say something we were nervous about this coming school year. Almost everyone had the same answer: they were scared of being away from home and having a different school system. When it was my time to answer, I said that I was not really nervous about anything but the grades.

I feel like due to moving around so much, I have a small advantage. I feel free to go wherever I want. I don't get homesick. I don't feel fixed to a certain place or a certain country. I never settled down long enough for that. I love the feeling that I can go anywhere and not think about getting homesick, or wanting to leave. Even after all this moving around, I do still feel connected to Amsterdam. I go there a lot to be with my friends and go out. I just feel good being there. I have a feeling that I am going to live there at some point, but I have no idea when that will be. I am excited to see where I will travel to or live in the future.



Overcoming Unexpected Struggles by Cristal Ventura

Mom! Only a month left to go to the United States.” The 11-year-old me counted the days with excitement knowing that soon I was going to arrive in the country of opportunities and hoping that life would be perfect. It was finally February 12, 2016 and I couldn’t stop smiling. Getting on a plane and finally feeling the cold of the winter when we landed was one of the most amazing experiences. Despite all the excitement, it didn’t take long for reality to hit. Instead of a perfect life where there weren't any difficulties, I found myself facing the greatest challenges that I wasn't prepared for: adapting to a new language.

I had thought it would be easy to learn English because I was so young. But learning English actually took a lot of effort and study. I had the wrong idea that English was going to get into my brain just by being in the United States for a while. I remember taking English classes as a required subject at school in the Dominican Republic, where I’m from. I was taught the basics like numbers, pronouns and names of things. However, I never took it seriously because people always said,

“Once you get to the U.S. you will learn fast because you are young.” I thought that kids had an easy time of learning the language. My cousin who was 2 years younger than me learned English really fast when she moved to New York. I noticed how she was able to communicate in English without ever seeing her study the language. I didn’t see any reason for her fast learning other than the fact of her just being here for a few months. I thought the same would be true for me—but that didn’t happen. I felt like the problem was me. Maybe I wasn’t smart enough to learn English as quickly as my cousin did, which made me angry with myself.

I never disliked school, but when I started middle school, it was like a nightmare. I wasn’t able to understand my classes and wasn’t able to communicate with my classmates. I was clueless all the time and couldn’t participate in class assignments which really affected my grades. Many of my classmates didn’t speak Spanish at all and those who did didn’t want to talk to me, which made things even more challenging. For my English class, there was another teacher there to give me and three other students extra help but I was still clueless about everything that was being taught in class. As a result, I was filled with frustration, hopelessness and feeling like an outcast. I felt like I wasn’t going to be able to do the class assignments and homework by myself like the other students. Every time I heard my classmates and teachers talk, all I could hear were weird sounds that I couldn’t describe. Many times, when my mom arrived home from work, I told her with tears in my eyes, “Mom, I don’t want to go back to school.” But she replied, “You have to go. Soon you will learn English.”

Finally, after struggling for months, things got better when I moved to a bilingual class. In that class, it was expected that I would learn in Spanish *and* English, so I would be able to understand the material and learn English as well. However, due to the little understanding of English that my classmates and I had, the teachers taught only in Spanish except in my English class. I felt happy and relieved that everything was going to be easier. I wasn't afraid of participating in class and working with others because I didn't feel like an outcast anymore. I understood the assignments very well and I loved to participate in class debates. Yet there was still an issue.

Although I was having positive outcomes with my grades going up, my English skills weren't progressing. I had to use Google Translate during class because I wasn't able to write in English on my own. In spite of that, I made friends with whom I sat during lunch time and talked. I met people from different cultures that, even though they also spoke Spanish, their accents and use of words were different than mine. They ate food that I had never tried before. Getting to know all of this was like opening a door to a new world. It led me to try Mexican, Salvadorian, Colombian, Honduran, Ecuadorian, and later on, Japanese food.

Moving on to high school changed things yet again. I knew high school was going to bring more challenges, but I still wanted to be in my comfort zone of sticking to Spanish. I was ignoring the reality that I still needed to learn English. The night before my first day of high school, I prepared all the material that I needed and chose what I was going to wear. In the morning, I woke up full of excitement and got ready to leave. While I was on the train on my way to high school, I observed a lot of

other students and the feelings of nervousness, shyness and uncertainty started to build up in me. Entering high school, those feelings started to get stronger but I knew that was part of this new beginning.

While getting to know what was expected in class and who my teachers were, I started to notice that everything was in English and that scared me. But I entered into a mode of acceptance. I knew I needed to learn whether I liked it or not. To my surprise, I encountered myself surrounded by many students who were just like me. They were from different backgrounds and spoke different languages, but just like me, they struggled to learn English. Realizing that was comforting and encouraging because there was no judgment. Getting to know them forced me to speak English because they didn't speak Spanish. Trying to communicate with them and learning about their culture was a huge help, not only in learning English, but also in opening up my worldview. After a while of practicing with others, learning from my academic mistakes and consulting with teachers on things I needed to improve, I was able to stop using Google Translate and eventually write essays on my own. In my sophomore year, I had to write an essay discussing the differences between Spanish and English and used directions to describe in detail how I got to high school from home in both languages. I was really scared because I was required to use descriptions that I didn't know how to use clearly. I was doubting myself and thinking I wasn't going to be able to do it. I expected the worst. To my surprise, I did well on my essay. This made me realize that my English was improving and that gave me encouragement to keep pushing myself to learn.

Arriving in a new country where another language is spoken is difficult and scary. There were many unexpected things that I had to overcome but that in the end, were worth it. We all have different ideas about learning English or any other language, but the reality of learning English is different for everyone. It can be easier for some people and harder for others like myself. Being young didn't make learning English easier, but I was willing to get through the process of learning it even when it was hard.



Bond by Himanshu Ghimire

I was 14 years old. As a shy person who preferred studying to having fun, I got outstanding grades up until I was in seventh grade. I then entered grade eight. After that, along with meeting new people, I also found my three closest buddies. I had never felt as attached to anyone as I did to them. We shared a powerful bond. I was a simple boy who preferred learning over fun. However, I became different. I started taking my studies a little less seriously, and my grades began to suffer.

On the other hand, I was enjoying myself and I had a fantastic year. Never before had school been so enjoyable. But things change.

In Nepal, where I'm from, we used to have a fixed section in school for a year, and then the school management would shuffle it randomly the following year. When we were all in grade nine, school management changed my section. One of my friends and I were in completely different classes, and my two other friends were together in another. I gave my all to change my section. I did everything I could to be among my friends, including sending many emails, filling out applications to

change my section, and everything possible. I received a severe warning for acting childish, yet I could not pay attention in class as I wanted to be with them. I hated going to school because of it.

