

“Am I American? How Kindness Shapes Growth”

By Meral San

I pressed my finger into the cold wet blue ink. The stain stayed on me the whole day as I sat, waiting for my number to be called, in the Immigration Services center in Elizabeth New Jersey. The long lines agitated me, and the flickering fluorescent lights stung my eyes. I tried to glimpse everyone’s passport to see their origins and discreetly tilted my dark red one to reveal my own: the Republic of Türkiye. I made assumptions about everyone based on the country they were from and wondered what assumptions they were making about me. I hated going. Each time my mom told me we had to return, I’d be furious. *Why do I even have to go? Why couldn’t I just be born here?* To pass the time, I watched the ongoing video explaining the process, but the words merged and the images blurred. I didn’t want to learn. It made me feel less American.

My parents have been here in the US since 1998, but they returned to Turkey for a brief time, and that’s where they were in 2007 when I was born. Apart from just those first two months of my life, I’ve been living in northern NJ. Both my older and younger brother were born here, making me the odd one out. Yet it wasn’t always unpleasant. In elementary school, telling people I wasn’t born here was like a party trick. I pulled it out randomly, and I found “being foreign” brought attention and excitement. But one day in fourth grade, when we were researching news articles, a story appeared about Muslims born abroad being deported.

“Meral, do you know you’re getting sent back?”

I remember being startled and appalled at the classmate’s question. At home later, my mom told me it wasn’t true but that I shouldn’t tell anyone about my birth lest they get “the

wrong idea.” The heat of embarrassment rushed over me at having to keep this secret. *What am I? Am I American? Am I not?*

This feeling of not being 100% American started to fester in me. I felt increasingly impure and worried that people saw that “stain” on me. I developed OCD, feeling anxious about my own cleanliness, trying to avoid germs, even on door handles in public places, and this then became another secret I felt I had to hide, making me worry even further about how people perceived me. I sought therapy, struggling to let go of these ever-amplifying thoughts.

It was in coping with these ruminations that I finally began to unlock the larger challenges of my identity and how I can use kindness to develop my identity. I now actively practice acceptance, aiming to recognize the faulty assumptions we all make about each other. When an old friend asked me if I agreed with the way my religion treated women, I realized she was making an assumption based on a lack of knowledge, and I answered respectfully, saying that people tend to confuse culture and religion. In the same way, I remind myself that I, too, make assumptions based on a lack of knowledge, and I’m learning to make peace with the unknown. Being kind to myself and others instead of jumping to judgments about myself and the world improved the way I value my own identity, and from there, I won’t be so focused on how others perceive me.

I received my green card in my freshman year, and am now on a pathway to citizenship. With time and acceptance, the “stain” is fading, and I can embrace both my Turkish heritage and American life. I love sharing *borek*, a Turkish potato pastry, and having henna at my birthday parties so my friends can draw designs on themselves. I view kindness as a lifestyle and a way to share kindness with others. I am grateful to be a part of two cultures and hope to keep learning and growing in both.

