

優良賞

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いとこの経験を通じて、言葉だけでは伝えきれない思いもあるのだと知りました。多くの人が身近にある小さな優しさに気づきかけになればと思い、このエッセイを書きました。

### More Than a Label

Do we get to choose who we are? Or is it already decided by how others view you?

Today, the answer to “who we are” is heavily influenced by our labels: ethnicity, appearance, age, gender, and social status. My cousin was the first and only person to make me realize the misconceptions created by labels.

I have a cousin who is 2 years older than me, who lives in California, and who is diagnosed with ADHD and autism. We could only meet once in every 4 years or so because of the distance, but whenever we had the chance to reunite, we would always hang out together. But whenever we would play together, I always had a notion in my mind that he was a person with special needs.

When we would go to the mall together, jump on the trampoline together, or even when we had dinner together, I was overly cautious, and there were times where I acted more like a guardian, rather than a cousin. Unconsciously, I had defined who my cousin is on my own, based on my experience and perspective.

Due to his conditions, he had difficulty with verbalizing his thoughts and emotions, which would sometimes make me frustrated, not because of his autism, but because I felt ignored. Despite knowing each other for almost 16 years, I sometimes felt like he didn't recognize my true self and care about me, because he would never look me in the eye, or show genuine affection.

As the outbreak of COVID-19 made it impossible for our family to visit the U.S., my cousin only existed in my distant childhood memory. Time passed quickly as I became busy with school.

However, things completely changed when I received a phone call from my aunt, who I haven't spoken to in several years. After sharing how our lives have been recently, my aunt suddenly mentioned how my

cousin wouldn't stop calling my name. I was completely astonished by this news. Apparently, my cousin had been repeatedly calling my name, and kept asking his mother where I had gone over the past few years.

Instantly, when I heard about this, I was so ashamed of myself, because I never realized how much my cousin had cared and loved me, before and even after we had diverged in different paths. My cousin never saw me as a "guardian". He always saw me as a great friend and an equal family member.

I immediately asked my aunt to pass the phone to my cousin, whom I haven't talked to for years, and when I heard his voice, though it was the exact same voice I kept hearing for years in the past, I sensed love in his language. Even if his grammar was improper, I realized how he was trying his best to tell me that he misses me. In that moment, I truly connected with my cousin because I saw him as someone who is trying his best everyday to express his love despite all the difficulties, not just someone with special needs.

In contemporary society, before we even interact and create meaningful connections with people, labels stand in our way. Superficial information speaks before we do, and causes us to make judgements based on how others look and speak.

But my experience with my cousin taught me that people express themselves in various ways. Ever since, when I engage in conversations, I have started to pay attention to people's small expressions, rather than what we see on the surface because I finally realized that love and emotions are not only expressed through literal words. They are sometimes carried through imperfect languages, gestures, and tones. True communication begins not when we speak, but when we actually start to listen to people.

And, at the end of the day, assumptions and prejudice will still exist. But the answer to "who we are" can be determined by our own selves. Labels can describe a person, but only empathy allows us to truly discover and understand one another. I hope everyone gets to know this, so that they can realize the subtle love and kindness that they are surrounded by.