The school ultimately agreed to alter my section after requests from my parents and me. I was the happiest person around at the time. I imagined my friends would be glad to see me when I walked into the new class where they were, and we could all sit together as there was a big table in my school where three students could comfortably fit. But! Bolt from the blue, I had no value when I first entered the class. I sat down in front of my two friends as their seat was full. I was upset and wanted to return to the earlier section since I didn't want to be with them and felt left out. I tried to speak with them, but they were not interested. At the time, I did not understand their behavior, but as time passed, I began to understand.

Since the management personnel made it very clear to me that my section would not be altered again at any cost, I went to my new section shamefully. The head of school management said, "Your section will not be changed, even if the president showed up." I had no idea what to do next and felt utterly helpless. Since my parents would have been concerned if I had told them what was going on with me, I was alone and had no one to discuss my problems with. The only friend I had at that moment was also in the other section. Still, I kept quiet for several days. I made numerous attempts to be friends with the two boys in my section, and during that period, I didn't even care about my self-respect. But eventually, they began to bully me.

Dark clouds, however, do not last forever. One day, I went to sit with some other classmates. There were six people in that group, and they were the real backbenchers, a complete package. Everyone was there, from the top student to the

worst student. Whatever the situation, they were always cheerful, even with little things. They didn't care what other people thought; they were more of a “give respect, take respect” type of group. They motivated me and improved my personality, so being with them made me happy. School was fun again.

There used to be a competition for the position of captain at my school, and I was one of the candidates. I was the only candidate who received the maximum number of votes—732—out of the 1000 cast. The end is the new beginning. From a guy who was only known by three friends and his little group to the most popular student. I began to defend myself and became more confident in myself.



Religion by Bezawit Gebremichael

Women are to dedicate their lives to stand by and service men”; “A wife shall always be beneath her husband and like an extension of him”; “If you were to be slapped on the right cheek, offer the left one as well”; “Never question me, my actions or my words.” These were some of the lines I was being taught from the Bible growing up. These sayings were given to me as guidance to dictate my life. I was raised in an Orthodox Christian family where I was told to have faith in and worship God with no questions. I went to church every Saturday and Sunday, prayed twice a day and before every meal, attended every single sermon that our church held, and memorized Bible quotes, prayers, and worship songs. I fasted for almost 200 days a year (not eating any form of protein because dedication to God was proven by strengthening the soul and weakening the body by depriving it of body-building nutrients). It was difficult and rigorous but as a kid, I did it from fear of what would come if I didn’t.

As I got older, though, the more ridiculous the religion I grew up with seemed to me. I think the questioning came from having access, through my phone, to the lives that people all around the world were living. Women weren't shamed for wanting to work or rejecting the idea of a familial life; kids were allowed to be kids and question whatever they didn't understand; and societal norms didn't revolve around a religious book people were pressured to believe in. The more I learned about the western world's relationship with religion, the more I rejected my teachings.

When I was around eight or nine years old, my parents had an argument about something that I don't remember. What I vividly remember is my dad being loud and insulting, and my mom simply standing there, giving no response, just taking it all. After he left, I asked her why she didn't even attempt to say her part or defend herself and she said, "Oh no, my faith forbids it, and I don't want to anger God by talking back to my husband." Why would God be angry over someone defending themselves when they were clearly being belittled and verbally bashed? And why would God be angry at my mother only and not my dad? Why would a loving God say that women are beneath men, promote sexism and want to keep people poor? Simple: because she's a woman, and he's not.

Another incident that darkened my connection with religion is a conversation with my uncle on my dad's side. He struggles financially, to the point where he eats only one meal a day, but refuses to earn money above a certain amount because he believes earning more money will disconnect him from God. I

truly don't understand this as hard as I try. Why would living a comfortable lifestyle ever make you sinful?

I questioned if it was all some scam to keep people in line and behaving the way a few men wanted. I thought it promoted poverty by portraying wealth as the ultimate evil. Isn't poverty the ultimate evil though? Isn't it what causes starvation, illiteracy, and death for so many people? Why, if god is so forgiving and open to his children, would he say that questioning his words or actions is punishable by a lifetime in hell? It didn't make any sense to me.

The judgment within the Christian community is something that pushed me away from religion as well. The looks and comments that you'd get if you wore your netela (hair cover for women) wrong, the harsh slams if you were to ever ask a question, and God forbid you ever skipped a fasting day. Wasn't it supposed to be a safe and loving environment? Why were people seeking self-validation by putting others down or deeming them "less Christian"? The strictness of the religion resulted in a tense relationship among the believers because it always boiled down to being the most obedient, the least questioning, the least curious, and the least ambitious. They were so ignorant.

Despite all this, religion did make me happy sometimes. The church that I went to growing up would feed the homeless every week after sermons with homemade food from almost everyone who attended that day. Good Fridays were my favorite. There would be at least 1,000 people inside the church singing and praying in sync from 3am to 6pm. I would be thirsty and hungry and sweaty and drained by the end of the day but also filled with warmth and happiness from the

comfort that the day brought me. The candles lining the church walls and casting soft orange glows, the all-white attire, the smell of incense and burning cardamom, the soothing sounds of the prayers, and the scorching heat from being in a room with so many people made me content. I loved Good Fridays.

But when I was 15, I started drifting away from religion and even becoming opposed to it, gravitating instead towards atheism and anti-religious perspectives. I remember being very struck by an interview with Ricky Gervais I saw around this time in which he says, "Praying just in case there is a God is like hanging garlic over your door just in case there is a Dracula." The interviewer replied, "If 95% of Americans believed that there was a Dracula, I might hang garlic on my door." Ricky then said something that's stuck with me since I heard it: "Exactly. It has nothing to do with the credibility of the truth, it has to do with the popularity of the idea."

Is that what all my belief had been? Had all the effort and commitment been for nothing but a widely accepted idea? I stopped praying, going to church, and fasting in spite of my parents' protests. As time went on, however, and I completely abolished my connection to God, I started feeling depressed, like my days dragged on forever and I found no excitement for anything. I got anxious and felt unprepared for even the smallest events. It felt like I was drifting around aimlessly in an abandoned place every day. My mom told me it's because my soul had something precious that I took away from it and that's why I felt the way I did. But why, if it was so precious, were a lot of the things involved with it so conflicting? I hated the state of mind that I was in, but I didn't want to go back to the religion that told me to

follow ideas that I abhorred. I kept avoiding the way I felt, thinking if I didn't give it attention or weight, it would go away. It never did.

