

Reflections of an Involuntary Misfit

By Norie

Growing up as a middle child in a large family, as a child, I was lucky if I could get my voice heard above the other family members or if my achievements were recognized. So, I grew up complacent as the shadow sibling and struggled with the path of learning how to express myself not for the sake of others, but for my own quiet satisfaction. I learned how to "blend in" and be a peacemaker and be part of the backdrop, mostly to the success and glory of others. That was my family "role" – to not stick out, but to just "be there". Since blending into the woodwork was a comfortable existence for me, this is what I attempted to do outside the home as well.

But being educated at an American school in a foreign country (albeit the country of my birth and my paternal heritage), I was surrounded by blonde-haired, blue-eyed kids who came and went every 2-3 years. This ingrained in me a feeling that Japan was secondary to my existence and I waited for my chance to someday go "back to America" for a "free and easy" life

that offered "the best of everything". But I hadn't considered the fact that, being of "mixed" blood, I didn't even look "American", nor did I officially have a place to "go home to". But my "mixed" blood also meant that I didn't have a chance of fitting into the society of my homogeneously populated home country, either, so it was easier for me to try to see the US as my "real home", where someday I'd surely have a better shot at fitting in.

Looking back, I was still trying to fit into some "prepackaged" idea of success – I wasn't leading the life I had truly wanted.

When I eventually got there as a college student, it didn't take long for me to find out that I really didn't "fit in" there, either – although this was less obvious from the outside. I eventually made friends with other misfits and got by – but realized that in the end, Japan was my home after all and it formed the mainstay of what I associated with as "my identity".

So, returning home after college, I was to face the burden of accepting myself as someone who would never quite fit in and who would always look, act and speak differently from the pure-blooded majority. The tenuous acceptance I achieved allowed me to "get by" and maintain a borderline existence of normalcy, both socially and career-wise.

Although involuntarily, this life-altering illness has led me to find a truer acceptance of myself as who I really am – I am a misfit.

...That is, until one day (which ironically came at the peak of my career), I was hit with the debilitating illness of being intolerant of any chemical substance on the planet. It was only then that I realized how superficial this acceptance who I was, as a person who met the standards of "fitting in" by only a slight margin.

Looking back, I was still trying to fit into some "prepackaged" idea of success – I wasn't leading the life I had truly wanted. In fact, I was blindly following this cookie-cutter existence for which I was constantly deforming myself to try to squeeze into.

Although involuntarily, this life-altering illness has led me to find a truer acceptance of myself as who I really am – I am a misfit. Misfit I am and will always be – but not in the superficial ways of looks or cultural differences that I once thought, but out-and-out, in my heart, mind and soul. While it's truly a welcome change in my life, not one bit of it was voluntary. Living with an environmental illness has certainly not been merciful in allowing me any say in how I would have wanted things to turn out. As anyone living with chronic illness should be aware, there are no smooth seas for any of us – regardless of whether we have our health or not. We are all affected by the environment. It's just a matter of recognizing the connection.

Interestingly, allowing my "ego" to accept this "misfit" persona of mine facilitated a complete 180 in my personality to now speak out loudly and demand to have my needs met so that I could live without suffering and ill health. For the first time in my life, I have no option but to make myself heard and have my needs be met and recognized. This new identity (and resultant personality), enabled me to find a symptom-free existence and reach a peak state of wellness. It is here as a misfit, experiencing stable health and stable mind that I'm feeling more "me" than I've ever felt!

As anyone living with chronic illness should be aware, there are no smooth seas for any of us – regardless of whether we have our health or not.

Anyone else care to join me in celebrating misfit-hood?

Norie is a seed collector and experimental organic gardener in southwest Tokyo who dabbles in Japanese herbal medicine, organic rice farming, natural plant dyeing and the art of living slowly.