



Nigel: This is Nigel Ousey for See Beyond My Skin Podcast. My mom works at a software engineering firm in Philadelphia called STRATIS. They have a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. It is a really cool place, and before COVID. I told one of the engineers, Cemah about my project and asked him my two questions: how do you see yourself and how do you fear others perceive you? It really got him thinking. He shared it with the STRATIS IDEA Team. IDEA stands for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access. They spent a long time discussing how they see themselves, why names are important, and ways they felt included or excluded in their communities. My mom pulled me away from my school work to listen to part of it. They recorded the conversation for me and I am sharing it with you now.

Cemah: Ah, Is that my cue? Nigel had proposed to me “how do I see myself?” And this was on Friday. And I had to take the weekend to think about it. While I was thinking about it, I realized I really didn’t know who my sense of self was because there were so many different versions. Once I posed this question to the chat, I saw myself as a perceptual sculpture. A sculpture that changes depending on what angle you’re looking at it. And those - it wasn’t disconcerting but it was kind of shocking how far off like who I thought I was versus who I am in certain spaces. I had posted in the thread, it was kind of a thing I couldn’t stop thinking about once I started thinking about it. For me, I like to hang my hat on the fact that at the core of it no matter where I’m at or what scene I put myself in, I still try to be a person with morals and standards and yeah....at its core, that’s the one good that I can say I took out of it. But even though my surroundings and my outer presentation might change, at the core of it all, I try to be that same person through and through.

Lori: Yeah I didn’t jump in on the thread at all, but thinking about that now. So I am half Philipno and while people know I say that “oh yeah this is me,” I feel like no connection with it at all. Which sometimes makes me feel so strangely guilty that I don’t understand or speak Tagalog. I don’t know how to cook any of the food. I have to look in my little recipes. It’s a weird because when you try to, at least for me, know that this is part of my identity. I feel like it’s something I can’t claim, if that makes sense. I feel like I have no actual connection to it, because I don’t. I’ve never been there. It’s interesting because I do feel like even though I am half white, I look pretty white. Even being in elementary school, people could tell I was different, but didn’t know “what I was”. Which is the grossest question in the world. I feel like even though I wasn’t that Philipino, those formative experiences made me more white and want to be more white. I’m just word diarrhea-ing as Cassi so eloquently stated earlier.

Jason: I've definitely had my fair share of that as well. Not only have you heard me speak in the past about my roots as a Cameroonian American. Born and raised in the US. But having immigrant parents as immigrated to the US. I feel directly connected, but at the same time I feel distant only because there is definitely a nationalist and a culturalist lens to see things through. That we don't really see unless you have families in different parts of the world. I could be with aunts and uncles that are very much from the country and grew up there. Cousins that were born there but then are now going to college and living life here. There is a difference. There is love there. There is still family. But especially the older I get, the more I represent myself, the less of a past there is. Before it used to be, you're a Cameroonian American kid, I get it. But now it's almost a playful dismissiveness like "you just don't know." And that can hurt because in any other place I can go, I can sit there and be proud of my African roots. And not just proud of it but actually be able to speak to having a different perspective because of my households and the place I've got to go and the food I got to eat and the conversations I got to take a part of. But then when I'm with family, it becomes this layer of "oh you've only been there once. You went when you were a kid. You don't cook anything. You don't speak to it. You're missing these things." The lack can end up informing the identity. And you're left on your feet to decide what to do with it. And I'm still in the process of trying to figure out what being Cameroonian American means to me even though I can never reraise myself there.

Shawn: I'm interested in Cemah's analogy of seeing himself like a perceptual sculpture. Like Lori and Jason, if you're comfortable, I'm curious to see if you feel pressured to act in a different way when you're around relatives who are closer to that heritage.

Jason: Yeah, I have. Plenty. Quite a bit. It's, you know, it's almost like you always know you're American and there's nothing wrong with that. Obviously. We're here. We have family that is trying to immigrate here as well. But then there's almost a fear of not being *too* American. There's a fear of not wanting to come across as you don't know where you came from. You don't want to...there's a consciousness of not wanting to accidentally betray your roots. At least in the eyes of the people looking at you. You can't control what they see or how they come to terms. Especially knowing you have an immigrant family that tends to be terse in language that you're just like you, you kind of learn to deal with it. They're not trying to hurt you. They're just a difference in rearing. But, yeah you want to be able to fit in with your family because it's your family. But your face is just different. They don't know what it's like to grow up in America. You don't know what it's like to grow up in the proverbial Motherland. It's really what matters more is that in my case, just because we're at the cusp. My generation you could say, my sister and I and by extension my brother even though he was born there, we are the first generation primarily raised in America. So it's not like you have 2 or 3 generations after the fact. We're trying to figure this out as a family now. So learning how to navigate that is something that is happening a lot. Because now I have older cousins who immigrated here and they're raising children younger than me. And now they have to figure out what they're going to do. Because some cousins will give them authentic names and that can make it harder to navigate America. Some like myself have more standard western names but then you still have authentic middle names. And all these cultural exchanges that you have to decide to determine how you want to

honor yourself but also best engage your new environment. It's tough to have to make the choices. But the choices that because of your position you end up having to make.