I went to church after about two years. Just randomly after school on a rainy Wednesday afternoon. I remember having a really bad day that day, not because of something big or terrible but just little bad incidents that added up to ruining my day. I didn't want to walk back home, do homework and the usual after-school routine but I also didn't want to go out with friends or do anything fun. I put my headphones in, playing "Do I Wanna Know" by the Arctic Monkeys and started walking to wherever my mind would take me. I was very observant that day: I guess sensitivity humbles us into acknowledging other people's presence way more than usual—at least I feel that way. I didn't have an umbrella because I usually Uber or ride with my friends to go home so I was fully soaked in rain, but I loved that feeling. It was therapeutic. People were frantic and running around trying to get cover from the rain, a little girl was trying to drink the rain droplets with her head thrown back and her mouth wide open, a teenage guy slipped but caught himself on a pole. Tree branches were all waving in symphony because of the wind that was also accentuating the cold and giving the streets that crisp rainy scent.

I kept walking through all of it until, to my absolute shock, I found myself walking towards the church that my mom took me to when I was little. Somehow, when I felt I needed comfort, I went straight to the thing I walked away from when I rationalize everything. I continued inside and it was empty because there were no sermons or occasions. It was simply open and inviting. I sat at one of the pews and just spent time there, staring at the paintings and the beautifully painted ceiling, the

candles, and the dust on the carpet. This was interrupted when my ringtone blared so loud in the silence that it made me physically flinch. It was my mom calling, wondering where I was because it was getting late—it was almost 8pm. I usually finished school and walked home at around 4pm. I'd spent four hours at the church and I was feeling so much lighter. I felt more at peace and soothed. But this confused me. My thoughts towards religion confused me: Why did it affect me so much, both positively and negatively?

Three years, and a move to New York later, and I'm still confused. I don't follow the religion or believe in a lot of its teachings but I still go to church and pray. I went to the church of St. Francis Xavier recently and spent hours there just admiring its beauty and feeling very calm. I want to go to St. Patrick's Cathedral next. I want to go to churches all over the world. The high, arched ceilings, colorful stained-glass windows, paintings, delicately carved walls lined with lanterns, thick and vibrant carpets under hand-carved wooden pews are so beautiful to me. I love the substantial feel in the air, a place that's witnessed years of joy, tears, prayers, pleas, confessions, and grief. It will always bring me a sense of comfort and I don't want to question that. Praying everyday makes me feel better and less anxious and I want to keep doing it.

That doesn't mean I stand by any of the things I didn't believe in before like the oppression of women, the promotion of destitution, and the ignorance of society, but I still appreciate the support to the less fortunate and would love to celebrate Good Fridays again. For now, I'm in a mental state where I'm letting myself do the things that my soul feels it needs.

Questioning religion gave me the mental liberty to think and act independently without feeling guilt or disappointment in myself. I feel like I am more confident as a woman in my thoughts and my beliefs and I feel like I have the power now to make decisions and lead a life that I choose without looking to men for approval. I am at a place where I'm letting myself enjoy the beauty and solace in religion without associating myself with the ignorance and discriminatory aspects of it. I'm understanding that everything is a package of good and of bad and we can balance the good without being stained by the bad.



Navigating a New Society: A Personal Account by AaroHi Poudel

Now, don't go into the kitchen for four days and stay as separate as you can from your friends at school," my mother said when I got my first-ever period while I was in middle school. While I was worried that there was a flesh-eating monster inside my stomach that was killing me, my mother was worried that I'd touch the bedsheets in her room and she'd have to wash them because I'd now made them impure.

I remember growing up in Nepal, how my mother never visited temples for a few days in a month or how my grandfather screamed at her when she mistakenly touched the flowers that he kept to use during his *puja*, his daily ritual of worship. I always wondered what he was angry at her about because what she had done was nothing at all, but I didn't say anything because they were adults, and I was taught to never question them. However, when I got my first period and I was asked to not go to the temple the same way as my mother, I couldn't help but be extremely curious about what that meant.

“Why do you have to be like this? What have I done wrong?” I asked my parents, whose reply was simply that I should respect Nepali traditions. They told me how easy I had it, since women in rural areas were kept in cowsheds for seven days every month. I thought maybe I did have it easy; at least I could see my friends in those days, unlike Dipa, my best friend at school. Her parents didn’t let her come to school during that time. Thinking about this bizarre experience now, many years later, I realize that this was the moment that I began questioning why things were so different for me and my mother as compared to the rest of my family.

Five years later, I arrived at JFK airport in the United States. I was baffled by the things there were to see. Not only was I fascinated by the big airport, but also by the people. People here looked so different than I did. There were people playing music for money just outside the airport. It felt like something you saw in movies. But most of all, I was surprised to see women dressed in clothes that weren’t covering their knees.

“Look at the woman wearing the black ripped shorts and crop top. I hope I never embarrass my parents like that,” I said to my friend Deepum as I looked at the woman from the corner of my eyes. It felt like I was betraying my values even by looking and liking what the women were wearing here. My friend, however, brushed off my comments and started looking excitedly at the big escalators that took you from one place to another in a jiffy.

That wasn’t the end of the cultural differences that I saw between me and the new people that were around me now. The worst of it all was something that happened with my roommate here.

“But should you really cook? You just got your period,” I said to my roommate who looked at me with wide eyes.

“I don’t get you sometimes. What has my period got to do with cooking?” she replied.

“You’re not supposed to touch stuff when it’s that time of the month,” I said, in a “duh” tone, thinking about what I had been doing all these years.

She stopped listening to me and went inside the kitchen, cooked lunch for the both of us and did her chores. I showered twice that day and prayed for an entire evening so nothing would happen to me now that I’d eaten the food. And to my surprise, nothing happened.

A few days later, I was telling my friend Deepum what had happened, who exclaimed, “What!!! You said what to her? I thought you would grow out of all those draconian rules that you had been following at least once you moved to the States. First with the clothes and now with this? Don’t you feel liberated now that you’re here and can do whatever you want?”

“But this is what I’ve always done and what I’m supposed to do,” I said hesitantly.

The word “liberated” was something I always thought I felt, but watching women feeling normal doing whatever they wanted, I wasn’t so sure anymore.

“What other people back home say you’re supposed to do isn’t always the right thing, you know. I know we have our own cultures and traditions, but there are some things that you should really think through,” Deepum said calmly.

