DEFYING STEREOTYPES:
TO ASSIMILATE OR NOT ASSIMILATE?

By John Hansen

Assimilation – a suppressive term to most. It elicits thoughts of lost culture and compromised individuality, or of powerful authority forcing integration. To me, however, assimilation is associated with words like acceptance and equality, opportunity and advantage. The act of assimilating has been a benefit throughout my life.

Currently an English instructor at a community college in Arizona, I grew up in Iowa with a Caucasian father and a Korean mother. I received a B.A. in English from the University of Iowa and an M.A. in English Literature from Oklahoma State University.

I may look Korean, but don’t fit the mold. I’m not a whiz kid at math or science. I teach a variety of writing and literature courses. I happen to be athletic, participated in high school and college sports, and currently coach the local high school women’s tennis team. I’m 6’1”, can grow a full beard, and do not even play a stringed instrument.

I’ve always been hyperaware of Asian stereotyping in my life, the media, and society. I’d watch a movie like A Christmas Story (restaurant scene at the end) and groan at how the Asian character is scripted. Recent movies like Harold & Kumar or Star Trek, and television shows such as The Walking Dead seem to finally be breaking those stereotypes, albeit slowly. I remember saying to my wife, “Finally, a role that breaks common perceptions of the male Asian figure,” (Glenn gets the girl, has major scenes, is not depicted as weak or needs saving, and is not made fun of with small, crass comments from others).

I contend that this shift away from portraying the typical Asian male helps Asians as a whole by lessening generalizations and labels. I’ve had a stranger come up during a pickup game of basketball and say, “Man, you’re good!” I thought Asians weren’t good in sports. Maybe playing a good game of basketball will give the next Asian a chance. It is all about changing people’s mindsets. Speaking of mindsets, I was at a gas station in Arizona when a large truck pulled up. One spoke to me: his tone was demeaning and full of scrutiny. He wanted my name, why I was in town, and what I did for a job. When I answered with clear, intelligible English, his change in demeanor and tone was evident. He said, “You probably speak better English than me!”

There are plenty of examples of Asian-Americans who do not want to assimilate, and thereby reduce their chances of economic, social, or professional success. My Korean cousin from Los Angeles is one example. She came to live with us in Iowa and attended a local university, but didn’t like it because there were too many Caucasians, not enough Asian culture, and not enough diversity. She never made the effort to adapt, dropped out, and moved back to L.A.

I’m proud of my Korean-American heritage and culture. I’m glad that my mother taught me the language, history, and customs. I proudly gave my Korean name—Jae Young—as my son’s middle name. I currently travel two hours from home to eat authentic bulgogi and kimchee, and I’m ecstatic that my wife is a beautiful baby boy. Fatherhood comes with protecting him from the type of treatment of fellow Asians for the foreseeable future. I want my son to face fewer misconceptions of what Asians are “supposed to be.” I want him to have the chance to be his own person—not the person someone else presumes he should be on the basis of stereotypes.

When I think about how my mindset and lifestyle might help change the future treatment of fellow Asians for the better, when I think about people showing respect to my mother, and when I think about paving the way for my son to be treated equally and without prejudice, the cost of my personal assimilation seems minimal. I’ll always strive to do my best in every endeavor so that any encounter can become an opportunity to challenge individual bias.

Seeing my own mother put down because of her accent and the food she ate had a profound effect on me. This is why I feel so strongly about assimilation. Even today, when my mother wins at bingo, others make derogatory and racial comments. She just grins and waves her cash at them. Flashing a smile is often not enough.

Just over a year ago, the stakes of assimilating increased when I became a father to a beautiful baby boy. Fatherhood comes with protecting him from the type of treatment that my mom and I endured. I want my son to face fewer misconceptions of what Asians are “supposed to be.” I want him to have the chance to be his own person—not the person someone else presumes he should be on the basis of stereotypes.

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