Cemah: I almost feel, for me, I know where you're coming from. When it came to family for me it's like they're family. They get on your nerves. You still love them. It is what it is. My biggest fear was introducing my family to my American life. So like my mom has the accent of all accents. I understand her clear as day. I don't have to think about it. But I remember Parent Teacher meetings, parent school days, field day, color day, and like my mom would show up and it would just be like I was deathly afraid she would open her mouth and say something. Thinking back on it now, I feel so guilty. It's my mom. And I guess I was ashamed of who I was because I wanted to fit in. And "conform." So to have my mom there showed that side of me that I didn't want people to see. Kids are kids. What they don't understand, they don't understand. They'll tease you about your accent. They'll tease you about your lunch because your mom made you African cooking or whatever the case that maybe. The one thing that stood out to me was none of the kids in my class were ever really pushed to understand my culture. I can vividly remember conversations where my teachers would pull me to the side and tell me to pick up a football or watch a baseball game. And it was always me having to conform to the general confirmation rather than the general population learning about me. And I think just from that point of view was kind of how I learned to betray my African roots but you know. I started to detach from them in order to assimilate into this other world. I don't know if that still happens today. Clearly we're all adults now. But I would love to hear the perspective of former teachers if that's still a thing that happens.

Nima: I had something I wanted to add to what you were saying about putting your previous heritage aside. So I'm the first generation. My parents were born overseas. I was the first of my family to be born in the States. Born and raised here. I moved around a lot, but still. I definitely assimilated to the American lifestyle. To the extent that I might have considered myself white because that is how the census considers me. That's how my demographics have put me as. While I kind of like assimilate myself with American culture. As I walk around, as I've gotten older, based on how I look, people don't perceive me as what the government perceives me as. People see me as brown. Not necessarily what I see as an American. Because what I am first and foremost versus being white, brown, tan, whatever you want to call it. I was definitely raised with this mindset of "I'm an American kid" and as I got older, and more in college, people perceived me as an ethnic person. So it was definitely difficult for me to come back to that. But there is another side of it which is my family. I have tons of cousins that were born overseas. And they are much closer to our culture and our heritage than I am. So there's a middle ground that you want to jump back and forth to what you were seeing Cemah. One side says be an American. Another says hey remember your heritage. Remember who we are. One side of me says hey I'm Persian and I have a lot of culture around that. The other side says Hey you're American. Try to be an American. There's nothing wrong with being both. But there's a lot of context switching between both of those.

Jason: As far as how things are happening today. It's funny I've seen quite a few memes in regards to the shift for the Afrocentric teaching to Afrocentric cultural symbolism. You're seeing

more Black kids, young Black adults in more African patterns and natural hair. You're seeing more of that now. Then you'll see memes from other children of other African immigrants. Where you're like "oh decades ago you were making fun of us for this, this and this but now all of a sudden it's the way you want to get in touch." There's a certain level of bitterness that is well deserved in many respects.

Cemah: When Black Panther came out, it was the most annoying 2 months of my life. Because every time I would go on something, I would roll my eyes at the people doing Wakanda Forever. 10 years ago as an African booney scratcher, don't come back here and think shit is all sweet.

Jason: You put it right as it needs to be put. It's a shame that it has to be this dynamic but it's real. When you're the one who has to live it daily.

Cemah: yeah for sure.

Lori: I feel like a mildly similar thing has been happening with white people cooking Asian food and saying it's better than Asian people cooking it. Oh cool, when you'd bring very fragrant lunches to school, you were like some absolute outcast weirdo. But, you know, now let's let this white man hawk spicy chili garlic sauce or something. It's yeah. They don't respect or want any of the culture until someone that looks more like them does it or it's presented in a more palatable way.

Jason: Yeah, as opposed to letting that take a different turn conversation wise. I feel like a lot of that has so much to do with other cultures being treated not just as "other" but almost as trends. It's almost like here to entertain. It's dehumanizing. That's definitely not what I represent. I'll be damned if I'm just here to entertain someone else. But that comes back to how we define ourselves. It extends even to more politics, how people choose to represent themselves as Americans. I think as Ben Franklin put it, "I may not agree with you but I defend your right to have an opinion." That's supposed to be part of the spirit of what it means to be an American. I have seen black conservatives and I look at it as "I may not agree with everything that comes out of your mouth, but you are an American and you have every right to hold the position." It doesn't mean there aren't consequences that come with that. But it just means you have the space to do that. You take that. And there's a certain level of freedom in terms of what we talk about when it comes to being American or identity politics. Where you're trying to say I am what I am, but this is what I represent and I'm going to speak to you about it. It's very difficult to negotiate that room between being something and then you saying what that actually means. You might think you might like me. I think okay so I'm a Black man which means xyz. I could think that. I could mean that. And in my inner world, that could be something. But how I walk in the world doesn't mean that's how it's perceived. It can be a dangerous path to talk about the freedom to represent yourself but then having to deal with the consequences of what, how you are seen is taken. You have to be like you and recognize where you're at.

Cassi: I know we're running up against time, but I feel a lot of what you are all saying and that combined with sort of Puerto Rican. I am by default American. But not really. We're a colony.