That night, I couldn't stop thinking about what a bubble I had been living in back home. Here, you have the opportunity to be whoever you want, do things however you want to, when back home people make snarky comments at you even if you speak a little loud to your elders. The values, both good and bad, that my society back home has instilled upon me are so internalized that it is very difficult for me and other people like me to let go of these beliefs. Even if you think that maybe the rules are wrong, you feel ashamed to even be thinking about the fact that a rule might be wrong because that's what we are taught from a very young age. Moving to an entirely new place is now a way for me to reflect on everything that has happened until now and to make a fresh start, and I'm very excited at the prospect of being able to do so.



No Matter Where I go, or Where Life Will Take Me, You Will Always Have My Back by Escarlet Hernandez

Since I was little, I lived with my mother, sister, and other family members in a small rural town called Luperon Puerto Plata in my home country, the Dominican Republic. There were a lot of houses close to each other. Everything was surrounded by an intense green cloud, bathed in a green scent, and the sweetness of mangoes and cherries. Still, when I was thirteen years old, everything changed when my family decided that moving with my father to the United States was the best decision, so that I could take advantage of new opportunities and a better quality education.

Everything around me was new, including a new home, new people, a new country, a different culture, and, most importantly, a different language and a father I had not met before. My father moved to New York when I was three years old and my sister was only a few months old. Even though we used to talk with him on the phone and on FaceTime calls, we never got the chance to meet him in person until I was thirteen years old. We met him the same year we were coming to New York, just

weeks before the move. When you come from a small town, you can feel like you're losing your mind in the middle of a strange country. It can be scary and you can feel anxious, but there is always something to learn and enjoy from changes.

It was nice to meet my father, but it was uncomfortable for me to have to live with someone I had never spent much time with, despite the phone calls. My father used to tell me, "Estoy aquí para lo que necesiten, solo tienen que preguntar, hablar," which means, "I am here for you, you just have to ask for it," while all I used to answer was, "Gracias, lo haré." I started to get even shyer than I was when I was back home, since I did not feel confident talking with him yet and only had my sister to talk to.

The first day we arrived, I saw New York as a prominent place where I could get lost, see new faces, and not be able to communicate or understand what people were saying. It was a radical change for my sister and me and a completely new experience. I lived on Flatbush Avenue for six years. The neighborhood was mostly made up of people from Mexico and people from the islands of the Caribbean. There are many establishments like clothing stores, restaurants, and grocery stores, among others. My father used to take us to as many places as he could, to show us the city, the life here, the food, and how everything works. As I started exploring the city with my father and sister, I realized how different the environment here is. We did not even know who our neighbors were. Every time I walked on the streets of New York, I saw how focused people were on their things, the phones controlling their minds, long-distance conversations, and the rush always after them.

For some, every stop was a lost minute. This made me miss my mom back in the Dominican Republic and the time spent with my family, like when we gathered together in my grandmother's house to cook meals, laugh, and tell stories about youth. I felt like we did not have enough time to do everything we had to do. Every day was a day of rushing. With school and homework, we did not have enough time or energy to cook fresh meals after school, so we had to cook our meals the night before and save them in the refrigerator for the next day. Back home, I used to eat freshly cooked meals. My father used to help us by cooking for us sometimes. He reduced the pressure a bit.

With the school schedule here, the school programs, the homework, and the house duties, I felt I barely had time to eat and sleep. I used to go to bed late at night because I had school homework and projects. The school schedule was much different here, compared to how it was in the D.R., and so I had less free time. In the D.R., we used to start school at seven a.m. and finish at four p.m., but the homework they gave us was barely anything, since we used to do almost everything at school. I started managing my time by doing homework early after school and doing the projects right after the teacher introduced them.

Perhaps the biggest support to help me through this challenging period of adjustment were my teachers. My school was bilingual, so I had teachers who spoke Spanish and who were from the same country as me. I met one of my teachers two weeks before classes, around four to five in the evening. We met in the same room where my classes were going to take place. Ms. Peña was in her forties, shortish, with honey-colored eyes covered with her green glasses. I was nervous and scared

when I met her, considering the surprise test that she was giving us. I felt thousands of scared butterflies inside my belly, shaky and anxious, but she looked at us and said, “No tengan miedo de preguntar, enfóquense en sus metas y todo valdrá la pena,” which means, “Do not be afraid of asking questions, focus on your goals and everything will be worth it.” The only thing I could do was thank her for her comprehension. It made me feel comfortable knowing that I would have someone who could help me communicate, who could help me learn in school in a language I could understand. She introduced me to some classmates who spoke Spanish to help me become more integrated into the class and the school. She also pushed me to talk more, and to not be so shy. I took a risk, and I started making new friends by asking for help with school assignments and even by asking how to take a train somewhere.

However, it took me time to get used to living in New York and to understand the culture, people’s way of living, and the places. I started feeling more comfortable and adapted to my schedule and the food. My relationship with my father has been improving over the years; we talk more, and I do not feel embarrassed anymore when talking to him. I let my father in. His wisdom about life, and the stories he has told, have taught me more than I expected.

One day in the car on our way home, we had a conversation where my father taught me not to sit and wait for the opportunities to come, but to go and seek them out. I learned that putting my shyness away sometimes can help me open new doors and new opportunities that can help me achieve many of my dreams. Wise people

will come into our lives to give us life advice that can cause an improvement in ourselves.



This Very Moment by Barbare Sturua

I was in elementary school when our literature teacher, who was enthusiastic about trying to make us see the hidden world buried between the lines of stories written on paper, asked us to choose between wisdom and wealth. “Raise your hand if you choose wisdom!” screamed the teacher, and I was the only one who rushed her hand toward the sky. “Raise your hand if you choose wealth?” said the teacher and the frenzied friction of arms flying towards the sky made me startle with fear. Isn’t it clear that knowing everything will open every door?! That wisdom can make us wealthy too, if that’s the desire?! From the start, it was clear that there was a glitch in the world and we choose to live knowing it. There are questions without a correct answer or an answer at all and we have no other choice but to search endlessly for these answers, knowing that we will never get to the end.

