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The Cultural Tree

Growing up I never really got to experience cultures other than my own. I knew about other people's cultures and respected them, but other than trying different cuisines that was kind of it. As a Japanese American I grew up surrounded by my Japanese culture, whether that be participating in traditional Japanese events, being familiar with its customs, or eating rice basically every day. My lifestyle was largely affected by my Japanese influence, which is probably why I feel so attached to my Japanese roots-- my culture was ingrained into my foundation. From a young age I grew up in an environment that was majority Japanese. I never saw this as a necessarily bad thing, but it cut me off from all countries other than America and Japan. I love my culture-- and still do-- but I think the oversaturation of a single culture kept me from realizing the beauty I was missing out on outside my confined little bubble.

My biggest outlet for discovering new cultures was through my friends. During my early years of school most of my closest friends were all Japanese. As I grew older though, I began meeting people from other ethnicities and backgrounds other than my own. We would eat lunch together and play a special kind of tag that we liked to call slenderman. Over the years me and my new friends grew closer, and as a result I learnt a bit more about their cultures and beliefs. Near the end of elementary school I had a group of friends that were all very different from me and yet we were all able to get along and make meaningful connections-- with the help of tag of course. Making friends with people of other cultures didn't really fully open me up to new

cultures however. I learned more about new cultures and traditions but I didn't hold those "outside" cultures as important in my life and thought they were only meaningful to the people with the same ethnicity. At this point in time my teeny tiny brain was being very self centered, but as I grew older I slowly began to realize the importance of different cultures and diversity.

High School was around the time I truly understood the importance of diversity. Sadly it was also during these years where I learnt the most about just how unfair the world is. Discrimination and hate crimes became more common, and I was faced with the reality that there are some people out there who can't accept the value of diversity. My family experienced some of this discrimination as well; my cousins' house was vandalized and there were multiple instances where other members of my family were verbally assaulted. Now that I had more life experiences and knowledge, it became very apparent as to why diversity was so important. We need diversity because it creates variation in our lives-- it breaks away from monotonous similarity. Sure I like my Japanese culture, but not being able to experience all those other cultures would make life that much more bland. That's why North High's multicultural event was so impactful for me. After so many years of being oversaturated with one culture, this event helped me genuinely understand and appreciate the uniqueness and importance of cultures other than my own.

I think that the main core of discrimination and racism is a lack of empathy. People who can't put themselves into the shoes of another will never be able to find peace with the diversity around them. However, the ultimate cause of conflict is opposing beliefs-- or differences-- so how do you create a solution to a concept that naturally generates friction? The answer to this is a change in perspective. We should start viewing culture not only as differences, but more like unique interpretations of a common human experience. This perspective acknowledges both the

diversity and beauty of different cultures while unifying all people under the general concept of humanity. We will still be celebrating our differences in culture in tradition, but we will also be acknowledging the underlying humanity that connects all the branches of the world's "cultural tree". The richness of diversity allows us to see just how different we can be while still originating from the same form-- human. Our ability to create so many cultures with their own special traditions and history speaks to the incredible and beautiful humanity we have been blessed with. Culture is an innate part of our humanity, and embracing our natural differences allows us to ultimately live richer and more fuller lives.