To Be Wilder

When I was a kid, I used to wonder why I was different. I didn’t feel different and I didn’t think I looked different, but somehow I was different. I would stare at myself in the mirror and wonder who exactly was starting back at me.

I grew up in Small Town, USA, in a farming community in north central Iowa, known as the Driftless Area. This was a generic, yet uniquely beautiful place where everyone had a white picket fence, so-to-speak. Homes were left unlocked and grandmas really did bake cookies and bring them to school. It was a place of honor and respect and unexplained stoicism. My family lived seven miles outside of town, along a muddy river that was fun to explore, on a nice piece of land with many large trees.

People from this area are, to this day, traditionally white, conservative, God-fearing folks who have a strong work ethic and large families. Many inhabitants were born here, will live and die in the same county, never having ventured beyond the familiar.

Though my father was from this area, he was one of the few who left his home in search of something different. Yet, he returned, and when he did he brought with him a much younger bride from the big, scary city of Chicago, along with a tiny baby daughter. My parents wanted me to grow up somewhere wholesome, so there we planted our roots.

The physical and internal culture of the Midwest is fairly generic; from one small town to the next, mostly just the buildings change. People were, and still are, of Scandinavian decent and lead simple lives with unspoken expectations everyone seems to obey. Participation in school sports is expected; you will do well in school; attend college; get married and settle down locally to raise a family. And generally in that order. Christianity maintains a strong presence and everyone celebrates the major Christian holidays. Most attend church services with their families every Sunday, as one might expect.

My father was tall, dark and handsome, with a quiet demeanor, stern face and kind eyes. His family had lived in that area for many generations, and his grandfather was the first Sheriff in the county. My dad was German.

As the story goes, four Wilder brothers came to the Americas during the early 1800s from Germany. One brother put down roots out East and made a name for himself in Massachusetts as a prominent clock-maker. The second brother chose south, becoming a shipman involved in slave trade, a vocation that earned him a complete excommunication from his family.

Brother number three, my great-grandfather, sought a life of farming and the homestead opportunities out West. He only got as far as Iowa, however, where he settled down in a land that was dark and rich with promise.

The fourth and last Wilder brother traveled from the East Coast to the West, to California, the land of golden opportunity – literally. There brother number four engaged in the railroad and shipping industries, eventually sailing to the island of Oahu, Hawaii. There he settled and established a sugar cane plantation, launched a commercial shipping harbor, and pioneered the rail system in Hawaii. On Oahu, there is a street named after this Wilder brother, and a book written about his life, successes and legacy, titled “***The Wilders of Waikiki.”*** The epic novel, “***Hawaii***,” penned by James Michener and published in 1959, recognized this Wilder brother as playing an integral role in the settling of the Hawaiian Islands.

Back to my father…. He came from a large, traditional Midwestern farming family, where gender roles were solidly established and never challenged; where hard work was a given and the reward for your efforts was a full belly. His family had the same unspoken expectation as his neighbors’, though no one ever spoke of them.

Most of our nuclear family traditions originated from my mom’s family influence.

My mother, of 100% Irish decent, is from a predominantly Irish suburb on the south side of Chicago. She has ice blue eyes, milky white skin, and strawberry blond hair. I look nothing like my mother. Her family is from south-central and western Ireland. Mom is second generation American. My great grandmother spoke English, with a heavy accent, as Gaelic was her mother-tongue.

Irish people equate to Catholicism, much like a sock to a foot. You just expect it. My mom’s family was no exception, though perhaps a bit less strict than most. My grandmother had but four children, a surprising few, given her generation and the Church precepts regarding birth control. Perhaps an outcome of my grandfather’s vocation as an international salesman. Mom, the youngest of the four, grew up attending Mass regularly. Though as the years passed, the family attended less often, especially after my grandfather passed away. My mother’s family is steeped in their Irish culture and proud of their Irish heritage. But I’d still describe them as American.

I look like my father. I am tall, dark, and handsome. I am the darkest-skinned person in my family. I was the darkest person in my small-town school. I have very deep brown hair, olive skin, and eyes as dark as night. I am the same, yet I am different.

Growing up the same, but different, from others around me was difficult. I identify myself as Caucasian, but others see me as something else: something they can’t put their finger on. Not Native American, or Latino, or Mexican, or Eastern Indian, or Central American… Something in between somewhere. Did someone slip south of the boarder along the way and forget to record it?

Yet growing up with this “case of the mystery identity” has helped shape me into the person I have become. And on this journey I learned to free myself of such cultural stereotyping.

There is very little about me that is speaks of my traditional Midwestern upbringing, other than perhaps my solid work ethic. And my physical appearance certainly doesn’t scream “Midwestern!” I will go so far as to say I resent gender bias and find “unspoken life expectations” quite suffocating. I crave adventure, new experiences and learning, and find it impossible to imagine a life without exploration.

I have crafted my own cultural identity. I believe in the untapped potential of others and relish helping others discover their inner strength.

My culture is independence. It is adventure. It is happiness and it is hope.