

Accents: The sounds of who we are

I teach Hindi and talk about Indian culture in my son's and daughter's elementary school classes as a volunteer. So one day, when my son told his 3rd grade class that it was interesting how I instantly switch accents when I talk to someone from India as opposed to someone non-Indian, the children asked me to give a demonstration. In the spirit of things at the moment, I tried to speak English as if I was speaking Hindi, with intonations and slang and all. I don't know if that's how I really speak when I'm on the phone to India, but mingled with excitement, I did notice a look of slight surprise on my son's face. And I also felt an undefined astonishment at myself, as if I had tried to fit myself within a stereotype, the non-Indians version of an Indian, like the exaggerated Indian grocery man in the Simpsons.

A few days later, I remembered the episode again and it set me thinking. Accents! How many of us choose to remove all signs of our accents, wanting to blend in, to merge, to lose ourselves in the common stream. Many times, as a way of getting ahead. We don't want to be singled out, laughed or sniggered at, on our speech. Sometimes, even by our own sons and daughters who a lot of times, not having enough confidence in themselves yet, and wanting to be like the majority of their peers look askance at their own parents accents.

Accents! The wonderful sounds of ourselves, of who we are: They hold the secrets of our childhood, the stories of our cultures, the music that vibrates our souls, the rhythms that make our feet want to dance. Accents! They hold the scents of night-queens and jasmynes, the flavors of cardamom and cinnamon and the sounds of our parents. They hold the whistle of the steam train as it rushes past farms and rivers and children

splashing into mountain lakes. They hold the chorus of our school friends, the yearnings of our youth, the failures and successes of our lives. They are us. What are we without them?

I love to go to New York City. First, it reminds me of the hustle and bustle of a big city, like New Delhi, where I was born. And next, it throws me in the organized chaos of a million cultures coming together: their sounds, their way of walking, of talking, of carrying themselves. The hairstyles, the colors, the faces, the sizes, all different and all co-existing happily. Outside the building of the United Nations exists, the real United Nations.

I sometimes wish that all the boundaries that we have put around ourselves in the world would one day just lift, disappear, and we would all become someday, a true union, with no need or desire for wars and fights, with no thought to give up our accents along with our homes as we move about the world. Given the current state of things, I know it's a wildly utopian thought, but despite its setbacks and problems, I'm waiting for the European model to succeed. And in my lifetime, expand outside its' own boundaries, with a new name.

Maybe, it'll happen another way, through our acceptance of each other. By embracing the good things from each other's cultures. By just embracing each other: as friends, neighbors and colleagues. I feel fortunate that I live in Portland, a liberal city, a small city with all the benefits and few of the problems of a big city, where it's tough to get lost! Where children grow confident and curious to want to listen to the world. It's a good thing, because the world is at our doorstep.

My daughter says that when she hears someone speak with an accent, it sounds fun and it makes her want to learn more about their country.

Well, I do have one and I hope I always do.