

To Be Like Everyone Else

There I sat in a sea of fellow Vietnamese teenagers, with an unkind sun radiating above us. We encompassed an empty stage. Suddenly, a young Asian man graced the stage, introducing himself as a “recent” Stanford graduate of nine years and the son of the woman who organized the very Lunar New Year festival we were attending. As he began his speech, I began my nap.

Towards the end of his speech, my dad shook me awake just in time to catch the closing regards. The “recent” graduate preached that in order to gain the respect of mainstream America, Asian-Americans must contribute by obtaining respected roles such as doctors or lawyers. Only then could we “play our part” and “be like everyone else”. Courteously, our speaker was drowned in applause as he left the stage. But I was troubled. Is this also what my parents think? Would it be inappropriate of me to pursue a career in humanities, writing, etc.?

Immediately after the speech ended, my dad calmly pulled me aside from the emptying crowd. Given the solemn, earnest look on his face, I was expecting my second lecture of the day on why I should become a doctor. Instead, he warmly smiled and said, “I didn’t move halfway across the world, not knowing any English, with barely \$100 in my pocket for you to ‘be like everyone else’”. Like always, my dad knew exactly what I needed to hear.

That was four years ago. Today, I feel the Asian-American community needs to hear my father’s message. For far too long, growing up Asian in America meant facing prejudice, xenophobia, and stereotyping. Perhaps in the face of these obstacles, we Asian-Americans scrambled to find acceptance through our niche of being “the smart kids”. But our fault lies in that we settled for that role.

We are so glad to even be on stage, that we don’t dare to be center-stage. We are so glad to even make the team, that we don’t dare to be the star player. We are so satisfied with one dish on the menu, that we forget to try the others. So, we allow ourselves to be the understudy, the role player. Macroscopically, this results in underrepresentation of Asian-Americans in sports, politics, Hollywood, and other non-STEM fields.

So, what do I hope to contribute? What do I want to make happen? I want to make the Asian-American community valued, not just accepted. I want to make Asian-Americans a norm in all industries. I want to make Asian-Americans leaders, not just model followers. I want to make Asian-Americans heroes, not just sidekicks. I want to make Asian-Americans a community of game-changers, trailblazers. But most of all... I want to make my dad proud.

It is through the pursuit of these goals that I believe myself and my fellow Asian-Americans will not “be like everyone else” but will instead be the best version of ourselves, which is all we can hope to contribute.