

An Experience in Equity

Jared L. Cassedy
K-12 Performing Arts Coordinator
Lexington Public Schools, MA

*It was the morning of New Hampshire All State and I was driving from the hotel to the performance venue planning to stop to grab coffee and breakfast before heading to the concert. Passing by a vehicle pulled over on the side of the road, my eyes locked with the driver and the person in the passenger seat. Thinking nothing of it, I pulled up to the drive through, placed my order, and moved forward when out of the blue, that same car pulled out in front of me drove up to the drive thru window and took what I had ordered. I reached the window asking how they could have given my order away without them paying for it to which the attendant indicated that they said I was following up to provide payment directly. About to respond, that same car came around the side of the building again, rolled down their window and threw the order they took from me at my car. They drove off - I was stunned. Not sure what to do, I just remember driving forward merging back onto Main Street trying to rationalize what was happening. And then I saw them again - the same vehicle was in the middle of the road - I passed them without even glancing up, but they began following me. Each light I went through they ran through to keep up. I shifted lanes, they shifted lanes. Their eyes were glued on me. Unsure of what to do and worried about just pulling over, I opted to head back to the hotel. Eventually Main Street came to a three-way intersection and I pulled into the right lane to turn, not able to move with other vehicles in front of me. The driver pulled up next to my car - the passenger rolled down their window, mimicked putting a gun to my face, yelled an exceptionally racist expletive and told me to go back to my "homeland." I just sat there taking what this person said, not able to move or think or rationalize.**

I found myself back at the hotel and I felt completely and utterly dismantled. How did this happen? I have had such an incredible life of support and love, opportunities and guidance. I have worked so hard, navigated so many personal and professional challenges, and I do my best to serve those around me.

And that's when it came over me like a huge wave wrapped up in a million different feelings. This person didn't know me. It did not matter what college I went to, what degrees I had, how many awards and accolades I had received - everything about me was reduced down to one single thing; my race.

I am a South Korean, an adoptee, and a gay man. Who I am is something that I have continued to navigate my entire life. While I *am* a person of color, I was adopted into a white family in one of the most non-diverse states in the union. And while I *am* a person of color, there have absolutely been a vast number of privileges I have been provided despite this important part of my identity. For the first 35 years of my life I grew up, lived, and worked in New Hampshire. I went to high school and graduated with a class of almost 600 students with the smallest percentage being people of color, let alone people that looked like me. For the first 12 years of my career I taught in a school district at the time that had less than one percent of students'

families in the poverty margin. These formative years did not provide me many lenses into what this identity truly meant until this experience happened to me. Sure, I have had racial slurs thrown at me before and I've heard folks making off-handed remarks and jokes, but until that day I hadn't had something that made me feel so unsafe; so small happen to me. And what's worse is that while I have such sympathy for those who been targets of racism, sexism, otherism - black lives, women's rights, the #metoo movement - I do not think that I had an authentically real sense of what those experiences meant to folks in those communities until I experienced it myself.

I was dismantled.

Flash-forward to my journey from New Hampshire to Massachusetts. Six years ago, I made a very difficult decision to leave the only state I had ever lived and worked in to come to the beautifully diverse community I find myself in now. What a transition being one of, if not the *only*, practicing music educator of color at the time in New Hampshire, to being thrust into such diversity. It was overwhelming. I remember walking into the high school on the first day of school being overcome not only by the many identities represented within this community, but even more so by how many people looked like me! I was greeted by so many students eager and excited not only to have a new band director and performing arts administrator, but someone that also looked like them. And then it happened again - I was asked where I was from, where I was born, what my favorite kind of boba was, what dialect of Korean I spoke - and I was internally dismantled again. My identity was reduced to what students' assumptions were of me. As I shared my own background and how I was adopted, that my family was in fact white, their facial expressions changed and I remember one student saying in a way that only a high school student might not realize how it could be received, "oh that's really great, but...you're not exactly one of us." This said, I understood where they were coming from, but then again, who I am was reduced solely to the customs and traditions that were contrary to an "authentic" Asian American. It made me question my belonging and where I actually fit in.