The first steps of my search for the dead-end questions—or rather, questions without an end—were taken by being born in a country that gave up its freedom to maintain its religion. I was born in The Republic of Georgia. My ancestors chose to

side with our eternal enemy, Russia, instead of living happy lives and being under the claws of the Ottoman Empire. The early 2000s were dark and cold. The Soviet Union had collapsed 10 years before and people were left in ashes. No official currency, no food, no electricity, no heat, and only each other. My family wasn't extremely religious but I was baptized when I was 33 days old. We didn't have much money to have a ceremony at the church, so my parents called a priest and a couple of friends. We had no electricity so my mom used to touch a metal stick from our balcony to the cables in the street and our light bulb would magically turn on. My dad filled up a water bucket with holy water, the priest came, their friends got a gold cross for me, which was sold shortly after, and I became an Orthodox Christian. But I think it takes much more than just a random shower in the living room to be anything in this world.

Growing up, there was a church right across the street from our home. I used to go there and find peace. I listened to the silence, to people's whispers to God, I heard the candles burning their wishes and I stared into the calm eyes of the icons fading into the ancient walls. I remember sunlight finding its way through clerestory windows and reflecting on the silky scarfs that women wore. I still feel the echoes of the slow steps towards the crucified Christ. I remember the people kissing his feet and kneeling to ask for forgiveness, love, freedom, happiness, harmony, and peace. I saw them close their eyes, while pushing their palms together and hands towards their hearts and asking for what they truly wanted. I used to stare up at the dome and listen to the heavenly sounds of the chorister singing gospels. The church had a

priest who used to slowly step out of the temple and give it a moment of silence. People's eyes used to fill up with hope and sincerity.

My father has always been one of my closest friends. While my family was never religious and was always skeptical about my frequent visits to the church, my father saw that I was searching for something beyond peace. I always considered him a wise man despite his alcohol addiction and the chaos of being a Method actor. We started reading the Bible together. We used to stay up till three a.m. rereading chapters, analyzing, and discussing. There was so much more to the text than just simple rules and being told what's right or wrong. It is a book about ourselves and a book about each other. It makes us understand who we are and what we are capable of. It makes it impossible not to love everything and everyone around us and feel the hope that we are much more than animals. I still don't know much about the Bible as it is an ocean of life, but as time goes by, my father reminds me to go back to certain chapters, and I see that I interpret the same words in a completely different way. Sometimes I forget why I would ever need to read the Bible. I forget the names, the words, and the chapters. But I always clearly remember how my father and I spent hours reading together. I learned much about patience and the need to get out of my comfort zone. At least the endless hours spent reading with my father freed me from the traditional stigmas of the institutionalized "church."

There is a distinct line between faith and the hierarchal Christian church. I listened to how homosexuality was wrong, and how men are born to be the leaders of the family; I heard that temptations and desires are sinful and I disagreed because all these are part of being a human. I was taught at home, though, that God doesn't

forbid love, freedom, or equality. As much as I felt that the church right across our house was the home of God and I was a guest of his, I disagreed with the frames and limitations of what other mortal humans, allowing themselves to speak for God, told to people trying to find the truth.

Later on, I stepped into my late teenage years. I liked to walk in the rain, smoke cigarettes and stink myself up with cheap perfume before entering home. I enjoyed skipping classes and listening to Led Zeppelin instead. I enjoyed reading books about love and freedom instead of doing mathematics homework. The more I started to live life, the more questions filled up my mind. I traveled with my family to different countries. Later I started traveling with friends. I read more, I listened more, I watched more and I realized that all things that serve a greater purpose have something fundamental in common. It appeared that it is not Orthodox Christianity that carries the meaning of existence but rather it is us human beings. Throughout cultures, we call it different names and give it different forms. Some call it Buddhism and others call it Islam. I happened to be born in a place where they call it Orthodox Christianity. It was clear that religion and God are two different things.

Religion is just a word that we people came up with. It is our way of saying thank you. We worship something unknown and try to verbalize it. God is something unexplored, and unreachable. It is something that is part of every one of us. It is force, or energy, or something that doesn't even have a name, but rather it can only be felt.

This feeling I am trying to define made me believe that we are much more than just a complex combination of molecules. It made me believe that there is some

innate moral that dictates that the most valuable thing we can achieve is not physical or material prosperity, but rather it's that feeling when an unexplainable voice in our heads whispers how magical those unimportant moments are.

The constant search for meaning, the extreme hope of being more than a survivor of natural selection, and the endless chaos in my head wondering what I am even doing on this planet, finally led me to an answer: nothing really matters. It doesn't matter what happened in the past, or what's going to happen in the future. It doesn't matter how human kind was created or how we will disappear. All that matters is that we are alive, living in this very moment.

I started to meditate. I sometimes sit in silence and breathe. After every 10 seconds, my mind wanders away to faraway places, but I breathe in and come back to where I am. I try to concentrate on awareness and let everything else go. Those 10 seconds until my mind starts to run away to everyday problems, until I suddenly remember that I have to put my laundry in the dryer, or that I have to pay for the internet, or that I have to attend a meeting, I sit in silence and I feel the moment. I try to exist here and now—without reaching something that goes beyond my ability to explore. Sometimes whatever we are looking for is much closer than we think. I learned this from my grandmother who always searches for her glasses all around the house, while they are just on her head. I realize that I don't even know what my favorite color is or what my favorite food is. I have never been in love and I tremendously miss my best friend who lives on another continent at the moment. I am still fascinated by how the tiniest creatures such as ants survive in this gigantic world or how leaves disappear so fast after the fall. These unimportant details of

life, the thoughts we have to which we give no value are the answer to our existence. The world is a construct of our mutual existence. Buddhists say that the entire separate universe is inside every individual. So while I search for the truth in books, in other people's viewpoints, in history, in places, while I feel angry for having no answers, while I observe others' behaviors, while I assume things, and while I send letters to God, it might all be easier to start from looking around and acknowledging the very present moment, because that is all we have.



I Love You! by Sambidha Bhandari

I love you! Everything I do is out of love. For love. “I love you!”
You want me to believe all the pain and suffering I go through is just for
love because love is the most beautiful divine entity that will help you
forget everything.

I hate the love you made me feel! I hate everything you made me do. Every
suffering I faced, every tear I shed, every cut I made is because of the love you often
quote. But what could you ever see? The tight Band-Aids were forever fixed. In the
middle of my own canvas stood a never-forgetting shiny gold watch and long sleeves
covering up the mess.

In the beginning, there are two characters called Love and Hate. Both are
born from the same womb, sharing the same similarities, yet interpreted so
differently.

Love: 4 letters, 1 syllable. There is always a fight to hold onto Love.

Hate: 4 letters, 1 syllable. There is always a fight to disregard Hate. But what
did the pitiful Hate do differently than Love?

