

Short Stories

My Identity

By

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One of my father's favorite sayings was from Cervantes' "Don Quixote". This he always delivered in Spanish, as he changed the Castilian to a more popular version and added his own addendum to it, which explained the reason for quoting it. He would bring up the saying whenever we started to speak too much English inside the house, and especially if we tried to speak English to him:

"Hay un dicho: 'Cuando en Roma, haz como los Romanos' – y en MI casa, van a hablar español"

("There is a saying: 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do' – and in MY house, you will speak Spanish!")

This was his very subtle way of telling us that English was not permitted inside the house. He would add that we could speak all the English we wanted outside the house to each other, or at school, but not to him inside his house. He even went so far as to ignore anyone who spoke English to him, including his own children.

My mother, on the other hand, subscribed to the policy that the schools imposed on parents at that time: an edict that parents should speak English to their children at home so that the children would more quickly learn English. Luckily, my mother had attended two years of school in Arizona and also worked a few years before she was married, so she spoke some English. And she wanted to perfect it; therefore, she allowed us to speak English to her, and answered as well she could. Although my father made it apparent that he didn't approve of that practice, we continued to speak Spanish and English to my mother, but only Spanish to my father.

One day, when I was around 8 years old, my father called me and asked me to sit down by him. Then he asked me "¿Qué eres tú?" (*"What are you?"*)

"What am I?" I questioned in Spanish, not quite knowing what he wanted me to say.

"Sí, ¿qué eres?"

"Mexicana...?" It came out slowly, more like a question – is this what you're asking me? What I am? I didn't doubt the answer, only the question.

"¿Tú crees? ¿Tú crees que si fueras a Mexico te iban a ver igual a los Mexicanos que nacieron y viven allí?" (*"You think so? Do you think that if you went to Mexico, people would see you the same way they look at Mexicans who were born and live there?"*)

"No," I answered, now a little quicker than the first question. I knew that I couldn't compare my "Mexicaness" with those of my classmates who came from Mexico. I was born here in the United States, and my Spanish was definitely not as good as those who were born in Mexico.

"Entonces, ¿qué eres?" (*Then, what are you?*)

"Americana...?" Even as I said it, it didn't sound like a word I would use to describe myself. I knew I was American, I was born in the United States, but it just didn't feel as comfortable to say I was American as it did to say I was Mexican.

"¿Tú crees? ¿Tú crees que te ven a tí igual a los Americanos blancos que nacieron aquí?" (*"You think so? Do you think that people see you the same way they see a white American who was born here?"*)

"No."

"Entonces, ¿qué eres?"

My father gave that familiar wave of his arm that seemed to say "This discussion is finished for today. Think about what I've said."

I knew he wanted me to think about it, but what was there to think about? I was either Mexican or I was American. No matter what he said, I still felt more Mexican, but I knew I wasn't as "Mexican" as he was. And I certainly wasn't as "American" as some of my classmates. I wanted to cry out "Just tell me! What am I?!!" But it was clear he was finished with the topic, and the 'problem' had been passed on to me.

It wasn't until twenty years later, when I was a student at the University of California at Santa Barbara that I realized that it was my father's way of telling me that someday I was going to have to deal with my identity, to be able to say what "I am."

During the 1960s and 1970s, the history of the Hispanic contribution to the United States was being retold, rewritten, and reinterpreted. It was an exciting time that exposed historical events that many of us had never even heard of. An awareness of who we were and events collectively experienced, bound us together as a people and begged a label that would define us under a spirit of unity and celebration of our culture. But just as our culture is richly diverse, so are the labels that we can choose from to identify ourselves.

It is important for us, as Hispanics, and especially as teachers, to have our own identity, to be able to express that to our students and to be proud of who and what we are. Only then can

the students entrusted to us understand that whatever experiences they hold dear are valuable, and help to shape and form their own unique identity. When our students can say what they "are" with pride, they are confident and capable of success.

As a teacher, enrolled in a class to teach Culture to those who were going to take the BCLAD, I was somewhat surprised to learn what my Hispanic colleagues called themselves. A teacher born in Mexico who has lived here most of her life is still "Mexican", while another born here in the United States, like I was, called herself "Mexican-American." Another teacher, one I consider a very vibrant activist, calls herself "American."

And mixed races are a whole issue to themselves. I enjoy hearing the identities of persons that I know. There is the Chicano-Filipino who is a "Chipino," the Black-Mexican who is a "Blaxicana," and the Mexican-Chinese who is a "Mexichin."

I can be "Mexican," "Mexican-American," "American," "Hispanic," "Latina," "American of Mexican Descent," "First-Generation American", "Mexicana-Gringa" or any other monikers that I cannot think of now, or that may come in the future. But for me, "Chicana" fits perfectly, and that is how I would now answer my father's question – "¿Qué eres tú?"