We tend to assimilate puertorriqueno to be an American. To the extent that even in the early days, there was a period of time where Puerto Rico where everything had to be taught in English. No one knew English. I feel so deeply everything you all have said. For me it's that schizophrenic life between yeah I'm an American by default, but I don't feel it when I go home. Because we are not treated as American citizens in so many respects. In PR, I'm afraid I'm not considered puertorriquena even though that's where I've lived my entire life. And when I'm here, I'm not considered American. And I'm always trying to definitely, with family and friends back home, I represent myself differently than I do here. Where I try to fit in and be American and be white. This whole conversation is incredible. I wish it could continue beyond this. Because Nigel this is brilliant what you're doing. This project is brilliant. Bravo. It makes a lot of think deeply about all of this.

Cemah: I do have a question for people who are not necessarily immigrants. Is it because you are part of the majority? You have the luxury of not thinking about it. People feeling out of place in society? If that makes sense? I always try to look at things from both sides. The younger me would just be like always angry and F the world because they didn't get me. And I was always treated badly. But then as I've gotten older, I've tried to put things in full perspective. Even now it's not all black and white. I still try to understand where the other side is coming from. Like I said about kids are kids. I don't expect kids to have that type of awareness to realize that you may be going to school with someone who doesn't necessarily fit in. Or who isn't really part of the culture. I would just want to elaborate on coming from the other side. I would greatly appreciate that.

Ashana: I could say that I had the privilege to think about it. Not have it presented to me of where I'm from. My father is a first generation Norwegian. Both of his parents immigrated. I was excited when I was in high school to be an exchange student in Sweden. I had a scholarship. I got to go over to Norway and meet my relatives and it felt very exciting. I sort of ignored my mom's side of the family that was Polish and German because for me, for whatever reason, it wasn't as exciting. There was a big family reunion one time and I went down to Washington and I was so excited to meet my Norwegian relatives. They were very politically active in Washington as Republicans and I felt so alienated that I scrapped the whole thing and never went back. For me, I didn't feel that connection. I have revisited all of the thinking about race and my heritage and everything since Nigel is my son. I'm feeling inadequate as a white mom and really think so much about the privilege of being white in a way that I had never had to think about ever before. I'll just leave it at that for now. Really a lot for me to unpack in many ways.

Anne: I think what I can say is that somewhere I read a description that being white means you don't have to think about race or having a racial identity. It's just a non-thought. Like by default. It's not something you really have to think about. I feel like that is the best way I've ever come across describing it. I feel like I don't have a race. Because it's default and it's majority. And growing up, one of my closest friends, was Indian American. And she brought the lunches to school that people thought were weird. And of course now Indian food is very cool. I think even now, when I think back on it now, I felt like there was so much I was oblivious to about her experience and we didn't talk about until she went to NY for school and was able to join an

Indian sorority and meet a whole bunch of other Indian Americans. For her it was just mind blowing. And for me, it was like oh wow, I don't think I realized how tough it was for her until she left. And then that kind of opened up the space for her to have conversations about it I guess. It was really eye opening for me because I was like, oh wow, I was really just completely unaware of this entire facet of her experience. And the way she struggled with it. It's, there's a lot of obliviousness and willful ignorance.

Jason: Yeah, I mean a lot of that can be in some sense, you can say it's taught. But in a lot of ways, it's just really, for lack of a better word, it's normalized. In a lot of ways, I have Black peers that just have raw angst for really anyone white. They've been in the past and have experiences in their own lives. The systemic reign of terror that has come down on Black people by the hands of many a white hand. But I also know too there is a reality in terms of discourse between the many stakeholders when it comes to race in America, but there are plenty of white people who didn't really have a chance to do or think any differently. And it's not to take any white person all the way off the hook, but it's to say that look if you really want a solution, if you really want to get to a place where there's hope for everyone, then let's focus on getting there. As opposed to it being a pure retribution play or a pure tit-for-tat type of thing. There is anger to be had and to be expressed. There is a sense of right and wrong. But there also still needs to be something that is built. There is something that can last. And there has to be understanding on all sides to have that so it can't just be extreme of one to rectify. In a lot of ways, I don't blame a white person for thinking how they thought or experiencing what they experienced. It's a generational thing. You had parents that weren't told to question things. It's a compound interested upon decisions made long ago. That you wouldn't even think twice about. But that doesn't change the fact that things need to change.

Cemah: Can I pose this question? With us being the first generation of whatever it is that we are, if hypothetically, if/when we all have children one day, should it be on us as parents first generation to try and empower our kids to not feel ashamed of their other side of their heritage. Or should it be more of a, once again going back to this majority example, for other kids to go out and learn more about different cultures/heritage. It was the third question I posed in that thread. It was kind of along the lines of, is there more I can do. Whether that's just a conversation and forget about it. Go do research about where you're from. Learn about the food they eat. History. Something like that. Something that shows the person I'm more invested in who they are as a person outside of a random conversation. I think that's something I struggle with. Because I can see it from both sides. And I don't know what side needs to make that happen in order for us to get to this perfect world that we're trying to achieve.

