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My “Otherness”

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My “Otherness”

Anonymous

The first time I felt my “otherness” was when my parents got divorced, I was five years old. I didn’t have a mother in my home any more. Children I knew had a mother in their home. Some of them didn’t have a dad, but at least they had a mom. Once, in first grade, we had to draw a picture of our family. After we finished our pictures, the teacher would come around to each desk and write each family member’s name under the figure. I drew a dad, a mom, and all the children in my family, just like the other children in my class did. When the teacher came to my desk and saw my picture, she pointed to the adult female figure and said, “Who’s that? It’s supposed to be your family. Your mother doesn’t live with you.” So I quickly said the name of the housekeeper/babysitter my father was thinking of hiring. But I felt embarrassed and realized how different I was from the other students.

I felt “otherness” again when I had to wear special orthopedic shoes that were ugly because I had something wrong with my feet. Once, I was with my sister and someone asked me why I had to wear those shoes. I made up a story and said that one time I had broken my leg and it hadn’t healed right, so I had to wear special shoes. Later in life, my sister said she felt bad for me that I had to make up that story and felt very protective of me even though she was younger.

My current “otherness” is that I’m queer. Since that is a “hidden” status unless I choose to share it, I haven’t had to deal with many negative experiences related to that. People have asked me through the years if I am married or have ever been married. A woman I hadn’t seen since high school asked me about my marital status. I told her I was not married. She quickly replied, “That’s okay,” but I knew it wasn’t. It was as if she was trying to reassure me that she liked me even though she thought I am so “odd.”

REFLECTION

Writing these pieces during class was an incredible experience. It was unlike any other assignment I have ever undertaken. Since the pieces were freewrites and were aimed to elicit our authentic voices, we had to keep our pens moving the whole time even if we just wrote, "I don't know what to write." At first I was very apprehensive as to whether I would be able to write anything coherent or if I would end up writing, "I don't know what to write," and "The weather sure is nice today," over and over again. But once I started writing, I found that most of the time the thoughts about the topic just flowed from my mind onto the paper. Surprisingly, I really did have a lot to say about most of the topics!

After each period of freewriting, we were given the opportunity to read the piece we had written to the class – if we wanted to. Listening to and sharing each other's writing was one of the parts of the class that, to me, built most the sense of community I felt with my fellow students. This was where I was able to learn about Latina/Chicano lives in an up close and personal way as most of the students identify as Latinas/Chicanos.

Even though I don't identify as Latina, the topics assigned were broad enough that I was also able to express my own experiences. On two different occasions, I chose to share my writing. The first freewrite I shared was with my piece titled "My Otherness." I hadn't finished it yet, but I read about the experience in first grade with my teacher's thoughtless remarks and how they made me feel embarrassed and "othered."

I found it very therapeutic and empowering both to write about it and to share it out loud. I hadn't thought about that period of my life for a long time. My classmates and instructor were so affirming about my piece and about me! Sharing encouraged me to continue expressing my feelings to the best of my ability in my freewriting and later to finish my pieces at home.

The second piece I chose to share with my classmates was my piece called "The Secret." Since it was about someone else's secret, I chose not to turn that one in for possible publication. But while I was writing it, I found tears flowing down my face. This was another thing that I had never experienced while writing. I cried again while reading the piece out loud to my classmates and instructor and could barely finish reading it. Again, my classmates and instructor affirmed me, making me feel cared for and empathized with as I made myself vulnerable and re-experienced the pain from that experience.

I felt like a real writer who could get people to feel something I had felt during a difficult experience in my life! Later I chose to share this piece with a counselor and discuss my feelings with her, but it was not as powerful as writing it and sharing it with my ES 107 community.