



## A small breath

by Amy Peterson, Monday, March 22nd 2021

Throughout my life, I have been asked, "What are you?" and "Where are you from?"

I used to answer with sass, saying things like, "I am a human from California." But I stopped doing this because I was met with even more frustrating questions like, "No, really, where are you actually from?"

In the cases where someone knows my name before they see me, whether that be from an email or application I sent in, I have also been told, "You don't look like I expected "

I can detect the hidden question in their voice. Over time, I learned to take in a small breath to brace myself before giving the answer to the real questions being asked, which is about my racial background and possibly even my citizenship.

That inhale of air braces me for the thoughts I see lurking behind the questions: You don't "look" American. Let me categorize you into something that is easy to label. You don't "look" like someone who would have your job, your name, your education.

I genuinely don't think that those who ask or make these statements realize it feels insensitive and exclusionary. I do try to keep in mind that the person usually is not trying to be intentionally harmful. But I must admit I do feel a sting every time these questions come up no matter how friendly the face is that asks.

These stings come in various forms and build up over time, and the impact lasts longer than the few seconds it took to utter them. For example, there is Yen. Yen is an immigrant from Vietnam who came to America to escape being murdered by the Viet Cong due to her father's work with the American embassy.

She was told, "Your accent is so thick," and she was teased for her broken English at school. Years later, all grown up, she chose not to teach any of her children Vietnamese out of fear they would develop an accent. Yen is my mother. I wonder about what I have lost because of these stings numbing me, her and others like us over time. Does the numbness ever go away?

When I was a teenager, a boy asked me about my mom's name. Doesn't 'yen' mean money? I explained this: Yes, the Japanese currency has the same sound, but my family isn't Japanese. My mother is Chinese but was born in Vietnam.

She remembers a warring Saigon when she escaped to America as a pre-teen with my grandparents and her siblings. Her name is the Vietnamese word for a native swallow; named after a bird, similar to how some are named Robin in America. I tried to explain all the important parts inherent to his simple question. How this means I am Chinese racially but my cultures and traditions are also Vietnamese. How beautiful my mother's name is because she really is like a bird that flew away for better weather.

Yet how sad it is for a bird to lose a home as her familiar Saigon is lost. Her name is simple — one syllable; but it means so much. Sadly, it didn't matter how deeply I explained the importance of all this. That boy did not hear me and only ever referred to her as Robin from then on. I think that was the day I realized I take that little breath before speaking.

For the readers who want to know how to support Black, Indigenous and people of color, please start by really listening to our stories. This looks like you trying to understand to hear us and not blocking out the things that you don't want to deal with or don't want to hear anymore because it is bothersome.

Expect conversations to feel complicated because human beings are complicated. This is the necessary mindset we all must have in order to bridge our differences and find our commonalities. I hope you can hear and see the point of my story. I will keep trying too.

It's been fairly lonely operating almost a full year within a pandemic. Yet even in a remote world we can get to know our neighbors. Thank you for getting to know a little more about me.

*Amy Peterson is the daughter of a Chinese woman who immigrated from Vietnam and a white male veteran who grew up in California. She is also the equity, diversity & inclusion coordinator and lead Title IX coordinator at Rogue Community College.*