Jason: You can make the case that it's simply needed all around. If we've learned anything from history class or civilization class, cultural exchange is a part of human interaction and civilization empire building. It can go very wrong even in many instances in history. But there is a lot that's come to be because groups of people intermingled. And I think that now we can do that on a digital level by learning information and discussing findings. Unfortunately because of the digital landscape we're in a position where we have extremes. People tend to stick to their familiar extremes. But the resources are there to find and learn more. And to discuss. Without

even, quite literally, having to leave your home And simultaneously, on a personal level, I absolutely am willing. My parents will be able to meet, greet, and connect with all of their grandchildren. They'll have more of an opportunity to directly exchange what our culture is to us with them. And in the meantime, I'll have to do a better job of understanding what my culture means to them. So I can figure out what it means to me. So I can articulate it to them. Instead of hoping that someone else can do it for me. So it's work on all ends. But it's a collaboration and the exchange that matters. It has to happen civilly and it has to happen with respect. It has to happen in an informed manner. But not in a presumptive informed manner. This is what I've learned. Can you help elaborate? This is what I've learned. This is how I'm speaking on it. Is there anything I'm missing? Have I misunderstood? It has to be more or less you trying to drive the conversation with you at the wheel of another car, another culture. And more of a "hey am I driving this right?" or "hey I'm watching you. Is there something I'm not getting?" You need to be teachable still in the midst of learning.

Cemah: Well, I'm going to call someone out for a comment that was made. Grace referred to that as being a "walking encyclopedia."

Grace: The difference between being the resident expert and being the walking encyclopedia. The difference between that and what Jason just described is the communication. What Jason described is Person A met Person B. They were from different cultures. They went their separate ways and learned about each other's cultures and came back and had a conversation. And a conversation that said "Hey I read this or I did some research and I learned this information. It was interesting to me or it wasn't interesting to me but I'd like to have a conversation about it." As opposed Person A meets Person B. They come from different cultures. And they say, "Hey that's really interesting. Tell me all about Cameroon." NO! I don't want to be. You literally have a world of information at your fingertips. I don't need to be an expert. You CAN go out and read a book or read an article and come back and engage with me. And we can have a conversation where you might go ahead and ask me questions, yes, but you've come to the table with something. Not with just the simple expectation that I'm going to be that person for you and answer all of those questions. I don't want to be that person for you.

Jason: Right. And you don't want to tokenize or act reductively to another culture. Even at work, I'm a VFA alum, and I talk to Yuzuka quite a bit. One of the times I've talked to her I've been like "I love anime. I appreciate Japanese culture. But let me know if my enjoyment of it or my recollections of it ever somehow inexplicably cross a line." Because I would never want to be one to say that in and of itself, that medium, is the entire culture. And thankfully I know better than to think that. But I can at least pick up on themes within it. And pick up on different motifs. And I can go to her and ask her about that. And how those specific themes and motifs resonate. Things like that. It's one thing to tokenize and another thing to discuss.

Grace: Right. I don't want to be your Barbadian friend. I want to be your friend who happens to be from Barbados. You know what I mean? I mention that specifically because you used the term token. That's something that has been an issue for a long time. I'm not saying for me specifically, but just in general. There was literally a character on SouthPark whose name was

“Token.” It’s what happens. I just don’t feel that as an individual who is different from someone else that I should be held responsible for all of their knowledge of my background. Whatever part of my background that is. I know we’re talking about our nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Whatever my background is, if I have a background as a performer, I should not be the only place that you go to to get information about performing. You have other resources so just to draw that parallel.

Shawn: One thing that circled back to your third question Cemah is: representation really matters. I think we need more kinds of stories. We also need to not tokenize the stories themselves. Because sometimes there is the ethnic film that’s completely authentic but it’s not actually. It’s held up as the exception. As a parent, we read a book together called “Measuring Up”. It’s about a Taiwanese young comic book, a graphic novel, about a young girl who moves to the US from Taiwan, but she’s entering into a cooking contest to try to fly her grandmother over. And it definitely goes into the stereotypes she faces as an Asian American in the United States. The scene of lunch and her not wanting to have Taiwanese food. Like wanting American food is in there. What I found really beautiful about it, it’s about the interplay between cultures. And I think that it was really a good book for us to read together and discuss. Because there were some touchstones that my daughter could connect with that were like stepping stones to think about another person’s experiences in a different way.

Cemah: Yeah, I guess I kind of put my own experiences on others. Like my experiences, I just really just want to be left alone when it comes to the immigrant thing. So I don’t want someone asking me about Liberia or Liberian cooking. I don’t care and I’m not in the mood for it. I take that into my own life where I have very surface level conversations. And after we’re done that’s it. And since this, I’ve asked myself how can I change the problem that I’m seeing here. Because I think it’s naive to think that it’s everyone else’s problems and there’s nothing you can do but try to fix it. I appreciate the advice Jason and Grace. The context to which you asked those questions. Definitely take to heart and keep in mind going forward.

