

Being Content with Myself

"Why don't you 'act black'?"

Since my middle school years, I've been asked this question more than any other. It seems to me that too many people have let society program into their brains what should be expected of me, a black person, before ever interacting with me. But I believe in being who I am, not who others want me to be.



On my first day of high school, going into math class, two of my classmates pointed and laughed at me. I initially thought my fly was open, or that something was stuck in my teeth. But as I took my seat, I heard one of the students whisper, "Why is a black person taking Honors?" So my fly wasn't open. An honors level class had simply been joined by a student whose skin was an unsettling shade of brown.

Many people think my clothes should be big enough for me to live in, or expect me to listen exclusively to "black music." In seventh grade, a group of my peers fixed their cold stares on my outfit: cargo shorts and a plain, fitting t-shirt. They called out to me, "Go get some 'gangsta' clothes, white boy."

In one of my Spanish classes, as part of a review exercise, the teacher asked me, "¿Te gusta más la música de rap o rock?" "Do you like rap music or rock music more?" I replied, "La música de rock." The look of shock on my classmates' faces made me feel profoundly alienated.

I am now in my junior year of high school. I still take all Honors courses. My wardrobe still consists solely of clothes that are appropriate to my proportions. My music library spans from rock to pop to techno, and almost everything in between. When it comes to choosing my friends, I am still colorblind. I continue to do my best work in school in order to reach my goals; and yet, when I look in the mirror, I still see skin of that same shade of brown.

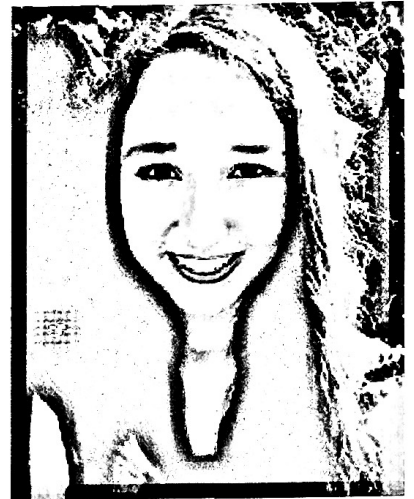
My skin color has done nothing to change my personality, and my personality has done nothing to change my skin color.

I believe in being myself. I believe that I—not any stereotype—should define who I am and what actions I take in life. In high school, popularity often depends on your willingness to follow trends. And I've been told that it doesn't get much easier going into adulthood. But the only other option is to sacrifice my individuality for the satisfaction and approval of others. Sure, this can be appealing, since choosing to keep my self-respect intact has made me unpopular and disliked at times, with no end to that in sight. Others' being content with me, though, is not nearly as important as my being content with myself.

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Find a Good Frog

I believe in finding a good frog. It seems that all throughout childhood, we are taught to look for a happily ever after. "And they all lived happily ever after"; isn't that the conclusion to many children's films? When I was a kid I always thought of that as magical; but now really it just seems unrealistic. And it teaches us that what we want is a fairytale like they have in the storybooks. We all want to be Cinderella who gets swept off her feet by the hot prince; we want to live in the royal castle, right? But I don't think that's necessarily a good thing for us to seek. Now I'm not saying I believe in being pessimistic, but I do believe in being realistic; it's something I got from my mom.



My mother and I always have our best conversations in the rain. We sit in the car, neither of us wanting to brave the rain to get to the house. So we sit. We watch droplets race down the windshield, listen to the rain strike the roof of her little blue Honda, and feel the heater on full-blast rushing at our feet (just the way we like it). I don't know why, but sitting in the car, we always talk more than normal. There was one rainy day when my mom told me something that is going to stick with me forever. Earlier that day she and my dad had been arguing about something; I can't remember what. So she said, "Don't spend your life looking for Prince Charming. Instead, find yourself a really good frog." At the time, I found this thought really disheartening. Who wants to think that you'll never find Prince Charming? You'll never get to be Cinderella? Another thought that struck my mind: if my mom says there's no Prince Charming, then what's my dad? A frog? I asked her, and she replied with, "Of course! If he were Prince Charming, he wouldn't snore, would be able to cook, and we would never argue. But you know what? He's a damn good frog." Of course, being young, I didn't think of the meaning behind what she was saying. I was too busy thinking of it literally, visualizing my mom as a princess and my dad in frog form.

But a few years later, I understand the value of my mom's words. You can't expect everything to be perfect. Let's be completely honest; if you wait your whole life for your prince with flowing hair, statuesque features, and a white horse, you're going to be lonely. I think that the point of finding a good frog is you accept something that's great, flaws and all. It's so easy to be picky. You can find the one tiny thing that's wrong, and that one tiny thing is what you can't get your mind off of. But in life, we can't afford to wait years in vain for perfection. So I think that a good frog, an amazing frog, the best frog you can find is what we're really looking for in this world. Don't laze through life waiting for a happily ever after, because I don't think you'll be very happy with the outcome.

This I believe.

Delia Motavalli wrote this essay as a high school freshman in Fairfield, Connecticut. Her favorite subjects are math, chemistry, and art. Ms. Motavalli volunteers every week at a community supper and sits on a hunger outreach advisory board.