



Gracefulness

**Story by: Celeana Gibbs, R.N.
Mayo Clinic Health System**

When Mayo Clinic Health System put out a call requesting employees to consider sharing their stories related to diversity and inclusion, I was hesitant. My opinion at the time was that it was not really a problem, and as a mixed woman my own experience had been very positive at Mayo. I listened to the first session and was frankly surprised and disheartened by the volunteer's experiences with racism. I started to reflect in earnest over my life to truly understand and piece together my own interpretation of my personal life experiences. I agreed to share my stories when someone during the listening session asked if a woman of color would be willing to share their perspective.

I was born the oldest to a black father and Caucasian mother. They lost custody multiple times of myself and subsequent siblings, and when I was eight years old I was adopted by my biological mother's sister and husband. I grew up in northern Minnesota, where there's very little diversity.

Probably the earliest memories of feeling different came from having frizzy, curly hair when I wanted fine and straight hair. I recall being called "triangle head" when I tried to brush my curls out. Haircuts were always slightly traumatic. No one up north knew how to cut or style my hair. Many tears were shed over hair in adolescence. Other comments over the years included a reference to my "big African nose," or "I could never date a black girl." While comments like that hurt, I always felt that kids were sometimes just mean or insensitive to anyone. If I had red hair and freckles, they may make fun of that too.

One of the biggest carryovers from adolescence is probably my penchant for small purses. I have had my bag searched in a department store—as has my younger sister on separate occasions—and it was humiliating. I have had employees follow me around stores with repeated inquiries to whether I need help with anything. I have wondered if I am just being sensitive or imagining things, but the end result is the same. I do my best to never carry a big bag or a purse not zipped, as I am just too self-conscious. I have never stolen or contemplated stealing, but that is the number one social situation where I remember that I am a minority.

With the recent spotlight on law enforcement and how they interact with minorities, I reflected on my interactions with them. I have probably been pulled over for various reasons four to five times in my life; every interaction with the officers was respectful and uneventful, though I do question one situation as I look back. When I was about 20 years old, I left a Starbucks after spending some time studying. As I walked to my car, I noticed a police officer watching me from their squad car. As I pulled out of the parking lot the officer pulled out as well and began following me. I was followed for about 1.5 miles before the lights turned on, and I was pulled over in a busy intersection. The officer got out of her car and walked slowly around my car twice. When she came to my window, she apologized and said, "Sorry I thought your tabs were expired." I was less than kind in my thoughts; I was upset that I was at risk for being late for a final exam. I remember thinking "what a dumb lady cop." Was this tied to some type of racial profiling? I do not recall feeling that way at the time.

As an adult I can say I have never experienced any type of overt racism that I am aware of. I credit my place of employment and direct team for that. Occasionally, I get comments or

questions from patients regarding race, such as “where are you from? No, where are you really from?” Once I had someone ask me what color my baby turned out to be, as my husband is Caucasian. Another patient referred to my “nappy hair.” I can honestly say though, I have never felt a maliciousness or intentional desire to hurt. One of the physicians I work with wondered if perhaps I am too graceful. But, I dole out grace as I would want it for myself. I have said things that I wish I could take back and feel most people have “stuck their foot in it.” I sometimes feel split. I see both sides to every story and can play devil's advocate with myself all day. Change needs to occur as a country, as a community and in ourselves. I do not feel cries for help and understanding can be ignored. I am hopeful, as I truly feel we can drive this change by our choices every day.

Artist Meira Smit
Colfax, WI

Meira Smith loves being surrounded by art and making art. She practices realizing and recognizing the abundant beauty all around and shares that with others.

One of my goals is supporting healing and growth within caring communities. The voice of this story is familiar to my experience being a biracial woman with wild curly hair. I wanted the vibrant colors of the face, the chaotic spirals of the hair, and the shadows to depict transitioning from our country's history and trauma to making individual choices that bring happiness and equality to everyone no matter their identity.

View all the pieces in the *Healing Reflections* [online gallery](#).