Jason: Not being afraid to command that respect. Offline I made the point, and I’ve heard it made before, that even for something as simple as a person’s name, I remember I was in the high school enrichment program. We were working on a graduation ceremony. And I was trying to get the announcer to pronounce my middle name correctly. And he just kept butchering it. And just like almost jokingly butchering it. People were laughing. But to me it wasn’t a laughing matter. That’s my name. It’s not a joke. It’s my name. And you know you want people to respect that but they’re not always going to know. So even if to them it’s a light hearted moment, you got to be very willing to set people straight and let people know. Because I’ve seen even powerful people. I’ve heard many distinguished people and powerful people refer to Africa as a country. It’s just one of those things that because it resonates to you personally, you could be the President or whatever. I have no problem stopping you and saying no, that’s not accurate. And funny enough, that’s actually something that parallels my experience at WestPoint where one of the things that they told us was that anyone at any level is allowed to make a uniform correction to anyone. So if a 4-star general for whatever reason has an error in their uniform, I, back then

as a cadet, could just say Sir, sorry to take your time, but I would like to correct you on such and such on your uniform. And if they see it and they fix it, then they appreciated it. Or at least they should. But it's a point of just saying, hey, look,. there things that matter beyond your own perception. There are things that matter simply because they matter. There are things that are due respect when met. That includes culture. That includes the tenant of that culture. And if you're not in a position to understand it, then seek that out as opposed to feeling entitled to an explanation.

Cassi: Thank you to you because, to all those who contributed, because I find myself always not wanting to. Or maybe too exhausted. Puerto Rico should be a state. Hello? What about autonomy? What about us given the chance to figure that out for ourselves? Haven't you done that many times? Like no not really. And I never know...it's sort of like Grace's encyclopedia. I'm not an encyclopedia on the history of colonialism in Puerto Rico. Let me just explain that to you. Do you have a month? This whole conversation has brought out so much.

Cemah: Do you feel like correcting people on things that should be corrected. Does it make the situation better? Does it kind of add strain to it? Now is there this unspoken tension because you checked it at the door? Because I've been through this. Other companies that I worked with. I correct someone on my name and they give me that little cringy look. They don't even know they're doing it.

Grace: I mean like my name is my name. From a cultural perspective. Names have meaning. I'm going to start there. A woman gets pregnant. She knows the name she wants to give to her child. And if she doesn't know, she puts great thought into it. She doesn't just randomly say, you know what, John. Good. We're done here. No. People take the time. There's a reason why there are books and websites and so many resources that people like take the time to go through and comb through and say I want my child to have this name because it means. As far as checking people at the door, I'm not really concerned with how you feel about me checking you. This is me personally. I'm not concerned about how you feel about me checking you. The fact is, I demand respect. I deserve to be respected. I shouldn't have to ask for your respect. But I am asking for your respect. Even if it's just in pronouncing my name the right way. I had a professor who called me "Grahs". I understood he came from a different culture background (French African). Cool. Fine. That's how you would pronounce this word where you are from. But this is my name. And my name is Grace. And I expect that you will call me Grace. The same way you expect I will call you Professor.

Jason: Yeah, it's boundaries. Because I've told people before. We learn over time. You learn how to say and spell Tchaikovsky,

Grace: Dostoyevsky. You can get through all of those.

Jason: But you can't say. All of a sudden, Cemah Tudae is hard. You don't want to do it and just shorthand.

Grace: Like do you have a nickname for that. Can I just call you C? No, my name is Cemah.

Jason: Right, just put in the legwork. It's one thing that you're trying. You're practicing. And you're asking for proper pronunciation. That is one thing. That shows you respect the source material. Like imagine. You're making music. And you just snatch a clip and you think you can make your track. You gotta pay royalties. There is someone who actually owns that who you need to respect because of what you're using it for. Just taking it because you think you should take it. No. My name is my name because it's my name. And I fully know if I mispronounce your name you would correct me. Just because it's not normal for you doesn't mean you're beyond correction. And correction doesn't have to be super harsh. It should be simply I expect to be paid the respect that anyone would expect to be paid. And if we have to take baby steps to get there then we'll take it. If that's what you need, then that's fine. I shouldn't have to feel bad about being paid the respect that any other person would get paid for an innocuous moment such as knowing how to say my name.

Cemah: even the example of the name. It wasn't until I was older and I got into the professional world that things really started to annoy me about having to correct people. I was saying people would often cringe at me. And there'd be this awkward tension. Great, it's my first week here. I got three people that already hate me. I now have to navigate this world where I'm always on edge. People are hoping for me to fail. People are waiting for my downfall. Because I was the guy who checked it at the door. And oftentimes, I start internalizing that over time. If it's a repeated pattern, then I must be the problem. Everywhere I go, if people are starting to avoid me because I'm doing what feels right to me. It's like, sooner or later, human nature is to start looking towards yourself "am I really the problem?" and start second guessing yourself. People think I'm an asshole. But if you really knew me, I'm not. I'm just the type of person and I'll give it to you straight. And how you take it is how you take it. I'll never go out of my way to disrespect someone or try to be mean or condescending. But oftentimes, people treated me as if I was the problem. Negative energy going throughout the world because I was looking for that respect. So I just stopped. I stopped trying and I went along with my own mental sanity, I couldn't keep up because I felt like sooner or later, it was going to be me against the world. And it was a battle I wasn't willing to fight, but two, I thought I was going to lose.