The meaning of love is different for everyone. Love can be sexual interaction. Love can be soft, small puppy affection and butterflies in your stomach. Love can be between family members and the undying faith of siblings. Love can be crazy. Love can be toxic. Love can be dangerous. But everyone wants the pleasant feeling of love and being loved for a lifetime.

In sixth grade, my friend from school mentioned how her lovely new boyfriend, whom she met three weeks earlier, loves her, pampers her, and always says, "I love you!" I couldn't believe all the faces and giggles she made every time we passed by his classroom. Two weeks later, I could see bruises on her hands and legs. She mentioned how he loved her, and the bruises were to preserve it. We were sixth graders trying to figure out what ninth graders were trying to do to us, while they repeatedly drilled the words "I love you" into our minds.

My friend's mother began to notice how her baby doll was changing. She decided to have a conversation with the principal. On the way to the principal's office, she witnessed her daughter being beaten by an older boy, who was repeating how much he loves her. That was the end of love my friend and I saw. In our minds a sentence was permanently etched, "Abuse and bruising is hatred and not love."

I keep on asking myself why two characters born from the same womb were mentioned differently. Hatred was the brother of love and yet everyone chooses love over hatred. Was it because love is a synonym for forgetting and hate is the truth we want to forget?

My friend and I couldn't bear to hear the word "I love you" again. It brought her more terror than it did to me, but she kept on looking at the garden. The garden,

which was abandoned with no inch of sunlight, was often used as a new parking garage for the priest who kept on visiting. The swings behind the parked vehicles never swung, and the penguin dustbin, which was always clean but full, were the only existing characters. This was the abandoned garden of dark. But in the dark my friend saw light and one single blooming dandelion which always fluttered in the wind. Even though she was consistently abused, she would smile and say, "Why is it that I felt love with him more than from my parents? I love him. Is it wrong?"

I couldn't answer her. Later that same year, I was walking home from my neighbor's house. I was eleven years old when the head of the house decided to do something funny with me. He was a family friend, who mentioned, "I do not have a daughter. You are my daughter." He exclaimed that the love he felt for me required hugging and touching my back. Slowly, the love of hug and touch moved from my back to under my skirt. It went from a simple peck on the cheeks to suction in the lips. One day, he pushed me to the wall at the end of the hallway they had, and started exploring me. With touch of love from my back to my skirt to my chest and above. My flower died that day. I tried and tried to break free from the spell he had captivated, yet every single struggle was in vain. As soon as the door opened, I pushed him with all my might and ran towards my house never looking back. When I mentioned this to my parents, they told me it was all in my head because he loves me. He is an elder who loves me. That is love.

From that day on it never stopped; caresses turned into grasps, affection blurred into desire, and innocence burnt into ashes, the embodiments of love I acknowledged. I ran to everyone I could to ask for help but all I got was: It is all a

dream, and my little brain is making up stories because the brain is magnificent with the majestic power of creativity. My voice was buried inside two layers of pain stronger than duct tape; no matter how much I struggled, the one in pain was always and only me.

By the time I was 16, my little brain started calling brother depression, sister anxiety, and cousin insomnia the caring relatives I never knew I had so close. Everyone around me noticed a change, but no one owned up to why I became different. I built up all my courage and proceeded to ask my parents why they never heard my voice. Their response: "We did this because we love you. I love you, my love. And I wanted to protect you from all the evils that would affect you if this was out."

Love!? My parents loved me, so they decided to suffocate me with all the pain because love is a Band-Aid. Love is a Band-Aid to all sufferings. "I love you!" fixes all pain. That is when I drew this line between love and hate. If you tell me that you hate me, I'll trust every bit of you because that is the truth, and you can never sugar-coat it. But if you tell me you love me, I will never trust any word you say.

Love protected me!? No. Love never protected me. Instead, it broke me from all the sides that I fixed myself. My parents hate my attitude, but they can never question anything I ever did to mend myself from 0 to 10. I was alone picking up pieces that everyone broke. Love never picked up the pieces; I did.

By the time I was in my second year of high school, I wished I did not have to go home. I used to make plans with my friends and go to various areas of Kathmandu just to taste a few bits of freedom because I knew once I was back home,

I was locked again inside the haunting loop. My friends never knew the reason I never wanted to go home, and I never understood the reason they all *wanted* to go home.

During the lockdown of 2020, my friends, despite being with their parents all day, actually enjoyed those moments, while I sat cursing every single day that I must stay home and never breathe easily. I remember a particular conversation I had with a classmate. She often told me how her parents are her everything and how she cannot imagine a day without them. She went shopping with her parents. If she wanted to eat outside, they always took her. If she cried, they would bring chocolates and her favorite pizza to lighten her mood, and if she was ever in pain, she said they would force the whole universe into one and take off all her pain. I was enraged with anger; I was jealous; and, most of all, I was hurt. I questioned why she was that lucky child who loves her parents more than hate itself, while I stood in the same perimeter, but I hated my parents more than love itself. My friend said, "Your parents are weird. Mine would never do that."

I replied with, "Your parents are weirder. Do all parents show love that way?"

Everyone I asked nodded their individual heads. Turns out the way I was raised has always been completely different than others. My parents followed a silent treatment rule. If they were mad at me, no one in the household would have a conversation with me until the end of the third day. No matter how much I apologized or begged, all I received was a cold shoulder. If I ever reciprocated, I was given the usual line "I LOVE YOU!" A big tight hug and "I LOVE YOU!"

I began a fight against “I love you.” I could not do too much to offend my parents because the universal truth of them bringing me to this world stays. But I wanted to run as far as I could from my parents. I imagined that would mend my broken heart. I started my application to come to the United States.

“College here in the U.S. is so much better. You can handle it easily,” my friend said. She kept on speaking comforting words as I submitted my paper, received the final decision from the University, and walked into the Embassy for the visa.

“I pray your words are true as they sound,” I always replied, staying in the darkness of my room, hoping I would get the visa stamp on my passport.

Now, I live seven thousand miles away from my parents.

“I hate my parents!” and that has not changed. I still hate my parents. I still hate the fact that everything I do is questioned even here. The difference is I can make a decision. I can choose to act as if I obeyed, or I can actually obey. I hate their expressions, I hate their thinking, I hate their judgment, but I know all the nights I cried, muffling my scream with a pillow, with every small string of my heart that broke, my mother broke too. I knew with every scar my dad saw in my arms, he cursed himself under his breath. But as that little girl who still relives the nightmares, I can never forgive them. As much as I love them, I hate them equally.



