

A Note to Young Immigrants

The bittersweet aspects of immigration

by Mitali Perkins

Be ready: You lose a lot once you're tossed into the mainstream. You lose a place that feels like home, a community where the basics are understood, where conversations can begin at a deeper level. No easy havens await you, no places to slip into with a sigh of relief, saying, "At last, a place where everybody is like me." In the neighborhood, you're like a pinch of chili tossed into a

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creamy pot. You lose the sharpness of your ethnic flavor quickly but find that you can never fully dissolve. You lose the ability to forget about race. You're aware of it everywhere in town, like a woman aware of her gender in a roomful of men. You dodge stereotypes at school by underperforming or overachieving. You wonder if you're invisible to the opposite sex because you're foreign or because you're unattractive.

You lose a language. You still speak your parents' language, but it will soon begin to feel foreign to lips, pen, and mind. Your heart won't forget as quickly; it will reserve a space for this mother tongue, your instructor of emotion, whispered in love and hurled in anger. Your heart language will speak words that tremble through tears; it will join you with others in the camaraderie of uncontrollable laughter. In your new language, English, you enjoy the lyrical cadence of poetry and glimpse the depth of ancient epics,

but your heart will remain insatiable.

You lose the advantage of parents who can interpret the secrets of society. Your friends learn the art of conversation, the habits of mealtimes, the nuances of relationships, even the basics of bathroom behavior, from their parents. Your own parents' social etiquette sometimes leads to confusion or embarrassment in the outside world. You begin to take on the responsibility of buffering your parents from a culture that is even more foreign to them. You translate this new world's secrets for them.

You lose the stabilizing power of traditions. The year is not punctuated by rituals your grandmother and great-grandmother celebrated. Holidays in this new place lack the power to evoke nostalgia and renew childlike wonder. Your parents' feasts of celebration fall on days when you have to go to school.

You lose the chance to disappear into the majority anywhere in your new world. In the new neighborhood, you draw reactions common to minorities—outright racism, patronizing tokenism, enthusiasm from curious culture-seekers. If you travel across the seas to neighborhoods where your parents grew up, you're greeted with curious, appraising stares. You're too tall or too short; you move your arms and hips differently when you walk; you smile too often or not often

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enough; you employ the confusing nonverbal gestures from another world.

But don't get discouraged. In fact, you should feel quite the opposite. There is good news about life in the melting pot. There are gains to offset the losses, if you manage not to melt away altogether. You're boiled down, refined to your own distinctiveness. You realize

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early that virtues are not the property of one heritage; you discover a self powerful enough to balance the best of many worlds.

A part of you rises above the steamy confusion of diver-

sity to glimpse the common and universal. You recognize the ache that makes us all feel like strangers, even in the middle of comfortable homogeneity. You understand the soul's craving for a real home because yours is never sated with a counterfeit version.

So take time to mourn your losses, but remember to revel in the gains. Learn to embrace a litany of genuine labels—words like *stranger*, *pilgrim*, *sojourner*, *wayfarer*. Stride past the lure of false destinations, intent on traveling to a place where, at last, everyone can feel at home.

Reprinted by permission from *Teaching Tolerance*. Mitali Perkins was born in India and immigrated to the United States with her family when she was 6 years old. She is the author of two novels, as well as many short stories and essays about life between cultures.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you find yourself in this essay? What hits home for you?
2. Imagine writing a short welcome note to an immigrant coming to the U.S. from another country. What would you say? How would you welcome that person?
3. In her essay, Perkins writes of immigrant students' parents, "You translate this new world's secrets for them." What does she mean by "secrets"? What "secrets" are difficult for newcomers to learn?
4. Perkins refers to this nation as a melting pot, comparing flavors and spices to different cultural heritages. Others have described this nation as a mosaic, a collection of small tiles combining to form a larger image. What are the differences between a melting pot and a mosaic? Which do you think is a better description? What are other ways you could describe a multicultural society?