Jason: You're definitely not the first person to go through it. I will let you say that I sense no asshole energy here. This is certainly not a company that entertains that for very long. Just know that having a sense of what you can control and having a sense of what consequences can come from what. I know I said what I said about representing yourself and what you believe about yourself. But I had also mentioned being able to kind of tape and measure consequences external to yourself. Yeah, there are companies that correct them on your name, especially if you expect your name to be pronounced fully because that's what you've been called your whole life by those closest to you, and they make your life hell because you're pushing some non Eurocentric standard on them. And they don't expect you to be the type to bite back. They probably hired you because they thought you'd comply. It's all this stuff that's out of your control. That's like me to you. You don't have to shoulder that like that. And I would never want to see

you have to shoulder that like that because you clearly have more to offer beyond a needless burden like that. Just know that from me to you.

Cemah: I appreciate that.

Jason: I would just say that just knowing that your environment. I appreciate you Grace. Your environment is one that plays a hand in it and what you show. Just know not to make that burden and measure your consequences. Don't compromise yourself. Don't think I'm wrong for going by my whole name. You think, okay, well. Is this the hill I want to die on? Maybe not in my first week. Fine. It's Cemah. It's the little wins. You gotta win each front of the war to win the whole war. You may not get it all. You get the battles. But you don't want to lose the war type of thing. Like yes you gotta. You have to still command your respect. Like still at least put that out there forwardly. But don't think that you have to be the one that gives way just because there's an entire group of people who have never thought to pay that kind of respect. I don't want you to feel as if you're wrong for commanding that respect. You're not. Like if your environment takes it, that's how they take it. But you yourself are not wrong for commanding that type of respect.

Cemah: Yeah, I appreciate that. I haven't really felt I was wrong. I felt more like I was the common denominator. So it was obviously something with me. Life happens. You have responsibilities. Bills. Loans. Whatever the case may be. You kind of have to start making sacrifices. You have to go along to get along. There is a greater good or greater goal that you are trying to reach. Or it's like you said. You can die on this hill. And the unknowns with dying on that hill are super scary. And I'll go out on a limb and say that until I started experiencing that in life, I never really figured it out. I didn't really know until my girlfriend pointed it out to me that that's what women deal with on a daily basis. Just like living in a mans' world. After a while you just get fed up with the bullshit, you go along with it, your mouth shut, head down, hoodie up. And it wasn't until she made that parallel for me that I really realized they're so much of it in the world. I don't know. I try to ask myself, you know. I don't try to complain about it. I try to ask myself how I can be better. That's why to give you background why I asked that third question on what I can do to be better.

Nigel: The whole name thing. That is just the most infuriating thing that can happen. Even if you have a name that is easy to pronounce. People will still butcher it.

Jason: Yeah, but I say if they need baby steps. Give them baby steps. I enunciate. I do syllables. I draw diagrams. I draw pictures. I do the whole thing because if people need to be babied, then fine. Imma meet you where you're at. Because it matters. It's just one of those ones where it matters because it matters. People aren't always going to get it right the first time. I don't necessarily expect them to. But if they need that little facetious pat on the butt of encouragement then by all means take it step by step with them. And if they are especially indignant then let it be honest. Some people don't want to put in the legwork to understand other cultures.

Lori: This is such an interesting topic of mine because most of you on the Zoom call know that I'm having a baby. And I've been so back and forth about his last name. And I'm like, do I really want to give him the life that I've had where I have to spell it and pronounce it. And it's just a pain. And it doesn't sound like potato. Please stop. Do I really want to saddle him with that? And it's like yeah, I kinda do. What if there's no other one to pass on the name? I think this conversation has made me come around to, yes, he's going to have to deal with the consequences of this last name because it is important.

Anne: Well this is something I saw in an internet discussion. But it was a thread about women talking about changing their names. And one of them posted saying she was sad that she had changed her name when she got married because she felt like it was a marker of her Jewish identity and with it gone, that was like a way she couldn't connect with people at least immediately when they learned what her name was.

Lori: He might get both last names. But mine is staying on there. We're keeping it in the family. School was so weird. Making doctor's appointments is weird. Do I want to do that? And I'm like yeah, I think it's important.

AMCS: Yeah I agree. My name is Condolucci. My family is white but my grandfather is first general Italian. And when we got married, we wanted to hyphenate. We wanted to keep both names. I knew people when I was young who had hyphenated names. But I didn't realize that signing up for websites and credit cards. Can't recognize a hyphenated name. Your Bank account. You can't have a hyphenated name. And those two names are squished together. And then in the LGBTQ community, it's not just about names, it's also about pronouns. And getting people to think or to call you their/them. Or we have people in our choir who go by she. But to look at them, they don't match what you in your head think someone who uses a pronoun of she should look like. So that's kind of a thing. Back to the original question. In terms of being your true self and not, we built a house. And we know where we live in the country, the country-esque, part of Delaware, we can't always tell people that we are a same-sex couple. But a lot of the contractors have trucks, pick up trucks that have bumper stickers of people's names that we don't necessarily agree with. And one day when we came to look at the house over the summer, someone had taken a can of spray paint and had written TRUMP on the beams of our garage before they drywalled. And of course we went to the office and complained. They said it wasn't a big deal. But what that name signifies to a person who is of color or LGBTQ or non-cis-gendered, heterosexual or white. It's a trigger. And to not be able to feel safe in your own home because we had contractors the other day. It ended up being the same person who had the Trump truck, was just all in the house. And I had to leave my office area where I have pictures of Daniel and me. And a little book of Celine Dion. And gay love things. It's just not being able to feel safe and comfortable in my own home. I'm a white male. I get that. But I understand what it's like to not feel safe. And I can't imagine. I can "turn off" being gay if I needed to. Or just not talking about it or not speaking. But if you are a person of color, you can't turn that off. You can't hide that. You can't put that away. I feel good that we are finally in a place where a person who is of color can walk around with a mask and people not be scared because we're all in masks because it's a damn pandemic. I think that we still have a long way to go.

