Good morning.

So I have to admit, I have given a similar talk to this one before in this chapel. It was six years ago, so you seniors were in 6th grade. And I’m sure you remember every word of every chapel talk ever given… but as a faculty, we were talking about diversity and inclusion and equity right before the school year began during our teacher inservice. And it got me thinking about this again. And seniors, if you do somehow magically remember my talk in 6th grade, then don’t worry, it’s a little different.

My parents were both born in Taiwan at the end of World War II. They immigrated to the U.S. in the 1970’s. That’s when I was born, in Minnesota. When I was 6 months old, we moved to Kansas, where I grew up. Hence my love for the Kansas City Royals.

In other words, my parents are Asian immigrants, and I am Asian American. That is something I proudly say. I am Asian American. But it’s not something that I have always been proud of.

My hometown in Kansas is called Prairie Village. Prairie Village is not what you're imagining right now - it's not some tiny one street farm town.  In fact, Mr. Roth is also from Prairie Village, and we did not know each other, grow up on the same street, or even the same neighborhood. (it’s that big!) It’s a pretty normal suburb about the size of Menlo Park, similar to suburbs here in the Bay Area.  But there was one very big and obvious difference between Prairie Village and the Bay Area when I was growing up. Virtually everybody was white.

To give you an idea, I went back and looked through my high school yearbook from my senior year.  I turned to the senior portraits section, ignored my ridiculous haircut in my photo, and started counting.  There were 443 students in my senior class – more than all of Priory combined.  And of those 443, 9 were Asian American, 3 were African American, and 1 was Latino. And 430 - or 97% - were white.

Just for fun, I also decided to look at my Track & Field team picture since my life largely revolved around the team.  I counted 115 people on the track team.  Me and 114 white students.

Now when I was a small child, it never actually occurred to me that I looked any different from the other kids.  Their hair was brown or blond or red.  Mine was black.  So what?  When you're little, no one really cares.  But as I grew older, I began to notice that I was a little different.

The first time I remember actually noticing it was when I was young, and another neighborhood boy asked me out on our street, “Are you the Chinese people?”  and when I said, “I guess so,” he went running back in to his house yelling, “Mom!  I met the Chinese people!”

I also remember other times when I was older though when it was made very clear to me that I was different. Racial slurs said to my face or behind my back when they didn’t think I was listening. People making fun of me by going like this to their eyes.

One of my most vivid memories from high school is a car driving by me as I was walking down the sidewalk, holding hands with my girlfriend, who was white. They slowed down as they drove by us and two guys leaned out the window and started shouting at me in these ridiculous, thick fake Chinese accents and then laughing and speeding off. And I remember us just walking in silence for a long time after that, not saying a word.

But the reality is that those things were rare enough that I pretty much remember every time they happened. And while they made me feel horrible, I could sort of deal with them because I knew they were ignorant comments made by ignorant people, people who were relatively easy to dismiss. They were awful things, and most people in this world knew that they were wrong.

What was much more common though were little comments that people said. They weren’t things said maliciously or with a mean intent or by people I could easily dismiss. And I never thought much about them when I was younger. But they had an impact that I felt as I got older.

Some examples of these types of comments - people would often tell me “wow, your English is so good!” At first, I just thought that maybe I was just really, really good at English. I mean, I talk goo! But then I noticed people never said it to my friends with brown or blond hair. As I got older, I realized they said it because they were shocked that I had no accent. People just assumed that everyone who looked like me was foreign. I would explain that I was born here and grew up here, but what I really wanted to say most of the time was, “Wow, gee buddy. Your English is really good too. Way to go!”

Another thing I got all the time was, “So where are you from?” When I’d say Prairie Village, they would say, “No, no, where are you *really* from.”  Or better yet, some people would just say, “What are you?” To which I really wanted to just say, “Umm… human? Pretty… sure?” I knew they just meant what nationality was I, but to me, the questions meant “you are different.” Not American. Not like me. Different.

One I got more often as I got older was “I don’t even think of you as Asian.” Which I never knew quite what to make of. It was usually from friends, and I think it was meant as a compliment, but what did that mean about being Asian? Was it a bad thing?

These types of comments happened all the time as I grew up. There were others too:

* you must be good at math because you’re Asian.
* You know karate because you’re Asian, right? Often times that was right after someone would see me and say – hai-yah!
* Wow, you’re pretty fast for an Asian – which again I think was meant to be a compliment.
* And of course, sorry I can’t tell you apart - you all look alike.

And there were jokes – too many to remember, but again rarely told to actually demean me. But they still had an impact. I remember one in particular – someone once told me that Cinco de Mayo in my house shoud be called Chinco de Mayo. For many, the first reaction is to laugh, and I get it. It’s a good pun – I can see why it might be funny. And it wasn’t said out of spite. It was actually said by one of my best friends.

