I had never been stared at because of the color of my skin before. I was raised in a big city in India, where everyone looked like me. When I came to the United States for college, the campus was so diverse that I did not feel I stood out because of my appearance.

But that rodeo experience, during my second year in the United States, was like a loss of innocence, and perhaps it triggered the cultural compromises that followed. The next time I went to a math professor to ask a question, I changed my accent to sound more "American" because I was afraid he might not understand me. I also started to introduce myself using an "American" name I adopted. I would say, "My name is Mayank, but you can call me Mickey." Soon after that, it just became "Everyone calls me Mickey." Before I knew it, my true name was in hiding; I might not hear it spoken for days or even weeks. I felt I was doing well "fitting in," but also that I had lost a bit of myself along the way.

I had inklings that it didn't have to be that way, such as when I got a new undergraduate adviser. When I introduced myself to him using my American name, he surprised me by asking how to pronounce my real name. Then he repeated it, asked whether he'd said it right, and whether it was OK for him to use it. The experience planted a seed in my mind. Here was a white, native-born American, and on the surface we couldn't have been more different. Yet he cared enough to recognize me for who I am.

Thanks in large part to this relationship, I decided to take a different approach when I went for my Ph.D. a few years later. I embraced who I was. I started to grow my hair long, as I'd always wanted it. I recognized that I needed to be in a bigger, more diverse city. And when I headed to Austin, Texas, to begin my doctoral program, I decided it was time to hear my own name spoken again, by myself and others.

The professor for whom I worked as a teaching assistant, and whom I eventually asked to be my doctoral research adviser, was my next crucial mentor. Like my undergrad adviser, he was immediately welcoming and encouraging, with no hesitation about my name or identity. In our weekly meetings, he took the time to really get to know me. I've celebrated Thanksgiving with his family and gone hiking with him and his other Ph.D. students. He is a white, native-born American, and our backgrounds might have seemed mismatched, but he was the perfect adviser for me.

Today, I'm a faculty member in Los Angeles, a city far more diverse than my undergraduate college town. It has been many years since I introduced myself by anything other than my real name. When people mispronounce it, I politely correct them. I'm grateful to the mentors who helped give me the confidence to embrace my identity in this way.

I am also striving to be this type of mentor for my own students, many of whom are international. I tell them they don't have to adopt an "American" name, although I respect their choice if they do. But many have started to use their real names, I've noticed, and I'm glad. I believe they feel less alien and more empowered when they hear others make the effort to speak their names, no matter how "complicated" or unfamiliar those names might sound to an English-speaking ear.

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Reclaiming my name
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