A Daughter of Vietnamese Refugees

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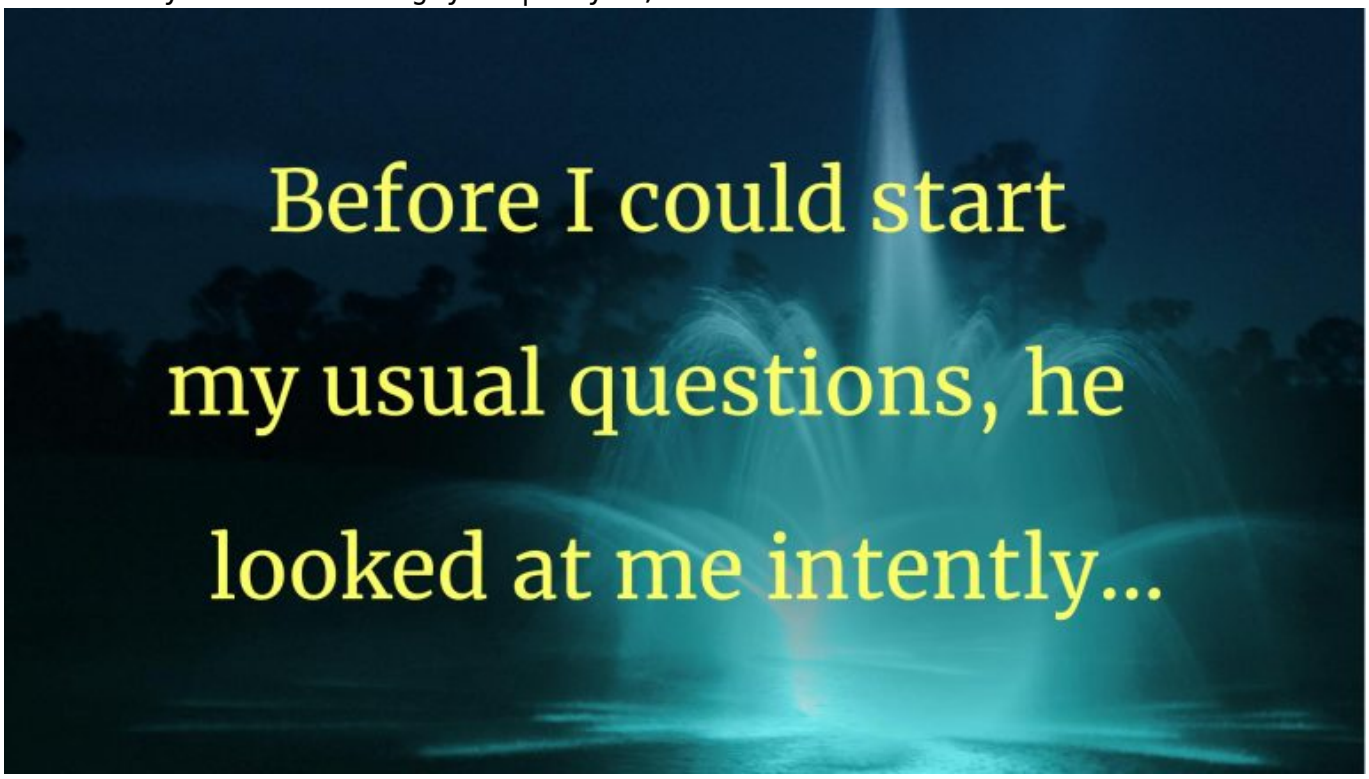

Editor's Note: This piece was a finalist in the Pulse *writing contest, "On Being Different."*

I am a daughter of Vietnamese refugees.

I wear my identity so proudly that I often reflexively lead with this when, as a medical student, I'm introduced to colleagues, professors and supervisors. It is my response when asked, "How will you contribute to diversity?"

I feel honored to be different. In fact, when I meet patients who have never encountered a Vietnamese American, and if it feels safe to do so, I happily pronounce my last name in my native tongue.

On January 22, 2023, the first day of the Lunar New Year, I started the morning's hospital rounds eager to celebrate my heritage. I wore traditional Vietnamese garments over my scrubs, hoping to spark conversations with my patients at the West Los Angeles Veterans Affairs Hospital.

Unfortunately, instead of celebration, I was greeted with horrific news on my patients' television screens: a mass shooting in nearby Monterey Park the previous night. Eleven Asian Americans had been killed.

"Another one…."

"Reminds me of Vietnam…."

“You’re Asian, right? Did you know any of them?”