Jason: Yeah, I think the respect for different people for being who they are is not nearly high enough. There are things that like Anthony stated. As a gay man in American, but where he is living with his partner. As well as myself as a Black man in America. Or even for Lori and Cassi as women of color. There are consequences that unfortunately get brought upon our doorsteps. That makes me think about LeBron of all people even though he had a home in Brentwood. And funny enough, my sister went to private school in this very fancy neighborhood. Someone had broken in and they wrote "nigger" on his gate. And you would think that is insane that that would even happen. I mean granted it happened to a man with a second home. And it happened to a man who is rather famous on this Earth. But to think. To me, my first thought was, even as much of an anomaly as he is as a person. Everything involved. The fact that even someone like him can not escape that. It lets me know there really are things that currently stand, hardly a chance any of us could escape it. There is no amount of money I can learn. Or acclaim. Or personal and professional feats that can make me escape the fact that I'm a Black man in American and there are people who feel entitled to belittle me. There are people who feel the need to belittle those in the LGBTQ community. There are people who feel the need to belittle women. Just anyone who is not them. And even amongst other white men. There are richer white men who want to belittle poor white men and extract them for votes every 4 years. It's all these things and it's like if things can't be civil, then we're going to end up with more extremes. And more extremes beget more extreme results.

Cemah: That leads me to an important point I was thinking of. The people who belittle others. Is it for some personal gain or is it to motivate or to make themselves better? Because the way I look at it. There's enough shit going on in the world. I don't have time to belittle other people. Ain't got time for that. I got too much going on. Full time job. 2 dogs. Unless you really have nothing of substance in your life that grabs your attention, is that why people in rural America act the way they do? There's nothing else for them.

Jason: I mean, just from what I've come to understand. I stand to be corrected since that's not my experience. Speaking as someone born and raised in a large city. I was just reading a quote yesterday where it was saying a person in that circumstance, even in a socioeconomically low circumstance, as a white person. Pretty much the quote was saying that if you give them a glimmer of a hope, that they're better than the best of another person of another race or someone who has more of them, but is of another race, then essentially you're giving them a lifeline of some sort. Like hey, I can give you something that they could have. They are who they are, but they're not white. Kinda giving you that thing to say "if you roll with me. If you vote for me. If you do this with me then I'll take care of you don't worry because you have something that is a permanence that they could never have." You're kind of selling a dream that you know you are not going to deliver on. That leans into my point about leverage on a political level. We are seeing people leverage that type of thought and leveraging it into votes. Leveraging it into policy and into their own agendas. It's not even to serve the people they're getting the votes from. It's just maintaining their position, their salaries, their assets, either legacies. It's very much a self serving position to be in. But it's self serving for a select few that it hits a lot of laypeople. Pitting them against each other. Quite honestly, even though there are better

discussions that need to be had in terms of race, and there are significant improvements that need to be had in terms of race and relations. In the midst of people arguing about race, gender and sexual orientation, all the different classes, there's a white guy making money off of it. All these platforms. All these arguments. All this tension. You can make video after video on YouTube, but there is a group of people making money off the attention in the ad space. Same with TV. Same with all the apps. It feeds into itself. Even with the conversations, if they were more civil. It would solve the need. If you solve the need, you have less need for business. If there's less business, there's less revenue. With less revenue, there's less profit. With less profit, there's less power. It feeds into itself still. As much as we have these conversations and these struggles, the game within the game is that someone is profiting off of it. Someone is leveraging it. Someone is helping themselves with it.

Cemah: For 50+ years though. I'll fly out there and have a conversation. If your life hasn't changed after 50 years, clearly at some point you have to ask yourself something has to change. I assume. I cannot speak for other people.

Jason: If you are a pawn on a chessboard, you don't ask questions. You just move forward.

Cemah: So you think these people are reiterating not their own beliefs but the beliefs someone from propaganda is giving them.

Jason: Now you are starting to catch on!

Shawn: One thing that I've seen with being around college students especially in Iowa. When the language first started coming out around privilege and like taking ownership of your own privilege and recognizing that. There was the pushback that I saw which was always like I'm not privileged. None of my parents made money. I'm not privileged because of whatever. I think a lot of that is driven by a culture of shame that we really don't build. We have very few places in our culture where we build kind of positivity and worthiness. So it creates this scarcity for self worth. And one of the civil rights movements. One of the negative consequences of it was that racism went underground. It made it so that being a racist was understood as this is the wrong thing to do, but it still didn't spark that self-reflection. So people went along with these racist views without understanding that they were racist views. And at the same time being very offended if they were called a racist. I think that's partly what has to change to get more.

