

Stereotypes are reductions. In a culture of compression, stereotypes reduce long, rich stories into a few descriptive words. By the time we realize what stereotypes are and the damage they do, we have already started internalizing the very ideas from which we seek to break free.

From a young age, I faced many stereotypes. It was easiest for me to assume that others' actions against me were based on stereotypes rooted in my skin color. I failed to see that it was so much more than my skin color. As a young Sikh American woman, religion and race based stereotypes have driven the microaggressions I have faced in my school and town. In elementary school, I understood that the lack of knowledge on Sikhism led people to assume I was part of a strange tribal religion that forced me to not cut my hair. I didn't tell my peers I was Sikh for 11 years to avoid assumptions about my personal life.

In eighth grade, I had a classmate tell me that I should be his slave because my skin was brown. My gut response was to be defensive. I lashed out and told him that he needed to find a better set of jokes. I was astounded that someone would say that to me. Through self-reflection years later, I still find it difficult to understand the origin of my classmate's comment. Because I felt so hurt by these words, and I felt so small—that my whole identity lay in my skin color—I started subconsciously internalizing these ideas. When I described myself, I was the brown Indian girl who was Sikh and that was it. When I saw others, I immediately differentiated them from myself before they had a chance to differentiate me. I othered myself to protect myself. Every person who was not on my "side" was the "threat". I started stereotyping my white peers out of my own frustration. Angry and frustrated that I was required to defend myself, I started seeing them as ignorant, difficult, and uninterested in making social change.

Freshman year, I had a disagreement with a boy sitting a few seats away from me. I don't remember what the disagreement was about, but I do remember what he said to me: "Trump's gonna send you back to wherever you came from." It was his final statement—a way to shut me up and make me insecure about my skin color and my ethnicity. While I brushed it off in the moment, it pained me to hear such a hateful comment. I had worked so hard to create a place for myself in this community—to feel as

though I was no different than anyone else despite having a different skin color and religious background. In that moment, I felt that the confidence I had built for all these years was crumbling. Being brown, being Indian, being Sikh didn't make me any more immune to hate speech. The stereotype that because I'm brown, I'm not American, and I don't belong here, has dominated much of the narrative that others had written for me.

Two years ago, for my U.S history final, my group and I did a presentation on the history of Sikh discrimination in America. At the end of our presentation, my teacher asked me about the correct pronunciation of Sikh and the significance of turbans. To others it may have been a normal expression of curiosity, but to me it was more. It was an individual approaching me from a position of inquiry rather than a position of seeking to reduce me for the sake of simplification. I now realize that this was a turning point in realizing that I did not have to define myself with a few words simply because some of my peers had done so to me. I could take those words and re-write my story and then share it back with others. I could remove those phrases and instead define myself through the rich story I know I have. Through this, I learned the true power of storytelling. Storytelling is so much more than simply sharing anecdotes and life experiences. Storytelling is fighting against the desire to define someone or something in a few words. Instead, it is a way to allow one to look at people with a nuance that does justice to their spirit, who they are, what they represent, and what they aspire to be.

We live in a world where everything is compressed and simplified. We've shortened our words from long phone conversations to texts to comments on social media. We communicate less and less with each other and by virtue of that compression, compassion becomes harder to come by. I knew if I had gone through this journey of confronting stereotypes and reimagining myself, my other peers must have gone through it as well. Due to my desire to hear the stories of others and share my own, I created a club called Unity in Diversity with a friend. The club's aim was to work on minimizing stereotypes through

storytelling. Beyond advocacy, the club became a safe space for individuals from varying racial, religious, ethnic, and sexual orientation backgrounds to tell their stories.

I would like to summarize my experiences and ideas in a few ways. First, I hope my experiences serve as a reminder that racism and prejudice based in ignorance is not a thing of the past, even in a community as inclusive as our own. Second, I want to express how the acknowledgement and support of an educator can make a monumental difference in the life of a student experiencing microaggressions on a regular basis. Third, there are few things as therapeutic as being able to share your own experience and being heard by your peers and your teachers. We often underestimate the importance of telling your authentic story: a story that has been defined entirely by you. These are the collective stories that change the world.