

## Coming Apart at the Seams

Jill Wetzler

2/25/03

I sat across from Anand, eating my lunch and pondering whether or not the past nine years of my life had been utterly worthless. He responded to my questions with an enthusiasm I only half expected, using wild hand motions and displaying the kind of excitement you might expect from a very happy 4-year-old rather than a college student.

“India,” Anand said. “India is very exciting. The rules are very different there—very different from America.”

I listened intently, literally transfixed by his responses. I noticed everything—his accent, his excitement, his message. For the first time, I felt like I was really listening to someone, allowing every aspect of our conversation to penetrate into my psyche.

About halfway through our luncheon, however, I began to wonder how I had managed to avoid this entire culture for 19 years. Everything about the Indian way of life fascinated me. The languages, the accent, the religion, the laws—all of these things sparked my curiosity in a way that nothing else ever had. I flashed back to my childhood, thinking that if I could convince myself that I’d never had the *opportunity* to learn about Indian culture, then I could somehow justify my ignorance.

The first 10 years of my life proved comforting to my current frame of mind. Growing up in South Dakota, there was little variation of skin tone. The only Indians in my area were American Indians, and I had seen a whole three of them during my decade-long stay in the Plains. I immediately felt better. How could someone expect me to learn about something that I haven’t been exposed to?

And then I remembered the Patels. My self-confidence slowly splintered away into a broken pile of shame as I recalled my days in Kentucky. I sat in my pre-calculus class amidst a crowd of Caucasians, half of whom would, by the time they reached 16, be driving nicer cars than the faculty. Two people stood out, however. A pair of Indian siblings sat in the back, almost trying to blend into the wall. They spoke only to each other, having secret conversations we didn’t even find worth eavesdropping on. I wouldn’t be able to understand their Indian language anyway.

When Mrs. Wonderling stuck me in their group for six long weeks of the semester, I was pretty upset. I wanted to sit next to my friends, the people that I partied with and actually talked to during school. I wanted to be with people I could be comfortable around—namely the same white students I had spent the past five years forming relationships with. Surely she didn’t expect me to be able to converse with these foreigners.

And I didn’t. At all.

Later Anand told me that the thought process and primary language in India is English. So much for their indecipherable “Indian language.”

For the next six weeks, I didn't say a word to them outside of the occasionally necessary "did you get 3 for number 5?" I barely even looked at them. They had black hair and dark skin, yet remain frighteningly faceless in my memory bank. I passed that class, I advanced to the next grade, and later graduated, all without a backwards glance of regret. Until now. It wasn't until I came to college that I ever realized I was missing out on anything.

From day one, my parents told me that I could be better than everyone else. They never mentioned anything about being white. "It's about working hard," they said. "If you always try to do your best, you're going to be rich and famous." Well, maybe the rich and famous part was not completely correct, but that wasn't the important part of the message. The most important concept that I extracted, even as a young child, was that everybody could do well if they tried. I never factored race into the equation for success because I didn't find anything about skin color particularly relevant to effort. As a young child, race was nothing more than an identifier to me—a means of describing someone the way you might identify a blonde in a room full of brunettes. So why the sudden prejudice? What had happened to the morals my parents and teachers had reinforced every day for ten years? It certainly wasn't my parents' fault. Our move to Kentucky had not changed their parenting habits. However, some unknown outside force began negating the values I had been raised with, and because of this it became increasingly difficult to figure out exactly who I was supposed to be. If not my parents, then what? In the end, I came to one conclusion. The old cliché really does hold true: it takes a village to raise a child.

There was a glaring difference in the attitudes of my two states of residence: the presence of a racially superior mindset was undeniable in this brutal Kentucky community. Such an extreme difference in viewpoints can only be explained by the extreme differences in the societies. In the essay "Created Equal: The Myth of the Melting Pot," editor Gary Colombo argues that "racial categories are not biologically determined but socially constructed." If the two societies that divided my life so distinctly are proof of anything, they are proof of this statement. Whether residing in a small South Dakotan city or in Northern Kentucky suburbia, an Indian is still an Indian, an African-American is still an African-American, and a Caucasian remains a Caucasian. Race is biological; there is no arguing that. However, societies all over the world embrace normalcy, and often the close-minded idea of racial supremacy is established as the norm. In this case, provided that you are of the race identified as "superior," you can find a certain comfort in your own ignorance. Befriending the Patels meant being open-minded, and being open-minded in a close-minded community meant being different. And believe me, you don't want to be different in suburban Kentucky, especially when you are a high school sophomore trying desperately to fit in. Your safer bet there is to either quail in the shadows or to blend into the troubled sea of pale skin and naivety. Forget conscience and compassion, there is no room for such radical ideas here.

Cultural dexterity was a mere fantasy in Kentucky. Lynell George's essay, "Gray Boys, Funky Aztecs, and Honorary Homegirls" unfolded the story of "Perry," a white

boy from Los Angeles who hovered between black and white, simply based on his wish to converse with people of different races. It's a far stretch to compare Los Angeles to Edgewood, Kentucky, but not completely infeasible. George asserts that "this sort of cultural exchange requires active participation." When such participation is discouraged by a society, however, it is unlikely that this cultural exchange will take place. Kentucky made me feel like it was okay to exclude people of other cultures. And not just okay, but necessary. It happened involuntarily however, silently corrupting my morals in less time than it took to instill them. My issues with my identity didn't arise until I was smart enough to regret missing my chance to learn about new people. The society in which I lived during my teenage years did not allow me to feel shame or guilt for this. It allowed me to feel nothing. And maybe that's all I wanted—to feel nothing. Most of the time, the absence of emotion is much more comfortable than the stress of opposing popular opinion.

I often wondered who was to blame in my situation. Should I have stood up on the Ohio River floodwall and proclaimed my value system to Kentucky, or should they have adopted and embraced my beliefs without question? In "Literacy, discourse, and linguistics: Introduction" by James P. Gee, it is argued that a Discourse is an "identity kit" which contains all aspects of our personalities, including but not limited to our values, beliefs, and attitudes. Gee writes, "The various Discourses which constitute each of us... often are not fully consistent with each other; there is often conflict and tension between the values, beliefs, [and] attitudes." This perspective certainly explains the clashing of emotions I had experienced. It once again proved that the two societies had shaped my identity in opposite ways, but was there really anyone to blame? I simply could not hold myself responsible for blindly adjusting to a society, even one so morally amiss. However, if I couldn't blame myself, then I couldn't really blame anyone else either, because we were all in the same boat. It seemed to me that Kentucky was on a one-way trip: bound for hell in a handbasket weaved of bad moral institution.

The continuous clashing of the traditional-yet-behind-the-times South Dakotan society and the prejudiced normalcy of suburban Kentucky caused more internal conflict than I could have imagined. I was morally ambiguous—being pulled apart at the seams by a decade of worthy values and a society of close-minded fools. Had I been conscious of the problem, perhaps I would have made an effort to even say hello to the Patels. However, in a society so deeply entrenched in one culture (read: middle-to-upper class Anglos), it is difficult to even recognize that racial issues exist. Returning to the traditional society where morals are taught in the schools is unrealistic for the times, but that doesn't mean we can't ameliorate our current situation. The first step is admitting that racial supremacy is not only wrong, but still prevalent today. Once we can acknowledge our faults, we can change ourselves. Once we change ourselves, we can start to raise our children responsibly. And after that, all we can do is hope that others are doing the same. It really does take a village to raise a child. The only thing left to do now is to ask yourself, what kind of village do you want raising yours?