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Author: Stephanie Cheung

“I know I am so much more beyond my skin colour: I am not a virus. I am a yogi, a nature lover, a travel enthusiast, a baker, and a lifelong learner. I am a daughter, auntie and friend. I am a teacher who inspires her students to be the changemakers of the world! I am CANADIAN!”

“When we were made aware of COVID-19 at the end of January, I experienced my first racist incident while taking the public transportation in Toronto. A man approached me and told me to “go back to your country” and went on an extremely colourful rant filled with racist and sexist words. That was the moment when it hit me that for some people in the public, they are linking this virus to the entire Chinese community. Their skewed perspective is that if you look Chinese or Asian, you are to blame for bringing in this virus to Canada. It does not matter that I am as Canadian as everyone else, including him, as Canada is an immigrant country. I was judged by the colour of my skin. After this incident, I was wary of taking the public transportation, and started driving everywhere.

Unfortunately, a second racist incident happened while we were in lockdown a few months later. This time it was closer to home. To celebrate Earth Day, my mom and I went for an afternoon walk, of course being aware of physical distancing from others. In the middle of our walk, we met a young mother and her toddler son. As my natural habit was to smile when I give eye contact to someone, even a stranger, I did exactly that. I believe a smile is a form of kindness and can brighten up someone’s day. It allows us to acknowledge each other’s humanity and shared connectedness even for a moment. As a teacher, I often teach my own students how the power of a smile can make a difference in someone’s day.

Imagine my surprise when all I have been practising, and teaching was not reciprocated. Instead, this young mom started to shout at me and said she

“ain’t smiling at me, it’s all your fault, you Wuhan b****!” Then she kept on ranting, quite like my first experience. When I realized there was no reasoning with her, I walked away. It was obvious she was dealing with her own inner demons and nothing I said would stop her words of hatred and ignorance. As Ghandi once said: “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” I chose empathy and forgiveness instead.

In reflection, I found this second incident extremely upsetting and disturbing because this mother was spewing these words in front of her impressionable child. What will this child learn from his mother when he grows up? At the same time, by speaking to me she was also targeting my mom, and of course the entire Chinese community. Based on these two personal racist encounters, plus what I've been hearing from across Canada and around the world, COVID-19 has become racialized to people of Asian descent. I'll be honest to say these days when I do go out for a walk or buy essentials, I feel a bit apprehensive about the people who I meet in those places and their "treatment" towards me. However, I know I am so much more beyond my skin colour: I am not a virus. I am a yogi, a nature lover, a travel enthusiast, a baker, and a lifelong learner. I am a daughter, auntie and friend. I am a teacher who inspires her students to be the changemakers of the world! I am CANADIAN!”