

Jane Bahr

THE BEAUTY OF BEING MULTIRACIAL:

My Experiences as an Asian American and How It
Has Blessed My Life



Jane Ellen Megumi Bahr

THE BEAUTY OF BEING MULTIRACIAL:

My Experiences as an Asian American and How It Has Blessed My Life

When I was five years old my favorite thing to have for lunch was rice and fish and seaweed. I loved the way my mom would pack my lunches in cute little bento boxes and how I could eat them with my special pink chopsticks. But I quickly developed a love of jam sandwiches once my schoolmates moved away from me at the lunch table and made fun of the way my bentos smelled. They didn't like my "weird" food and I suddenly didn't like it, either. When I told my mother that I didn't want rice and fish for lunch anymore, she asked why. Rather than give in to my request, she had a better idea. She came to my kindergarten class, read a story about a kitten who ate sushi for lunch, and explained to my peers that in Japan, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are "weird." I went back to my fish and seaweed lunches, and I am so thankful that my mother instilled in me a love for different cultures while I was young. She taught me to embrace my mixed background, and I no longer felt shame for eating ethnic food. But there was a time when I was so against the idea of learning how to use chopsticks that I told my mother I would pack a fork in my suitcase if we ever traveled to Japan.

My grandmother was born and raised in Japan. I am a mix of many different ethnicities and cultures—Japanese, Chinese, central Asian, Balkan, Inuit, Andean, Jewish, the list goes on—but Japanese is the one I feel most connected to. Looks-wise, however, I am White-passing. This gives me a unique perspective and insight into the world of racial prejudice. I haven't experienced many racially-charged attacks aimed directly at me like my mother or my grandmother. I haven't been called an "f***ing chink" or a "dirty jap"; I haven't had my locker filled with rice or been told that interracial marriage is a sin. But I've been told things like, "you're pretty for an Asian," or "you're lucky that you're mixed with White." And I often overhear racist or offensive comments— things I believe people wouldn't say if they knew I identified as Asian American and mixed race. People make derogatory comments and perpetuate stereotypes right in front of me because they think that I'm White, too.

In one of my high school classes, we were talking about how race affects college admissions, and how Harvard University was being sued for discrimination against Asian students by holding them to higher standards of grades and test scores. My teacher remarked that the next year of admissions, Asians were *more* likely to get into Harvard because the university was afraid of another

lawsuit. As the class was filing out of the room, a boy in front of me squinted his eyes and said, “Look guys, I’m going to Harvard!”

The next year, in a class at Brigham Young University, my discussion group was talking about how Japan’s government was influenced by the United States after World War II. One of my peers said that it was a good thing the US came in because “Japan’s culture wasn’t great until we came along.”

The recent rise of anti-Asian hate crimes has been heavy to bear. To know that people like me are being blamed, attacked, and even killed just because of the color of their skin and the shape of their eyes is absolutely heartbreaking. I cannot imagine my own sweet grandmother going for a morning walk and being shoved to the ground, or my brother being stabbed outside of his apartment building. People have been slashed with knives, shot, set on fire, and had acid splashed on them. While I’m grateful that the brutality of these attacks is finally being publicized, I have also spent hours crying over them and asking God, “why?” I have been comforted by the rallies to Stop Asian Hate, but I also see the injustice. Racial prejudice against Asians has been happening for a very long time. Why is it just now getting media coverage? And when people were posting on Instagram to “check in on your Asian friends and family,” no one asked me how I was doing or offered to hear about what I’d been feeling. I wondered if it was because I’m only one-quarter Asian; I often worry that people will think I don’t deserve to identify as Asian American, or that they think my involvement with social issues is me trying to play the victim. But no one checked in on other members of my family, either, even those who are more Asian than I am.

Despite the hurt that members of my family and I have felt, I am eternally grateful for my mixed race and heritage. It shapes and enriches my life every day, both in simple and grand ways.

Because of my culture, I know how to make gyoza and sushi by hand. I know that I must tuck in the right side first when I wear a kimono. I wear house slippers instead of shoes inside my home. And I know to leave my head bowed a little longer after a prayer.

