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A Sense of Belonging

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Abstract: National Collegiate Honors Council President delivers his address at the NCHC's 2021 conference, describing that, despite the privileges he has chosen and enjoyed, expressions of otherness have led to feelings of estrangement. Considering the question of how to face this challenge in honors, the author emphasizes the imperative of creating a sense of belonging for every student.

Keywords: immigrant students; higher education; people of color; identity (psychology); California State Polytechnic University–Pomona (CA)–Kellogg Honors College

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(What follows is a slightly revised version of Suketu Bhavsar's presidential address, delivered at the Annual NCHC Conference in Orlando on Saturday, October 30, 2021.)

I struggled with what to say in my presidential address. I wrote mostly about the issue that has been a core priority for me as president of NCHC: our pursuit of diversity and inclusion in honors and how much more we need to do. Last night, what I had written felt totally inadequate in view of the frank and heartfelt expressions about this issue I have been hearing from our students in the last few days at this conference, so I threw away my prepared talk and decided that—on this topic that I deeply care about and struggle with but don't have answers to—I can be the most genuine in sharing, with my honors colleagues and students, my personal experience as a person of color and an immigrant.

Describing myself to academic colleagues with these qualifiers is something I have never done, and it feels odd to me because one's otherness is not fashionable to talk about professionally. At the same time, it feels cathartic.

I am a privileged person of color. Though I arrived in the U.S. over forty years ago with a suitcase and \$8.00, I also had a scholarship to pursue a PhD at Princeton, and I had the best mentors and professors in my field of astrophysics. The privilege I enjoyed and continue to enjoy is genuine. More recently, though, I have come to realize that the gratitude I feel for my privilege resulted in rationalizing and explaining away prejudiced and bullying behavior that hindered or demeaned me.

Let me give an example to explain what I am talking about. I have been stopped and questioned by police twice in recent months, just taking a late evening walk in my neighborhood. I was annoyed at being stopped, but I told myself that they were doing their duty to protect the neighborhood and that I should be glad and grateful that I live in a safe and affluent society. As I walked home, though, feeling a bit shaken and somewhat indignant, I realized that either the police or some of my neighbors believe I don't belong in this neighborhood.

This feeling of not belonging was also triggered for me the day a U.S. president told four congresswomen to "go back to where they came from." This is something that I have been told during my years here but that I had brushed off. That day also brought back the memory of being told by a fellow graduate student that I had taken away a scholarship that should have gone to an American. Since I will always look like someone who is not from "here," I will never quite belong *here*.

So, the question I ponder as it relates to honors is: What will it take for any student to feel "I belong"? Here is what a student asked me yesterday: "How much do I have to change, and not be me, to fit in?" In our pursuit of diversity and inclusion, we must honor our students for who they are and create programs where they both know and feel that they belong.

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