

The Courage to Be Yourself

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Imagine a child walking into a classroom, dressed in pink from head to toe, carrying a pink pencil case. Most of us would assume this child is a girl. But why? This assumption is a classic example of gender bias—a bias that is so ingrained in us that we often don't even notice it.

Back in elementary school in the US, there was a boy in my class who loved pink. His backpack, his clothes, and even his pencil case were all pink. To us, it wasn't unusual; it was just him. We didn't tease him or think he was strange. As time passed, he began to embrace who he truly was, wearing skirts and tying his hair into a ponytail. The happiness in her eyes told us she was finally living as her true self. Everyone was surprised, but once again, no one teased her or thought she was strange.

However, some parents acted a little differently compared to us. Some talked behind her back and some even pointed fingers at her. I couldn't understand why she was so outstanding to them. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, about 80 percent of workers who identify themselves as sexual minorities or so-called LGBTQ have not come out as their true identity yet. This is a shocking number. Since the main reason they come out is that they want to live their life as who they are, this means there are a lot of people suffering in society with a lack of understanding.

I used to think that this problem had nothing to do with me because I thought that I had enough understanding of gender bias and discrimination. However, when I saw a TV commercial with subtitles saying, "Dinner is ready!" I automatically thought that it was a woman speaking. This made me realize that I am still stuck in stereotypes and am unconsciously biased. I started to worry if I had hurt someone with my words before.

Thinking back, I remembered how confident the boy was coming into the classroom with a pink dress. After coming out she looked happy and more

cheerful than ever before. At that time, I thought that was nothing unusual and special. But now after learning the fact that not everyone can show their true identity, I could understand how scary it was and how much bravery she needed to be like that.

From then on, I tried to be unbiased with my words and opinions. I didn't want to harm my friends or my classmates without knowing. I even became sensitive to what my other classmates said as well. I once heard someone saying, "Only girls should take a home economics class." I was stunned but it made me recognize how easily we can harm others with biased statements. Even if the speaker didn't mean to hurt others, these comments need to be banished. It should be, so that everyone regardless of gender identity, can live their life as who they are without worrying about how others may react.

These days, I often remember the smile she had on the first day of school with a skirt on. If one of my friends came out and told me their real selves, I would say "Thank you for telling me. But for me it's nothing special, I think it's great!" Thank you.