Lisa: This past year, the whole thing, the Gravy Seals. The guys who are really upset by the Columbus statue, everything that happened around Columbus Day and the riots. My family is very off the boat Italian. My dad is one of those people who said we fought really hard for Columbus Day and we're not giving this up. He doesn't view that this is about Columbus. He views it as this is what he Italian immigrants fought for to get respect. I think that a lot of times that the groups who have been longer in the US forget that just because you had to fight to get something, doesn't mean everybody else has to fight just as hard to get something. It doesn't lessen progress your group has made to help others and be more caring and be more thoughtful than the generation before you. That's one of those things like you said Shawn about

moving it underground. It's a thing that is talked about in Italian circles. But it didn't really become public until this year because of the zeitgeist of everything that was going on. All these people that had these thoughts were being called out for being racists but they were very offended for being called racists because they thought what they were doing was their justification of other people being racist against them. It was this giant cycle of weird negative bad feelings that had been going on for so long. I'm encouraged by the open discourse that everyone is having. Because it causes people to really think. When you say something out loud, it's different than when you have to say it in your head. And maybe that's not happening as much in rural communities. Maybe that's not happening as much in the communities where it is more homogenized and we've set it up to be really siloed in a certain way. I don't think it's as simple as we look at it as this group is ignorant or this group is racist. I think it's more this group has internalized the feeling that they have been discriminated against and even if they haven't, just systematically before them, they have been. And then it gets complicated and they start projecting their feelings on other people who are just trying to have the same goal. Everyone wants to be loved, to be respected, to be heard. Telling other people no, isn't the best way to do that. And as it's coming out, I think what I'm trying to say is that America is such a racist place and has been for so long, that so many groups are tied up in this systemic racism in a way that so many people don't even realize what they're doing is terrible because what they think they're doing is correct. And that is being exploited politically. We've definitely seen that in the last year.

Cemah: So I kinda had a different view on it. When Trump came into office in 2016, I felt like after everything went down and I had time to decompress. I wanted to understand why. The simple answer is racism in American and we don't want to see this structure of white dominance. There are only so many white males in this country that make up the x amount of people in the United States of America. My friend turned me to this podcast where they were kind of saying after the election, they went around and they asked people in rural Ohios and lowas and the Dakotas, why did you vote for Trump. And a lot of them said they felt they had been forgotten about in politics. And so Trump was something new. Which, when I thought about it, I couldn't be mad at. It got me thinking. Should it be on us, as people. I don't want to call us more civilized or more advanced or more cultured. But should it be on us as coastal people and go into those rural areas and understand them. Or should it be on them to come out, leave their silos. And it goes back to my earlier point. Should It be on me to find out more about you. Or should I wait for you to tell me what you want me to know about you.

Nigel: I think it should be more like a mix. It's going to be hard if you know something about someone, but they don't know anything about you. Or like going to a doctor as a small kid. You don't know the person and you're scared.

Somehow we have to find some trust in each other, some common ground. I have a section on my website called The Reason and all I know is I don't want to be on that list of people of color that were killed in this country by police. So I have to do something about it. I have to start making people understand that they aren't different from someone just because of the difference

of their skin color or race, or religion. My website says that to see beyond someone's skin color you also have to be able to see beyond their politics and to try to understand them.

Cemah, thanks for bringing the conversation to the group. What was that like for you to be so open with your coworkers?

Cemah: To be honest with you, it was kind of liberating because this is the first time expressing who I am. And not only from being a person of color, but just also being a person who I felt could show that he goes through personal struggles and he has a life about himself that isn't always perfect. To answer your question simply, it was liberating. It was a feeling that I've never really gotten before. I think STRATIS has kind of bred the culture where you can be open about your feelings and no one's going to be there to judge you, or it's not going to make for an awkward conversation or put people in awkward positions and, that's something I appreciate about working at STRATIS. To go take it a little bit deeper, it's a little bit nerve racking, obviously. You put yourself out there in any situation, you don't know how people are going to react, how people are going to receive it, but I was happy that I resonated with some people.

I think just the whole discussion we were having as you went deeper and deeper into it... It was liberating to get things off your chest and heard people say what you've been feeling but, oftentimes, you don't know how to put into words yourself because I think it's just... It's so much to unpack. And so hearing people describe what it is you were feeling allows you to not have to always be the person who has... I don't want to say put it into words but, that's the best way I can explain it, put it into words 'cause I have a feeling if we are capable of putting it into words and I think, to have people with STRATIS who feel the same way you do, who have the empathy, who have the experiences behind them to really understand what it is to be just a person in this world and I don't want to say a person of color or a Black person, whatever the case may be, but just be a person in this world and understand the hardships that come with it. It's something that I truly value. And, if I was to be honest, something I'll probably take with me for a long time. So it sets the bar high as far as producing a work culture where people truly feel included so, I really did appreciate that.

Nigel: I'm so glad you shared your story with me. Thanks again Cemah, I really hope you will continue to help me with my project. And I will always try my best to be there for you when you need a friend.

This was Cemah Torboh and the IDEA Team at STRATIS. I'm Nigel Ousey for See Beyond My Skin. Stay strong and stay true to your story.