

On the Verge Writing Contest 2020, Second-Place Non-Fiction Winner

By Angie Reamer

Full Lips, Olive Skin

Full lips and olive skin. Both of these physical attributes were a detriment to my self-esteem as a child, yet are trademarks of my beauty as an adult. I was teased incessantly about how much larger my lips were than the other kids in class. I would be asked ridiculous questions such as, “Where are you from? Why is your skin different?” I did not know how to respond so I would just smile awkwardly. After, I would go home and wonder what made me so unusual. I was born in Canada. I spoke English well. I had excellent grades. I played sports and was popular with the boys. I was sure I was part of the human race. I never told my parents what was happening. Deep down, though, something was brewing inside of me. It was a special concoction of confusion sprinkled with a little bit of seething resentment. In other words, a fantastic emotional state in which to enter high school.

I suppose I achieved some kind of artificial popularity. Nonetheless, how I envied the lucky ones who came from wealthy, well-connected families! These students seemed to almost float around the hallways without a care in the world. In contrast, I desperately tried to hide my “ethnic” appearance. In fact, I would apply makeup to detract attention from my ‘not quite’ white skin. I was so inconspicuous that I did not even need to attend classes, or so I thought. Eventually, I ended up with the school counsellor. I was greeted with a lovely smile and caring eyes. The counsellor proceeded to tell me that when I do not show up for classes, teachers notice. She politely suggested that I take up volunteering. “What?!” I both questioned and exclaimed. She continued, “It would help alleviate some of your stress and also help the school.” I had no idea that this counsellor, who I now consider as part of my family, had just changed the course of my life. I rolled my eyes and replied with my adolescent charm and sharp wit, “Sure, I guess.”

My assignment was to tutor students who were immigrants and refugees. The teacher introduced me and told them that I would be an assistant in the classroom. I looked around nervously, their eager eyes stared at me intensely, my heart pounded erratically, and I thought to myself, “How on earth can *I* help?” The teacher assigned me to a group and I could feel something inside of me awaken. Turns out, it was happiness. I found myself wanting to help the students, even outside of class time. I got to know some of them really well. They shared their personal stories and explained why their families moved to Canada. I heard about the atrocities of war and the emotional scars attributed to racism. We laughed together at some of the humorous cultural misunderstandings they had experienced in Canada and we cried together at the prejudice some of them had encountered. My heart opened.

I attended my own classes again, but with a different perspective. Before, I never took the time to look around the room; however, now when I noticed that some students were struggling with the material, I would walk over and help them. The so-called popular students stared at me with looks of absolute horror. Afterwards, some of them advised me that it was not good for my reputation to help “those kinds of people.” I simply smiled and said, “I see.” I found out I did not like being told who I could or could not be friends with. More importantly, I did not approve how people could be judged on how they dressed, the religion they practiced, the language they spoke, or what they looked like. After that day, I made a personal commitment to follow my heart and I became good friends with many of the immigrants and refugees at my school. My desire to connect with people from other cultures culminated in living abroad.

Many years later, I moved to Japan. I met incredible people and had a fabulous time, for the most part. One day, I decided to visit the famous city of Nagasaki. I went to the museum dedicated to the history of the atomic bomb. Words are useless to describe the eerie feeling of

walking on the very ground where the actual bomb had dropped on August 9, 1945. Moreover, viewing the deformed artifacts recovered from its aftermath made me feel nauseous. When I noticed some people were crying in the museum, I felt deep compassion towards them and a strong urge to embrace them, console them, but I knew it would be culturally inappropriate. Instead, I left sobbing.

One afternoon, around three months later, two older men were walking on the opposite side of the street. They saw me and walked over. As they approached, they began to utter racist comments, things I would rather not repeat. I tried to keep calm. I looked around, there was no one else in the area. These comments were definitely intended for me. As they passed by, both men spat at me. They walked away and shouted out that I should return to my country. I stood still. Paralyzed. I tried to process what had happened. I looked down at my jacket and realized I did not imagine it. Adrenaline kicked in and my hands started to tremble. I ran home and cried. At the time, I thought there were three options available to me. Option 1: Become a bitter, angry person. Option 2: Suppress all of my emotions and pretend it never happened. Option 3: Practice empathy and compassion.

The Dalai Lama suggests that suffering is rooted in ignorance, therefore, I tried to think of the incident from their perspective. The men were seniors so perhaps their lives were directly impacted by WWII. Did I, who was commonly mistaken for an American, represent the suffering and pain they experienced? Anguish so deeply embedded in their being that my mere appearance as “the foreigner” was enough to incur hatred? My supervisor heard of the incident and somehow arranged for me to be interviewed by NHK, a national television network in Japan, which just happened to be running a documentary on the issue of racism. It was a serendipitous opportunity to remind people that racism still existed, but also to propose that education,

empathy and compassion are possible ways to overcome and, hopefully one day, eradicate it. It took some time to heal from the incident, but I did not carry resentment in my heart. On the contrary, I decided to pursue a career in English as an Additional Language in order to learn more about different cultures. A classroom with students from various parts of the globe provides an exceptional space to practice empathy and compassion through the medium of language. I am grateful for my profession and the extraordinary opportunities it provides such as meeting people from diverse cultures, some of whom have become close friends of mine. Furthermore, one of most important lessons I have learned thus far is the integral role of self-reflection.

All of us have an inner critic, a negative voice that can influence our actions if we do not keep it in check. For instance, I could blame myself for not being mature enough to understand that the children at school had never seen a child who looked different than they did and they simply did not know how to express their curiosity. In high school, maybe some of the kids acted like they were superior to others, not because they actually believed it, but rather it was due to unresolved emotional issues. However, the hardest thing to forgive about my past behaviour was not being a better support for my mother. She was an immigrant who experienced much hardship due to cultural assimilation, the official policy at the time.

Profound changes can occur knowing that before you can practice compassion with others, you must exercise self-compassion. In truth, I stumbled upon this wisdom a little over a decade ago when I attended an event at which the Dalai Lama was the guest speaker. A person from the audience asked him, “How can we achieve world peace?” I will never forget his answer. He slowly scanned the audience and, with a wide smile on his face, he replied, “Start with you. Generate peace within yourself first.” Practicing self-compassion is a powerful act, but

it need not be an arduous task. In reality, small acts of compassion can be both healing and joyous. For instance, when I am given genuine compliments on my full lips and olive skin, instead of allowing it to trigger negative emotions from my past, I now receive the kind words with an open heart and reply with a sincere “Thank you, I take after my mother.”