My patients’ innocent questions reminded me of this country’s deep-rooted history of xenophobia and violence against Asian Americans. Although I desperately wanted to talk with my patients, I found myself flipping my name badge over and keeping my head down, hoping that no one would make assumptions about my ethnicity.

Sometimes, I don’t *want* to be the daughter of Vietnamese refugees; this was one of those times.

I wanted nothing more than to blend in with my non-Asian colleagues. I did not want to remind everyone of this tragedy; and I surely did not want to serve as a “diversity token” for the hospital—someone on whom the administrators might call to make a statement of solidarity during this time.

Walking around the hospital, I felt a mix of intense sadness, tension and confusion. My background and my research in Asian American studies have given me a nuanced understanding of the complicated history between US military veterans and refugees. I both honor veterans and recognize the difficult refugee experience. However, when horrific acts of violence are perpetrated against communities of color, I struggle to accept the reality that not everyone feels as shocked or saddened as I do.

After rounds, I wept privately in the bathroom. Wiping my eyes, I looked down at my name badge and wondered: *Do I have the capacity to hold these complex conversations with my patients today? Can I care for them in the midst of a tragedy that hits so close to home?*

Still feeling undecided, I checked on Mr. Vaux, who’d been my patient for the past week.

Before I could start my usual questions, he looked at me intently and asked, “Did you hear about what happened?”

His television was on, but muted.

“Yes,” I said.

He studied me for a moment.

“You know,” he said gently, “I joined the military decades ago because I wanted to feel like I belonged to something. I wanted to be different from the other guys in my neighborhood.”

He paused, his eyes twinkling. “But I never did like taking orders!”

For the first time that day, I smiled, thinking, *He hasn’t changed much.* (Mr. Vaux often resisted the medicine team’s daily treatment plans.)

“I can tell!” I joked.

Mr. Vaux grinned, then sighed.

Looking right into my eyes, he said, “I’m so sorry for what I was forced to do in Vietnam, many years before you were born.”

I couldn’t conceal my surprise. Then I realized that my badge had flipped, revealing my last name.

He gestured towards the television, then at my traditional Vietnamese clothing, saying, simply, “I know.”

It was as if he sensed the mix of hurt, grief and frustration brimming inside of me. We said our goodbyes, and I quickly left before he could see my tears forming.

Later that day, I sat in the residents’ workroom, silently weeping. Somehow, in just a few words, Mr. Vaux had touched on my inner turmoil.

I thought back to the conflict in Southeast Asia that had brought my family to the US in 1980—the very conflict in which so many of my patients had fought. Mr. Vaux and I shared an understanding of a situation that I’d previously thought had divided us. He had showed me that, while he was proud of his service as a veteran, he also felt anger and regret over the violent and disturbing acts that he’d committed.

Sometimes I yearn to be more anonymous in the hospital (for instance, when I don’t know the answer to a medical question). My talk with Mr. Vaux taught me that I need not hide: I, too, can feel simultaneously proud of my heritage and angry at the forces that bring about war and violence against innocent people.

My supervising physician walked into the workroom.

“How is everyone doing?” he asked.

Amid the “okays” and “goods,” I replied more loudly than I’d anticipated.

“Not great.”

Everyone turned sharply towards me.

“I feel at odds,” I said. “Trying to balance my responsibility to care for patients with my grief for the Asian American community. I’m frustrated with the system, and with the sociopolitical forces that allow mass shootings and war and all these preventable deaths.”

The team looked shocked. For weeks, our workroom had been a friendly but strictly professional setting. Thankfully, my honesty was met with compassion, and others in the room also expressed their sorrow over the shootings.

This experience made me more confident about sharing my thoughts—not only on medical issues but also on the social and structural forces that influence how we care for our patients. In situations where previously I would have kept silent because I was “just a medical student,” I spoke up. I’d finally

recognized the power in my identity and experiences.

Mr. Vaux and I continued to share stories during the rest of his hospitalization. As we discussed my favorite Vietnamese foods and his war memories, our rapport deepened, and we also shared our respective goals for my medical career and for his hospital stay. Our talks strengthened my wish to work with under-resourced communities like the one I grew up in. Mr. Vaux became more than just another patient to me as I sought to better understand the experiences that had made him a complex individual who, like me, was on a personal journey toward healing.

I am a daughter of Vietnamese refugees, constantly learning to incorporate my identity within the ever-changing spaces I encounter as a future physician.

I know that there will still be times when I shy away from standing out. But I also know that, if I can acknowledge my discomfort, those moments offer me the chance to connect even more deeply with my patients, who are just as different as I am.