
An educational autobiography

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I WAS BORN IN THE STATE of Washington, but my connection to the state remains nothing more than a blur to me. My parents whisked me away to Indiana when I was only a few months old, and it's from Indy that I have my most important childhood memories. The only souvenir I still carry that forever binds me to my birth state is in my name, which, according to my parents, comes from one singular esteemed Dr. Gary Locke—a reserved but resolute family man, a man whom my parents evidently admired, and a man who happened to be Washington's governor at the time.

But my connection to the other Gary is hard to shake off; our ties are deeper than name alone. Dr. Locke was the first Chinese-American governor in the United States, and even today in 2022, he is the only Chinese-American to ever have been. Perhaps it was not altogether surprising that we share a name then, because the story of my journey through education—and my life—begins where the world around me sang in the beautiful tones of Mandarin Chinese.

As was convention in many Chinese families, grandparents played an active role in raising children, and my grandparents had come all the way from China to stay with my parents. Though I went to a rather unexceptional preschool where everybody else spoke and understood English, Mandarin was the tongue that dominated my home life.

Because of my preference for Mandarin, my preschool had a teacher who had learned several phrases in Mandarin. Though she was by no means fluent, she had the mastered the quintessential Mandarin preschool phrase kit—*do you need to go to the potty? Wash your hands!*—and so we would often have short, simple conversations in Mandarin. As I was the only Mandarin speaker in my preschool, it seems strange now to think that a teacher would go out of her way to learn Mandarin. It's completely possible that my parents conspired with her to give me the best preschool experience possible.

Nevertheless, despite my preference for Mandarin, I understood English quite well. The smells of a Chinese-speaking household vanished the moment we left our door; indeed, the outside world was breathing English. Clifford the Big Red Dog barked in English, not Mandarin. The car radio hummed with the newscasters

of NPR. And of course, my classmates and preschool teachers—all except that one teacher—they spoke English. With no sparsity of English permeating my daily life, I never had a problem understanding or speaking English.

My entry into kindergarten, however, toppled my bilingual balancing act. I can't remember, fully, why I was so apprehensive about going to kindergarten; the past has its way of weathering memories down to stubs. Part of it seemed to be that kindergarten seemed so much farther away from home than preschool, and I hated being away from home. Whatever the case was, being surrounded by a new world of strangers, I walked cautiously around my new peers, and talked cautiously around my new teacher. Such shyness was probably not unusual for kindergarteners who were suddenly encountering a sea of new faces, but my teacher interpreted this as a sign that I couldn't speak English. Raising the alarm bells, she dutifully delegated my parents the task of requiring me to speak only English at home, and to lower my Mandarin to zero. Eventually, I gave up because, as much as I was comfortable in English, it felt unnatural to *only* use English. Even today, to call my parents “mom” and “dad” feels so strange and foreign; I'd much rather call them *māma* and *bàba* in their presence. But by then, the plan worked exactly as my teacher envisioned—after a long period of being expected to speak only in English, I lost a substantial fraction of my Chinese lexicon.

As I progressed through elementary school and middle school, my parents were enormous advocates for my education. They encouraged me to study mathematics, and I still enjoy math today. However, I felt that my middle school lacked others who shared my interests, and I was frustrated that the school seemed to be celebrating athletics more than academics. This, in hindsight, wasn't completely true: my district probably spent more on education per pupil than most others in the area. However, seventh grade Gary knew no better (after all, how could he?), and I was probably considerably hoity-toity and arrogant too. So, when my mother floated the idea that I try to test into a private high school, I felt extremely pleased at the chance to flex my academic know-how, and better yet, leave the public school riffraff behind.

Unfortunately, I got what I wished for. At first, I was elated. “I got into a private school!” I said, to my parents, to my friends, to the boy who sat next to me in choir, and to anybody who would listen. However, after I started attending classes, my opinion started to waver. I don't know what exactly I noticed first, but I started to make small observations, which gradually accumulated, suggesting the private school wasn't the paradise I'd been promised. For starters, I was re-learning things I had

learned in my public middle school, which didn't quite square well with the school's claims that it was light-years ahead of its public counterparts. It didn't help that the students talked down about those who had the misfortune of attending a plain old public school (*I'm so sorry for your loss!*). And despite their claims of superiority over public schools, my private school peers would ask me to fail my exams, so that they wouldn't look bad and get a better curve. When teachers didn't give enough A's, the students whose parents donated the most to the school usually won out.

The school, it turns out, was little more than a playground for the children of the ultra-wealthy. I initially tried to improve my environment rather than rejecting it. I wanted people to be kinder to each other, and to cast off the "rich kids only" atmosphere. However, this only brought a wave of hostility against me.

Not even my parents were spared. Once, a classmate invited my family for a get-to-know-you party which, surprise surprise, took place at their luxury mansion of four? five? stories. Before I attended the private school, I thought my family was rich because my parents had white-collar jobs. At the mansion party, my parents were some of the *only* with jobs—the other families had such vast fortunes, that day-to-day work life was never a part of dinner table conversations. No matter how much my parents earned, I would always be part of the 99% in their eyes—because my parents *worked*. For the rest of the party, while the kids busied themselves with Mario Kart, their parents laughed at mine for being such Asian Tiger Parents. After all, in their obviously extravagant wealth, and their idle idyll, what else could they point to, other than a racial stereotype, to explain the apparent urgency my family placed on work?

By the end of my sophomore year of high school, I felt cheated out of two years of high school—two years without friends, without happy conversations, with very few challenging classes. So, when I transferred back to the local public school district, I tried to savor my daily routine, no matter how trivial daily events seemed to my peers. It was as though I had to make every day twice as exciting to compensate for the missing half of my high school career.

Among these exciting things was an opportunity that came my way in my senior year of high school, when I became a teacher assistant in Algebra I. My first semester, I was placed in a high-need classroom for students who struggled with math previously. At the semester's finish, I made a computer game that I dubbed "Sign Slap" to help my students build mathematical intuition: the computer would randomly generate an expression that was either positive, negative, zero, or impossible to tell. Two students had to slap the desk to see who could determine the sign of

the expression first. The computer generated progressively more difficult questions the more they played. It made me happy that many of the students who didn't like math before found themselves enjoying the game. I wonder what kinds of experiences led them to dislike math in the first place. What were their past experiences with schooling like? Were they bad, like my private school experience? Had they, too, felt like outsiders searching for somewhere to belong? What were their experiences outside of school like?

When I got to college, I met another Gary, whose reputation preceded me. Or, perhaps more accurately, I didn't meet him—I found out about him. Gary Birdsong, (un)affectionately nicknamed the “pit preacher” by the UNC's student body, is notorious for his fiery views on race, gender, and culture—among other things. With his long beard and even longer streak of bigotry, Gary delivers his prognosis towards any student who fails the test of straight, white, cisgender male: an eternity burning in eternity. In almost every way, Gary Birdsong is the diametric opposite of the Gary after whom I'm named. They're different Gary's.

And in my lifetime, I've been many different Gary's as well. I've been the six-year-old boy who was too shy to speak to his classmates, but who absorbed every bit of the language around him; I've been the conceited seventh grade braggadocio; I've been the lone freshman who refused to conform to haughty private school; and in each of these past times, I've done things I'm happy about and things I'm not proud of.

I am connected to each of those Gary's, but I am not them (or not them anymore).

I can't ever be sure of how much of an impact I've had or what kind, but wherever the next chapter of my life leads, I hope that I have grown.