Because of my mixed background, I have a greater love of arts and world cultures. Without my heritage, I wouldn’t love travel or international film and cuisine. I wouldn’t be pursuing a minor in Art History. I wouldn’t have taken classes to learn the Japanese, French, or Italian languages.

I took ballet classes for years growing up, and because of my mixed race, I was inspired by dancers like Misty Copeland, Maria Tallchief, and Stella Abrera. And it makes me so happy to see

Asian artists and heroes that have recently been recognized, like Awkwafina, Steven Yeun, Youn Yuh-jung, Simu Liu and Sumi Lee.

Being multiracial has given me a greater respect, love and appreciation for immigrants, especially those who have come to the United States. My country was founded by immigrants—my grandmother is one—and as a second-generation Asian-American, that means so much to me. And my diverse background has made me more patriotic. If I weren't mixed race, I wouldn't feel as much of a need to be politically informed. I am so grateful for the many rights that citizens of the United States have. Because of the right to speak freely and the right to assemble, we have fought and protested for the right for all races to vote and for the right of interracial marriage. And we can continue to fight for justice for all races. I am so grateful that I can have these important conversations about race and I can use social media to try to raise awareness for important organizations.

Both of my older brothers have served missions in Japan for the church, my oldest brother being able to serve in the same area that my grandmother grew up in. It was there that he met his wife, who was serving in the same mission. She is half Japanese, and they have a beautiful baby girl that fills all of our lives with joy. I'm so proud of my brother and sister-in-law for making the decision now to teach their daughter that her Asian features are beautiful.

I have built much of my testimony of the gospel of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by learning about other religions, because there is truth in all of them. My grandmother grew up Buddhist and is the only member of her family who converted to Christianity. Learning about the beliefs and practices of Buddhism has taught me more about Christ than I could have imagined. Being multiracial truly has led me closer to my Savior.

Something that has enriched my life is the art of origami. I can't remember *not* knowing how to make an origami crane. It is so deeply ingrained in me. In Japan, the origami crane symbolizes peace, hope, and healing. Legend has it that if you make one thousand cranes, your wish will be granted. In Tokyo, there are hundreds of colorful paper cranes strung together, hanging on street corners, and they're hung at Buddhist temples all over Japan. Over the years, I have made crane mobiles for special people in my life, like professors or church leaders, or for friends and family members who are struggling or in need. I made one for a family friend whose son has been struggling with mental illness; another for my leader who struggled with infertility and finally gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. A few years ago, a school friend tragically passed away in an accident, and I made

a mobile for his family. I think of the recipient as I'm making each crane, and every mobile includes a personal note explaining the origami crane's significance. Without my Japanese heritage, I would not have this art form and act of service that blesses my life.

I created an origami sculpture to represent the beauty that I see in being multiracial. I chose to use cranes because I believe that peace, hope, and healing are the things that bring cultures together, and they come from Christ. The sculpture consists of thirteen strings of paper cranes. I wanted the mobile to reflect parts of my heritage, so every other string includes the colors of a different world flag. (Included are Tibet, Ireland, Mexico, Germany, Mongolia, the United Kingdom, and Japan.) Each of the cranes on these strings are unique. No pattern or design is repeated, there are differences in size and texture, and they were all folded carefully by my hand. And none are perfect. I strung the cranes around a circle to represent unity of cultures and eternal families. The six strings between those that represent flags include solid colors; these pay homage to Buddhist temples in Japan. There are bundles of these multicolored cranes hung at temples as a form of prayer.



Just like the cranes, we all come from different backgrounds and have unique stories to tell. Some of us are mixed race. Some of us struggle to know where we stand in society because of this. And even though all of us are imperfect, we are all beautiful children of God. We are family.

All of the world's cultures and ethnicities are beautiful and worthy of celebration. They are God's gift to us. Learning about them and understanding them makes us more like Christ. I am eternally grateful that I have connections to so many of them. My greatest hope is that I can inspire others to see the beauty that diversity brings to the world and that I can inspire other multiracial people to see the beauty in themselves.