Mistaken by Prakriti Budhathoki

To become likable you need to be selfless.” I grew up listening to this exact sentence on repeat. It might sound like my parents were great at parenting for me to be taught things like this from such a young age. But when you really contemplate it, do you think a person needs to be selfless just to be likable? My parents taught me to be selfless and I became so. It was as simple as that. What wasn’t simple were the consequences that I have faced up until now for being a selfless person. And up to this day, selflessness is one of the worst qualities that I have developed as a person.

When I was young, I had to bottle up all my emotions because my parents used to beat me up for crying or wanting anything that a normal child does. One incident when I was a child stands out: My father used to have money plants all over the room and he adored them very much. I was three years old and curious about the leaves, so I plucked one of the leaves off in front of my father. He saw me do it and then scolded me and hit me. He also punished me for standing on the bed for three hours without moving. I was

always scared of my father. Even to this day, I am never able to say what I want in front of him. I will reach out to my mother first whenever anything happens. I got punished for wanting to pluck one small leaf off a money plant. Now imagine what I had to go through for wanting things like Barbie dolls and teddy bears. This is how I learnt to suppress my own needs and be selfless to please my parents.

Ever since I was young, my parents told me not to have any friends because friends are nothing more than a distraction. This sounds very sad and pathetic. I had to grow up in an environment where I wasn't supposed to go out with friends, let alone have a close one. This situation made me feel very alone and, as a result, now, I am very selfless when it comes to my friends. However, this is also a traumatic response that I developed as a result of my parents' parenting.

I craved friendship and some good connections but I didn't want friends to only see the side of me that I let them see. I wanted them to see how I actually felt, to listen to my opinions and then give feedback accordingly. Because of this, I have gone many years without having any friends and those were the worst years of my life. The wave of sadness hitting me, the feeling of loneliness, seeing a group of friends having fun while I am sitting alone looking at them: it was very depressing. In high school, I finally had two best friends and we were a trio. Our friendship was admired by many teachers and other classmates were jealous of us. We had been a trio for only two years yet our friendship was strong—but then our classes were changed. My two friends were in the same class while I was in a separate class. That's when the friendship started going downhill. The two of them became a duo and I would always be left out of the things we three used to do together like having lunch together, and

going to libraries for our assignments.

It is common for my friends to have other friends as well. But one thing I hadn't expected from them was to be part of a crowd of girls looking at me as I was humiliated. To this day, this experience feels very traumatic to me. It was a normal lunch break in my high school and I was waiting for my two friends to come and have lunch with me. But that day, a group of almost twenty girls came at me, cornered me in the classroom and then started questioning why I said certain things and did certain things. We were in our teenage years so it was normal for us to make mistakes and say things that we weren't meant to say. We all were teenagers and very sensitive. One of the girls who was also close to my two best friends once said that she would marry a certain guy if he's intelligent because he will be successful in the future and earn a lot of money. To me it sounded like she wanted the money and fame from someone else's success and that's what I said to her face. That girl got angry and then brought the whole group of girls to threaten me and accuse me of spitting nonsense and say that I should just stay away. They were a group of high school bullies.

I was completely baffled at the situation. I wasn't supposed to talk about things that I felt? Where had the freedom of speech gone? I couldn't answer or fight back with those girls. I was lost and then my eyes met my friends'. The two of them were looking at me standing amongst the crowd like I really had done something wrong. That was the day I broke down completely yet was unable to express anything—because of how I was brought up—so I smiled at my friends like I never expected them to help me anyway. Being selfless has made me very much unable to process my own emotions. Whether I'm hurt or sick or sad or angry, I can feel all of it but lack the ability to process and show my

emotions. This is why I am misunderstood by so many people. I grew to hate this trait of mine so much that at one time I had started to hate myself for my existence.

After this incident, I was very hurt and I started drifting away from my friends. I never told them about the way they made me feel. I acted like everything was fine and instead tried to hold on to a friendship that was meant to go down. To this day, I haven't told the two of them that their actions hurt me very much. It was at this moment in life when I realized that no matter what I feel or what I have to go through, I would rather stay quiet than have to confront my emotions. This is just who I am. Especially when it comes to friends, I'd rather keep on being friends with someone than confront them with the things that they have done that hurt me.

After high school, I moved to New York from Nepal. Going to a new country is like restarting everything over again. I've got my freedom and privacy that I was very desperate to get back in my home country. But even after moving to a different country, this one trait of mine stayed the same. Right now there's a dengue outbreak in my country and my sister was diagnosed with it. So my family is a little tight with their income. I am low on money as well, as my parents send me money as my monthly allowance. My friends arrived in New York a month later than me. So I knew the way around the city, specifically, how to use the subway. When my friends came, I was broke and had only \$50. Yet instead of thinking about myself and my needs, I spent the money I had on visiting places and eating out with them. They each owed me \$100 as I had paid their deposit for the rent of their room. Until now, I haven't asked them for it. I want to tell them to give me my money but I am afraid they'll tell me I am very money-oriented and ditch me.

This personality trait is one of the things that I am trying to work out the most. I get complimented by my friends all the time because they say I never say no to them and am up for anything. The truth is I am scared that I will lose them if I say no or speak what is in my heart. But things have to change for me. Right now, I am in a whole new country for a fresh start and to live my life. Living and studying in a new place, a new country is a very big step in life. Leaving a country like Nepal has been one of my greatest achievements until now, even though I miss my family and friends back home. Leaving a patriarchal society with conservative values and ways of thinking has been a big step for me and now, I am in New York. I left everything behind along with the country. Part of what I hope I have left behind is my habit of holding myself back. Moving into a whole different country pushed me towards change.

I decided I needed to just go all out this time. It was midnight and my roommate and I were doing assignments while having gummy bears. In this situation, both of us were calm and had clear minds and were chatting about our life back in Nepal and how different New York is from Nepal. I thought, this is the moment and I will not get any more perfect situation. So, I confronted her about the personality trait I had. I told her that I have this habit of bottling up every emotion and then slowly fading away from the person that has hurt me. She said, "It is okay. We all have different personalities. If I do something that might offend or hurt you then please confront me right at the moment. Do not be scared. I won't fight with you or leave you. We will work it out together." I was happy that she was understanding and accepted my flaws. She told me not to worry about how my opinions will affect her and our other friends and just to say what I want to so that I don't have any of my feelings bottled up inside. It was the first time I ever

expressed myself and I got a good reaction from it. I am slowly learning and am happy with the changes I am seeing.

