

Choiceless Children

In late May of this year, amid a global pandemic, our country erupted into a series of racial protests over the police killing of George Floyd. Since May, these tensions have only worsened, as peaceful protests in cities across the country have been marred by rioting, looting, and violence. As I, like many other Americans, have watched this crisis unfold, I've realized how much everyone, including myself, needs to reflect on the issue of race and privilege.

It is inevitable that at some point in life, one will question why they were born. While many approach this question philosophically, digging for some deep purpose, I believe that it is more interesting to question why people are born the way they are. When I was younger, I playfully pondered these possibilities, toying with the question of "why;" I would ask myself how the place, time, and circumstances of my birth made me who I am today. These thoughts lead me to wonder how my life would be different if certain aspects of my life were changed. What if I had three brothers instead of two? What if my older sister was younger than me? What if I was an only child? Initially, it felt like a child's game; after all, what use was it thinking about circumstances that could never happen? But with these protests further exposing decades of racial inequality and injustice, I realize that the ability to assess one's own privilege and circumstances is anything but childish. Today, I play the same game, but with far more pressing and important questions. As an Asian-American living in the United States, I've experienced my fair share of dirty looks and racist comments during this pandemic. At times, these experiences have made me nervous to even walk down the street. And yet, I know that this anxiety is nothing compared to that of black men and women, who live in fear of being hurt, or even killed, because of the color of their skin. How would my life be if I was born white? Would I never have to worry about receiving judgmental looks because of my race? If I was born black, would I need to be constantly afraid of getting pulled over even for something as simple as a routine traffic stop? We are raised to believe that race doesn't matter, or that anyone can rise above the stigmatized world around them. However, when I see the divide between people in the world, and the stark history of racial inequality in this country, that idea seems almost laughable. The more I read about these protests, the surer I am that if I had been born a different race, my life would be drastically different. Some of the privileges I enjoy, like not worrying about getting pulled over unlawfully by police, would simply not be there. I would, undoubtedly, feel more afraid than I do now.

People like to tell you to "put yourself in other people's shoes," to imagine a life different from your own. But what can we do with these realizations instead of standing idly by? As we see minority groups swept up in the tide of racial injustice, we need to stop and think how we can use our circumstances and privilege for the better. Sign petitions. Donate to charities dedicated to social justice. Make your voice heard to your elected officials.

I hope that with these protests will come not just noise, but an era of real, dynamic change that will create a society free of institutional inequality and oppression.