Embracing my roots

As Filipino immigrants living in the United States, many of my family members and I started out as “essential workers”—and some still are. My mom was a fast food cashier. My grandmother, aunt, and cousin worked as caregivers; my grandfather washed dishes in a restaurant. My family did honest and hard work. But when I was younger, I was self-conscious about it. All I wanted was to escape the shame of being poor. I didn’t want to shop with food stamps anymore or be in the free lunch line at school.

My mom, wanting a better life for me and my brother, believed in education. So under her direction, I studied hard while my family cooked, cleaned, and cared for others. When I received a full scholarship for college, it felt like a golden ticket out of poverty not just for me, but for my family, too. And when I was accepted into graduate school, getting paid to study and train to be a scientist felt like a luxury. For the first time, I had enough money to live on my own and even help my family once in a while. I felt I had finally found an escape.

Leaving home and entering the academic world took me further and further from my immigrant working-class roots. Every so often, though, I would meet other Filipino immigrants working in the university as janitors, building maintenance staff, shipping and receiving workers, and lab aides. When I interacted with them, I would seamlessly revert to my younger immigrant self, speaking Tagalog, the Philippines’s national language, and behaving more deferentially. When I stepped back into my academic role, I would play the confident and assertive scientist. At some point I realized there was another reason the encounter stung so much.

Eventually, other lab members started to join us for lunch. At first it felt awkward. Scientists usually default to talking science, whereas I almost never talked science with the Filipinas. And I wasn’t sure I was ready for my scientific colleagues to see this other side of me. The melding of our groups—and my identities—wasn’t always smooth. But in time, we found common ground in food, sharing and exchanging dishes from our diverse cultures. I became the bridge between the scientists and the Filipina lab aides, and my immigrant roots slowly re-emerged and became comfortably fused with my academic identity. I realized they never had to be separate in the first place.

Looking back at that hotel experience, I now realize that being mistaken as a hotel server is not really what stung. Whether I am a hotel server or a professor, I—like my family members and all the other essential workers—deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, not belittled and dismissed.

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