

Stained Hands

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My hands were covered in dirt. Well, at least that's what he said. Looking down at my hands, I frowned. I didn't see any dirt, I saw mehndi (henna), an intricate design of flowers and swirls that stained my hands a deep red color, and quite literally, covered them in decades of history. I looked up at my classmate to explain what mehndi actually was, but he had his eyebrows furrowed, nose scrunched, and a grimace on his face which showed me all I needed to know. I looked back down, embarrassed, and didn't respond. I suppose my culture was just too different to be appreciated.

As a South Indian Muslim girl growing up in New Jersey, I often found it easier to conform to the norm rather than going through the trouble of educating others. "What's your favorite food?" *Say pizza, it's easier to explain. "Your name is so strange!" You don't need to explain the meaning, just laugh. Don't give the difficult answer.*

When I moved to D.C. for college, I remember a moment during first semester in a class discussion on cultural traditions. One girl spoke about her family's Christmas customs with pride and detail. I hesitated, unsure whether to share the story of Eid in my household—the morning prayers, the mouthwatering scent of coriander and biryani in the kitchen, the intentional way we passed boxes of homemade food to neighbors. But I spoke. I described the way we dressed in our best clothes, the way my father pressed a hundred-dollar bill into my palm as Eidi, the way my sister and I were forced to take photos in the backyard every year. To my relief, my classmates listened with both curiosity and fascination. One of my classmates asked about Ramadan and its connection to Eid. Another pointed to my stained hands and said, "That's beautiful! I've seen henna but don't know the cultural significance." That moment showed me what can happen when differences are spoken about.

Conversations like these instilled in me the ability to talk about issues I find important in the hopes of educating others. I've come to understand that when someone sees your culture and recoils, the problem is not the culture—it's the unfamiliarity. So, I made an intention to make the unfamiliar familiar. Not through confrontation or correction, but through openness with stories offered in a classroom or questions asked with sincerity. Over time, I've also seen this mindset stretch beyond culture. I've had honest talks about college life with my parents who didn't understand it. I've listened to a friend describe their academic struggles and shared my own story in return. Each moment was another lesson: the difficult conversation isn't really so difficult once someone is brave enough to begin it.

Still, I'm not always fearless. There are moments when I hesitate—when I feel that same embarrassment that I felt years ago, staring down at my mehndi-stained hands. But I remind myself that every swirl and flower in that mehndi tells a story. I speak not just for myself, but for every kid who once stared down at their hands, unsure whether to hide them or hold them up.

After all, our stained hands start the conversation, and our stories deepen them.