This is year twenty for me in education, but these past six years have served me in ways that I did not know possible. To teach and learn alongside such a beautifully diverse and truly welcoming community is something that has transformed my own understanding of myself and of other human beings - and it has also exposed so much of what I didn't know about my own background and self-image. Looking back, perhaps I didn't see how the lack of diversity impacted my own trajectory and I think a lot of that was due to the fact that I was provided such access to the supports necessary to move through life freely - a supportive family with parents who had encouraged (and had the financial means for supporting) extra-curricular activities - sports, piano lessons, clarinet lessons, art classes - friends and community members whom we were able to form strong relationships with, access to a public school system that supported and provided a plethora of instructional and professional pathways that students could draw from with outcomes that resulted in direct pipelines into higher education and beyond. However, over these past years I have found myself wrestling more and more with imposter syndrome, identifying one way in one circumstance and another in another circumstance. Being a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, but then also identifying as a member of the AAPI community in the

LGBTQIA+ community. Being an educator of color in a community that celebrates diversity and identity, but then living in a state still has a lack of diversity in general. Especially nowadays, I can only imagine how I would be holding my identity should I be residing and/or teaching in another part of the country. Would I still be able to maintain the core of who I am amidst what would or would not be accepted?

And I wonder what my life would have been like had I not been adopted into a family like the one I have. My husband and I now have two adopted children of our own. One is half Navajo and half Mexican and the other is half Navajo and half Hopi - they are half-siblings and are the most wonderful, amazing parts of our lives! In connecting with their birthmother, we were just so taken aback when she shared that she only wants to provide these two little human beings the best pathways forward and to do that she felt adoption was the best option. It was incredible to hear her story riddled with poverty, lack of resources, and insufficient resources, yet living with such thoughtfulness and kindness. To have someone place an insurmountable amount of trust in your hands providing such a life for two little lives.... My husband and I recognize the myriad of privileges we have been given that has placed us in a situation where we can feasibly provide for our family in this way. And it makes you wonder what other children; families do when they are not afforded those same resources.

Coming full circle back to my role as a music educator, I work in a district that is exceptionally well-resourced, places education as a centralized pillar of its identity, and has the capability to open up doors for so many of its students. Yet, there are still students that come from families that struggle. How these students and their families view themselves within such a high achieving environment places an incredible amount of pressure on them. We have students who we provide financial support to play musical instruments sitting next to students who take private lessons and are part of extracurricular ensembles in Boston at a premium cost. The disparity is so large. How do we provide an environment that truly welcomes ALL students in? I reflect on the purpose of our MEA's All State Festivals. Are we truly about it being an *all* state festival where all students can be represented, or are we just using semantics to create an *elite* state instead celebrating the capacity of those who have the greatest access to resources.

At the end of the day, music is about bringing people together, welcoming them in, and celebrating the diversity that exists within its make up. I reflect back over the experiences I have had and am so thankful to be surrounded by people, mentors, family members, friends, and colleagues who have helped to pick me up after I have been dismantled, and I know for sure I would not be where I am today without them. My question now is how can we do this for all students; all human beings who just want to have a chance to have a feeling of belonging. Equity and access is not just about providing pathways and resources, but also about the recognition of who we are as a humanity and the experiences we all should be able to be a part of.

*Whenever I have shared experiences like the one above, I have purposefully not identified the race, gender, or approximate age of these folks. My question to you is, what were the identities of the people that did this to me? So many times folks assume that these were both white, middle aged men. While the driver was actually a white woman who looked like she was in her

twenties and the passenger was indeed a white, middle-aged man, would it have changed one's perception of the situation if they were people of color? Teenagers? Two women? I share this here as we consider our own biases (either explicit or implicit) and stereotypes that are naturally imprinted within our own hardwiring.