But the truth is that while it is funny on its surface, he didn’t think about what effect it might have on me. For him, it was just a funny joke, and he knew we were friends. But for me, it was yet another comment among the many that singled me out. Put in the context of all the other things that I constantly heard all the time – the “your English is so goods,” the “where are you froms,” or the “what are yous,” – put in that context, that joke hurt. All of those comments hurt. And none of them were meant to be mean. None of them were meant to be degrading. But to be honest, these innocent comments and silly jokes were more damaging than the blatant racial slurs.

What they told me was that people made assumptions about me regardless of who I actually was. Not just ignorant people who would sling racial slurs, but people I knew, respected, and looked up to. They had these stereotypes about me in their heads just b/c of the way I looked. These comments and assumptions made me feel different from everyone around me. And not just different – but like I didn’t belong there. And they confused me because in my eyes, I was just like everyone else.  But I started to think that in other people’s eyes, I wasn’t.  That maybe they were right, that maybe I didn’t belong.

Looking back, I wish I would have spoken up. I wish I would have had the courage to say something, correct people’s assumptions, to tell people how it made me feel. But I didn’t have the self confidence to do that, and every time something was said and I didn’t speak up, it made me even less confident. Every time I heard a joke and laughed along with them, it made me feel worse. It made me sad and angry that I wasn’t like everyone around me. It made me ashamed of who I was so much that I just wanted to hide. I hated being different. I hated not belonging. I hated being Asian American.

There was a handful of other Asian kids who I had known since I was a small child – friends of my family. I was close with them when I was younger, but when I started to become ashamed of being Asian American, I became ashamed of them. In middle school, I just stopped being their friends without really ever talking about it. I just turned my back on them and went in search of white friends.

I started to be ashamed of my parents too. Not like teenagers often are in general, but it was deeper than that. By the time I hit high school, I avoided being seen with them at all costs. They wanted to come to my XC and track meets and just sit in the stands, and I always said no. I never wanted to be seen in public with them because I somehow thought maybe if no one noticed that they were Asian, no one would notice that I was too.

My cousin Todd who I had grown up with. He had moved to Kansas when we were both six years old, and we are a month apart in age. I began avoiding him too. He actually moved to Virginia when we were in high school, and then moved back my senior year. He came to sit with me at lunch early on that year, and afterwards, you know what I told him?  Not "welcome back," not "let me introduce you to people."  I said, “Please don’t sit with me anymore.”

I wish I could say that the next day, I went back and apologized and helped him make friends.  But I didn’t.  I ignored him at school my entire senior year.  Because he was different, because he was Asian, and because I so desperately wanted not to be.

When I was with other Asian Americans, I felt white people would see me as even more different. But why did I care so much? It wasn’t the outright racist experiences, but it was all of those little moments in my life growing up, those little comments that had reinforced the fact that in my mind, I was different. That I didn’t belong. Whether people actually felt that way or not, I don’t know. But I felt that way.

So I tell you all this today, not because I want you to say oh boo hoo, you’ve had a tough life. I haven’t. Relative to most people, I haven’t. . But these types of experiences aren’t limited to Asian kids in Prairie Village, Kansas. There are people in the Bay Area – students in this chapel right now who feel the same way or have had similar experiences. And it’s not always about race – it can be about religion, gender, sexual orientation, your beliefs. It’s about identity – feeling like you’re different from others; feeling like you’re not sure whether you belong.

And I guess I want to leave you with two big messages.

One, your words can have huge impacts on others. Sometimes they’re completely innocent – someone asking me where I’m from isn’t really a put down – and sometimes jokes are meant to be funny, not hurtful. But understand that sometimes, our words can have a bigger impact than we realize. It can be easy to feel like you didn’t mean something to be offensive or that someone is being too sensitive. But sometimes, we don’t know the greater context that make our words a bigger deal – we don’t know all the things they’ve been hearing or how they feel. You may not know that I feel like I already don’t belong, that I’m already ashamed of who I am. It doesn’t make you a bad person for saying it, but if someone has the courage to tell you how it makes them feel, please, please respect that.

And speaking of courage, the second thing I ask is this. I wish I had the confidence to say something when I was younger, but I never did. In my wildest dreams, I not only spoke up for myself, but for other people too. Because if someone had spoken up for me, I would have felt empowered. I would have felt like I had an ally. I would have been more likely to speak up, and I might have felt like I belonged just a little bit more.

So if you can, try and speak up when something bothers you or you think something bothers someone else. You don’t have to call someone out in front of a big group. You don’t have to embarrass them. It can be a gentle conversation in private – “Hey, I was a little uncomfortable with your comment,” or “Hey, I think that may not have made so and so feel very good.”

Speaking up for yourself builds on itself – every time you do it, it gets easier to do. And when others speak up for you, it does the same thing. It has taken me years to build up the courage to speak up about things like this when they happen. Actually – it has taken decades. But if I had started sooner or others had helped me speak up when I was younger, it wouldn’t have taken that long.

Today, I can proudly say that I am Asian American. I am different from some, but we all are. And more importantly, I do belong. And I hope that everyone in this chapel can help make sure that everybody feels this way.