Someday, I hope to think about myself too while taking others into consideration. I need to love myself first to be loved by everyone else. And in the journey of learning and loving myself, I am learning that it is okay to be selfish. It is okay to be selfish enough to prioritize myself but not selfish enough to hurt others. Because being selfish isn't always about hurting others; sometimes it is about taking care of yourself. And if I don't take care of myself, no one else will. So this is my willingness to be selfish for myself.

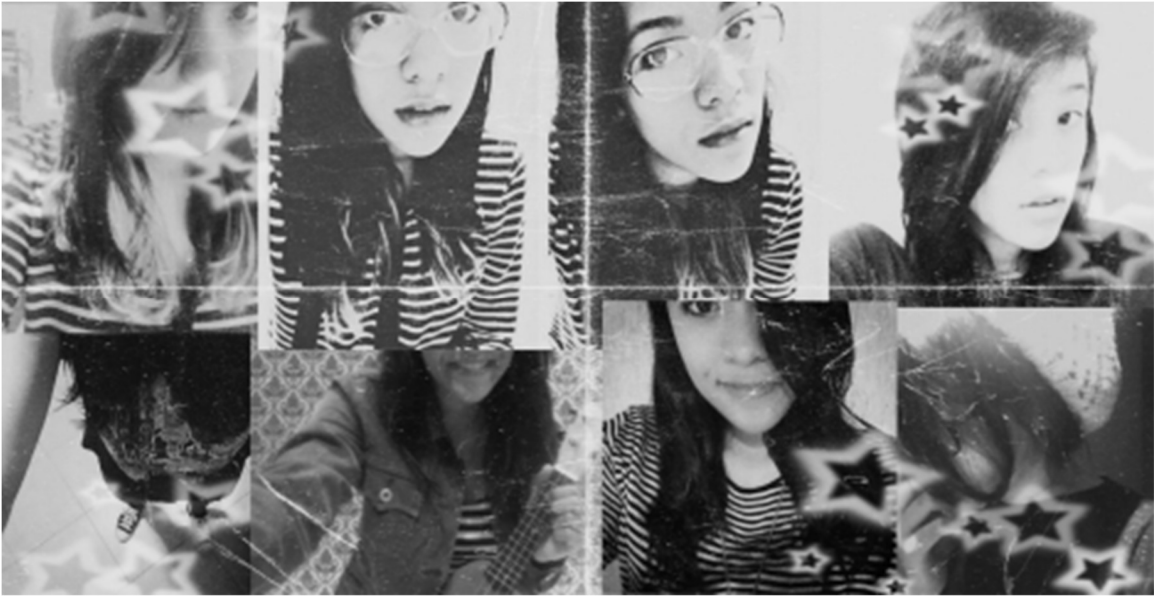


Photo collage by Livia Azevedo



All of Them at the Same Time by Livia Azevedo

The year was 2010 and emo culture was rising. With the boom of Fotolog, a social media website, in Brazil, as well as MySpace worldwide, this culture was growing amongst teenagers. As a pre-teen that wanted to fit in, I would try to become emo too. If you know anything about emo culture, you know that the icons of this movement had really pale skin because the sun was “so overrated.” There was only one problem: I am not white.

Growing up as a mixed kid in Brazil was not an easy task. Everything started when I realized the world had beauty standards and I was not invited to that party. If my memory is not failing me, it was after I got my first period, at 8 years old, that I started to care more about my looks. The first “problem” I ran into was my hair. I’m biracial—my mom is white and my dad is half-black, half-native Brazilian. My mom never knew how to take care of my hair because her hair has always been thick and really straight; mine, on the other hand, was a mess. Well, at least I thought it was. My mom would comb my hair and let it dry after the shower so if you gave it a day, it would look like a bird’s nest.

I got tired of that so, after complaining day and night to my mom how much I hated my hair, she took me to a beauty salon where she used to do her hair and I got my hair straightened for the first time. I remember how I felt. I felt like I was finally fitting in.

I grew up thinking my hair was some sort of “bad hair” because that’s what I would see in movies like *The Princess Diaries*, where the main character goes through a transformation to look like a “pretty princess” and the hairdresser straightens her hair and everybody loves it. It was also what I would see on social media. As I said, emo culture was growing while I was growing up and I was really into the internet at an early age. Even though I had a dial-up internet connection, I would spend my free time playing online games that would load on my giant, slow computer or scrolling social media. I started with Orkut and, there you would find communities like “I love being emo” or simply “emo community.” It was in these communities that I would find my first style influences. And they all had straight hair. But, all of a sudden, it was not just about hair anymore.

After straightening my hair for the first time, some years passed and I was now in middle school. That’s when things started to go wrong. With the change of schools and going to study in another city for the second time in my life, I was feeling a little overwhelmed. I started to lose touch again with my friends from my other school. Thinking about it now, maybe it was a good thing since they used to bully me a little and even make fun of the color of my gums. Yes, the color of my gums. You would think that that is stupid, and I thought so too—until I realized it was just racist. My gums used to be a little darker, because I have black in me. But to my “friends,” that was because they were rotten. That was one of the first times I experienced racism.

You would think that if you live in Brazil, one of the most diverse countries out there, you would not have to experience racism that often. But, believe me, Brazil is one of the most racist countries in the world. But, most of the time, it is a racism you wouldn't notice at first, unless you already understand racism in all of its forms. It's so subtle that it leaves you asking, "Am I the crazy one?" That was the question I posed to myself most of my life. Why am I being treated differently than this blonde girl? Why does everyone say she is pretty and say nothing to me? Why do they say my gums look ugly? Why do I feel weird around white people? Am I not wanted here?

Since a really young age, I was taught that I would be treated differently sometimes. My white mom taught me that. Because she knew. She knew that when we were together, people wouldn't think she was my mother. And that could lead to difficult situations. I have always been scared of these situations. Whenever I was in a store, since a very young age, I would make sure not to touch my purse (if I had one) and always keep my hands out of my pockets. I would catch myself standing with my hands open so people would know I wasn't grabbing anything. Nobody actually taught me that. It was a reflex, a response to what I have lived and seen. Even though I don't consider myself black, I am also far from considering myself white.

My point is, I have never felt white in my life, not even for a second, but I have always sought this. Was it because I was closer to my mom's side of the family or was it because white was the only reference I had on social media? It didn't matter. That was what I wanted to be.

Now, looking back, it hurts me that I did everything to fit into a box I could never fit into. But, as I grew up to learn, there are some things that you have to go through in

life, and those things will make you stronger and wiser. Now I know I'm not white or black or native. I'm all of them at the same time. And that's okay. I don't have to fit into anybody's box. I can fit in my own.

