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WRIT 153A

Story of Self

*My phone buzzes and I see a text from my best friend, “Sarah\* has been so annoying lately. She keeps making comments complaining about white people, but if I, a white person, were to say anything about Mexicans, it would be the end of the world.” I roll my eyes and send a text back telling her that white people actually have done a lot of awful things throughout history and that her reaction suggests reverse racism, which doesn’t exist.*

I find myself engaging in conversations similar to the one above quite frequently. Speaking up when I feel offended or think someone is being insensitive comes easily to me now, but it hasn’t always been that way. In high school I found it difficult to share how I felt, and I even struggled with forming certain opinions because I was surrounded by a culture that encouraged conformity. My hometown is a small farming community in the Central Valley of California. Almost everyone is religious and owns a farm, dairy or has at least one family member in the agriculture industry. My family didn’t have any of these characteristics, but we weren’t outcast or disliked by the community. However, most people held conservative views and made me feel like any opinion I had that didn’t match theirs would immediately be discredited. Any deviation from the norm was noticeable and punished, causing a strong fear of backlash. I didn’t speak up about certain political and social stances of mine, such as being pro-choice in regard to abortion, because I knew it would receive backlash and I wanted to avoid that at all costs. The level of pressure to conform was so high that I even felt guilty about my views, because I was told that they were wrong by everyone around me. I would often convince myself that I held a particular view just so I wouldn’t feel guilty about the ones that always seemed to be the opposite of what everyone else was thinking. Being complaisant was not something I enjoyed but I found it happening frequently; I sat quietly and never challenged the status quo.

It’s interesting to reflect on my past and also see how I was presented with opportunities to open my mind and speak out but refused. My sister is three years older than me and would come home from college talking about issues never talked about before. I remember silently envying her but remaining quiet and refraining from exploring the things I was interested in. The environment of my hometown was not a good place to explore, learn or think for yourself. I never felt like I was experiencing personal growth or development. In contrast, there are many issues that I’ve learned about and taken a stance on since being in college, such as intersectionality and environmental awareness. I didn’t know what intersectionality was in high school, and I also gave no thought to environmental issues. It shows how that small town is a bubble that resists to pop or let anything through. Telling this story is embarrassing for me, because I think back and cringe at how ridiculous I was for worrying what others would think of me. Now, I’m confident enough in my beliefs that I often don’t hold back in conversations and I care less about the opinions of people from my hometown every day.

Leaving home and coming to college at UCSB was crucial for my personal development and movement away from the crippling ideologies of my hometown. During my first year, I was exposed to a variety of issues that I was able to learn more about and I felt comfortable solidifying my stance on each one. For instance, I learned that feminism is more complex than I thought and I recognized the importance of acknowledging how the experiences of women of color differ from those of white women. I slowly began to change into a person who wanted to learn and welcome perspectives that allow me to think differently. Armed with my new knowledge and a hunger for talking about issues instead of sitting quietly, I was excited to visit home and see everything with a new perspective. However, my excitement lessened when I realized that not everyone else had the same experience after we all left for college. If I spoke up, I still would have been judged by others, except now the conversation would center around how I have become liberal and therefore an object of judgment and disdain. This began my struggle of coming to terms with leaving the ideals of my hometown behind while still trying to maintain certain relationships with people. I quickly realized that talking about and pursuing my passions is more important to me than maintaining some version of myself that is acceptable to the people back home. With the exception of my best friend and some family, I’m friendly with only a few people and I’ve accepted that situation. Continuing to conform to the passive person that was expected of me is not something I’m interested in, and I’ve enjoyed leaving that behind to discover my voice.

Being able to verbalize my thoughts and feelings on social and political issues didn’t come easily, and something that has helped me is speaking up on social media. I’ve always been active on a variety of social media platforms, but in high school I never posted, re-posted or “liked” anything political or any posts that would demonstrate how I felt about a certain issue or topic. However, during my freshman year of college when my values and ideologies were shifting, I wanted to share things on social media that brought awareness to certain causes that I support. In the beginning, there were a few things I didn’t post because I knew that many people from my hometown followed me on social media and I was still worrying about their judgments of me. Slowly, I began to care less and less about what they thought and I became more confident in sharing posts that reflected my interests. At first, the posts weren’t too opinionated but took a slight stance on an issue, but I got braver and started sharing things that were outspoken and clearly stated what I believed and supported. I follow the Planned Parenthood Facebook page and I constantly share their posts, as well as anything I see that supports women’s issues and intersectional feminism.

As much as it may seem like I hate the place I came from, I do have a small soft spot for the tiny town in the middle of nowhere. It’s where I grew up, where I grew close with my family and where I created meaningful relationships. Yet I still believe that leaving the toxicity and closed-mindedness of that place was the best thing I could have done to help myself grow as a person, figure out where I want to go in life and how I want to live it. While I struggled with letting go of my worries that my friends and family wouldn’t accept my new way of thinking, I can’t be grateful enough for that transformation and how it shaped me into someone who wants to create a better world.

\*Names have been changed