

***For immediate release:***

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**The Art of Being an “Other”:** When Being the Odd Ball Out Leads to Happiness  
*Growing up Bi-culturally*

From day one, I was labeled, “other.” Singing my ABC’s, looking Japanese and asking for a “bonbon,” it was hard not to notice me. My French mother and Japanese father told me that it was my terrible singing voice that drew attention, so being an “other” never went to my head. What did go directly to my head and heart, was the feeling that I was indeed different -- what some have coined a ‘language bigamist’ or as Katherine Knorr of the International Herald Tribune put it so well, “someone at home in two places and a stranger in both as well.”

After reading her article on growing up bi-culturally, and she certainly could have written a book on the unkindness of strangers, I have often thought about what it means to be an “other” to never entirely fit into one category -- nor to entirely want to. After all wherever I went, I would continue to introduce myself as a Franco-Japanese American from New York. And we all know that these days in the States, most of us would prefer to leave out the “French.” Yet, somehow, not fitting into any one category made me feel important.

Of course, a lot of people don’t always fit in. They may look different, or they may just feel different. And many times that is a good thing. According to some studies on bi-racial children there are some benefits to being an “other.” Studies will informatively tell you, that growing up bi- racially or for that matter bi-culturally can lead you to be “assertive, emotionally secure, independent and creative with a positive self-concept,” and those who know me might even confirm this happy outcome.

Sure -- growing up tri-culturally pushed me to think outside the box (there were at least three sides to each issue), to resist peer pressure (don’t care for drugs), to find your own path in life (you never fit into one category so you are quick to invent your own), and to do something that no one else wants to do nor can become (still not sure whether I am doing the former or the latter). Yet, I noticed that this was only because I naturally did things to protect myself when others seemed to sink. Things that could make it more fun to be a Franco-American, Japanese-American, Hispanic-American, Arab-American or countless “others” at a time where it is difficult to be a ‘stranger’ at home or abroad.

I let these thoughts boil out from inside me, and realized I was not alone. Biracial children represent a growing segment of the U.S.’s diverse population. According to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) between 1978 and 1992, the number of biracial children born in America increased more than 50% and some recent census reports even indicate that this number makes up over 7 million, 42% of them being under the age of 18. Add to that mix 1.5 million mixed-race marriages in the U.S. with that number roughly doubling each decade. Of course, you don’t have to be bi-racial or grow up tri-culturally to not fit in. People who have traveled, married a foreigner or lived the life of an ex-pat often feel that they deal with many similar issues. Even those who brag about being “run of the mill,” have at some point felt like the odd ball out -- like they didn’t completely fit in, nor want to. A feeling of not being completely understood nor accepted for who they were or who they wanted to become.

That means that for even the most positive “others’ amongst us, life isn’t always perfect. Let me assure you this was certainly true for me. There were some things that definitely bothered me. Oh, it was not that I ate like the French (although I can assure those still boycotting French

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## **The Art of Being an “Other”:** When Being the Odd Ball Out Leads to Happiness *Growing up Bi-Culturally (continued)*

wine or restaurants are missing out needlessly), looked Japanese or dreamed big like an American. It was that I was small in size. Yes, being small made me feel like an “other.” I know this sounds petty, but I remember every person in my life that called me small. Yes, every one of you. Of course my mother says that it is cute to be small. My father says that Napoleon was small. But none of that helped.

Yet, there were things that my French mother’s ‘savoir vivre’ and my wise Japanese father did that certainly helped me be happy as an ‘other.’ Things that my friends wished their Mom had told them, what most Dads may not have known (my father was a renown Harvard trained psychiatrist on happiness), and what my own happy go lucky attitude made easy.

Of course, lest I gloss over the difficulties involved in growing up bi-culturally, it is true that in addition to all the normal identity crisis that kids and adults go through there is the additional challenge of physical appearance (I had spent hours pinching my nose to make it less flat with little success), language (looking Japanese did not mean I spoke it fluently), a strange sounding name, identity, and how one deals with racism from all ethnic groups including your own -- if you are lucky enough that such a category exists.

Indeed, when I was eight I remember the day when a little American girl asked me why my last name was Ishizuka. Honestly, I had no idea. So instead, I asked her, why her last name was Jones. She too was clueless. And so we became friends. I concluded, that if someone asks you a question that merits no reply, don’t get angry, get curious. Today I find that still works and only wished that more French and Americans who have found offense across the Atlantic as well as ‘Arabs’ and Americans (should either category be easy to define) used a similar technique. For as a proud Franco-Japanese American that now lives in a city where one quarter of the population under 20 are of Muslim origin, I can assure you that we all have more that unites us than divides.

Nathalie Ishizuka is a Franco-Japanese American author and illustrator of *Mom Says, Dad Says, Nat Says: Other* who has spent over 15 years writing about a model of health and happiness. Her innovative interdisciplinary approach integrating the psychology of individuals, organizations, and the nation state has lead her to work with people from many fields and to receive the George A. Plimpton Fellowship for the study of social, economic, and political institutions.

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*Mom Says, Dad Says, Nat Says: Other*, illustrated and written by Nathalie Ishizuka, 60 color pages soft cover, ISBN 1-59113-741-1. \$24.95 published by Booklocker 2005, visit <http://www.natsays.com>