

Learning to Accept Other Cultures While Simultaneously Accepting My Own By Peter Flores

For many years, my family moved from obscure cities such as Blythe and Baytown, Texas to more prominent communities in Palm Springs before finally settling in Hemet to allow my brother and me to finally attend a school for more than two years. My father's practice facilitated these sudden movements, a notion that I condemned each time. Regardless of my disapproval, we moved constantly to Spanish communities throughout California where our Flores family name would help rather than hinder our way of life. As a result, we had always been welcomed into whichever town we moved to. Our neighbors would invite us for dinners, birthday parties, and other events normally meant for families. After making new friends with neighbors or classmates, two years would pass, and the process began anew.

Although we constantly moved, my brother remained to be the only friend that I did not fear losing. While my father spent nights in the hospital, my brother and I watched "Simpsons" cartoons, Lakers basketball games, and any television program other than the Headline News which my father absolutely adored. One night in the living room in the early 1990s, news of the L.A. riots appeared on the television to the absolute dismay of my parents. With a child's curiosity, I asked my father, "Why are they destroying those buildings?" Being a conservative Republican, my father simply replied, "Because blacks are stupid." My brother and I accepted my father's answer without any question, adopting this racist mindset until educated enough to repel it.

As a town dominated by white Middle Americans, Hemet may be perceived as the most inaccessible suburb in all Southern California. However, my teenage years, the most influential period in anyone's life, proved to be the greatest experience in my twenty years of existence, primarily as a result of Hemet's open-mindedness and willingness to accept a brown-skinned teenager. My brother and I were two of only five Asians that attended Hemet High School. For these reasons, it was very easy to become absorbed into "white-culture" and dismiss any Asian-American roots whatsoever. While my association to my Filipino culture slowly evaporated, "whiteness" dominated my relationship to my friends and family. Filipino dishes tasted awful, the Tagalog language sounded shrieking, and my mother's lack of modernization embarrassed me. This failure to recognize my unique cultural heritage allowed me to thrive as A.S.B. president, Editor-in-Chief of the school paper, and honors student. However, my shortsightedness distanced myself from my culture and, more importantly, my parents. Before my freshman year at UCLA, the thought of a life outside my parents command excited my remaining days in Hemet. Living on my own schedule and direction was what I had dreamed of during the summer of 2001. However, my ignorance towards my culture and my family finally caught up to me on the afternoon of September 11, 2001. As my family gathered around the television to watch updates on the New York City attack, I asked my father the same question I had posed almost ten years earlier, "Why did those people destroy those buildings?" Only this time, my father answered differently, "Because they hate the United States."

On that same day, my perception of America propagated by my experience in Hemet changed forever. I perceived America not simply as a nation dominated by whites, but rather as a cultural

soup of different religions, ethnicities, and peoples. No longer restricted by the predominantly white America in Hemet, my previous attitudes towards other races changed, allowing me to fully realize my myopia and mistakes in Hemet. The new world at UCLA simply facilitated my conversion and permitted me to become fully educated in other cultures while simultaneously accepting my own.

The conflict between my past and present cultures never fully enveloped me until the tragic events of September 11, 2001 awakened me to the cultural conflicts that embittered dozens of countries around the world. During my lifetime, the Los Angeles Riots and the attacks on the World Trade Center remain to be the two most important events that single-handedly changed my outlook on race. As a young boy absorbing any knowledge in any form, the Los Angeles Riots presented African Americans as a brutish and unkind race. Without any formal education or previous knowledge, this stereotype permeated my worldly attitudes and shaped my outlook for the worse. On the other hand, the 9/11 attacks changed my approach to race and religion for the better, opening my eyes to the world and destroying the myth of America's invincibility. This discovery undoubtedly can be partially attributed to a college level education, but this education will always remain theoretical unless applied to reality. 9/11 was real and, as such, dramatically removed my preexisting notions of the world created by my life experiences. As my own discoveries suggest, the intersection between history and one's life can forever change future experiences. Relating historical events to one's own life brings immediacy to history, and allows him/her to connect events that may seem unrelated. This intersection also may bring about both good and bad effects. For myself, the 9/11 attacks awakened me to my own prejudice while simultaneously correcting me to prevent future shortsightedness. Remembering those families crying over lost ones and police officers scramble around the World Trade Center changed my perspective entirely. In the same manner, relating history to real life changes perception of the past, present and future in hopes of creating a better society.