

My Neighbor's Mailbox

Lisa Zhuang | August 2016

It's a stereotype that Asian women are bad drivers. Urbandictionary.com defines an Asian female as "the reason why air bags were invented." There are pictures on the internet of terrible car accidents simply captioned "Asian female driver."

People have told me that it's just a joke, but when you're an Asian woman who has been surrounded by these so-called jokes all your life, you make sure you turn on your turn signal at *exactly* 100 feet. 200 in Indiana.

So when I knocked over my neighbor's mailbox two days after I got my permit, I didn't laugh it off with my friends. I made sure not a single soul found out about the incident. I didn't want to become someone's proof that Asian females were bad drivers. I didn't want to perpetuate a stereotype.

Christine Roberson is my high school lab teacher, and she experienced a similar dilemma. Before becoming a teacher, she spent several years working in labs where her bosses made it clear women were less effective than men. Women were too involved with family life to be good scientists.

ROBERSON: "I had heard a college professor talk about not wanting to hire women scientists because they ended up missing lab time for things like children and family. So I was particularly careful that family life didn't come into the lab.

LISA ZHUANG (on tape): How did this affect your day to day life?

ROBERSON: "I was being sent to the Netherlands to do some technology transfer for a biotechnology company, and although the transfer needed to be

done quickly, it wasn't an emergency. Two days after I was set to travel was my brother's wedding. And I didn't ask for them to move my travel, because I didn't want to be seen as weak. I ended up not going to my brother's wedding."

Ms. Roberson and I both took active measures to make sure we didn't fulfill a stereotype. Because when you're part of a marginalized group and you fulfill a stereotype, you feel like you're evidence that the stereotype is true. You feel like you've legitimized the stereotype.

And you don't want to do that. Because stereotypes allow people to view others not as complex individuals, but as objects with just one or two labels. By reducing people to one or two labels, we feel more comfortable committing violence or having hostility toward them. We see them as just ideas, instead of as real people.

Annelle Whitt is the director of MAC Scholars, an organization that provides support to multicultural students. She says all people have multiple identities. Ms. Whitt identifies herself as an African American. Heterosexual. A woman. A mother. A part of the middle class. A teacher. Those are just the start.

But sometimes, when she gets angry, all people see are two identities: the fact that she is a woman and African American.

WHITT: "I've had people call me, 'Oh you're just an angry Black woman.'" Are there times as a Black woman I am angry? Definitely! There are times as a black woman I am angry. But is it because I am a black woman, it is because I'm just a woman, is it just because I am a person? I'm so much more than an African American woman. I'm so many different things."

Stereotypes erase our complex experiences, personalities, histories, and stories. Ms. Whitt, Ms. Roberson and I all have an understanding of the negative impact of stereotypes because we've lived it. But people who aren't part of marginalized groups can understand stereotypes too, through education and diverse experiences.

My neighbor James Austin holds a lot of privileged identities. He's a white man. He lives in America. He's well educated - he's a retired professor. He is also the owner of the mailbox I knocked over.

ZHUANG (on tape): I'm talking about stereotype threat...

AUSTIN: Oh, stereotype threat, OK...

ZHUANG (on tape): So when I knocked over your mailbox...

He says he didn't think about my race and gender when I told him I had hit his mailbox.

AUSTIN: "I was delighted to find anybody who knocked over my mailbox was honest enough to repair it and my response had nothing to do with whoever it was that knocked over the mailbox."

Mr. Austin is an educator who has gone on sabbaticals in India, Japan, Sweden and China. He says his international education, and experience in the military, has helped him understand how people are influenced by stereotypes.

AUSTIN: "I have been in uniform in the second world war, and the Korean so-called police action, so I'm aware that there are dissimilarities and that people can be lead to hate, but I'm more aware of the resemblances than the differences among people all over the world."

The harm stereotypes can cause may not be experienced by everyone, but anyone can fight them. For me, fighting stereotypes means recognizing that I am a complex person. But for everyone, fighting stereotypes means interacting and getting educated on people different from us. Our country is getting more diverse, and we can't expect to successfully navigate this world by depending on stereotypes.

For Making Waves Youth Radio, I'm Lisa Zhuang.