I see my life as a mosaic: a thousand different colored pieces, some big and some small, all fitting together and coinciding to create a piece of art: me.

My appearance, my likes and dislikes, my strengths and weaknesses—they all shape who I am and who I will become. But there is one part that, no matter how hard I try, can’t seem to fit, and that part is my name.

The name on my birth certificate reads ‘Zhi You,’ a Chinese name meaning ‘freedom.’ Yet my friends and teachers at school recognize me as a short, black haired American named ‘Amy.’ I have called myself this since kindergarten, after realizing that nobody can pronounce ‘Zhi You’ correctly. It serves me well because it eliminates my peers’ looks of anguish as they try to pronounce it, and their embarrassment a few minutes later when they realize they can’t even remember what I am called. It prevents the substitute teacher’s flustered behavior while trying to take roll, and helps me avoid the hassle of trying to enunciate ‘Zhi You’ over and over again while people struggle to catch on. Put simply, the name ‘Amy’ is easier, a name thrust upon me to help others remember who I am.

It is Monday morning, and I stagger down the school hallway, my shoulders sagging from my heavy backpack and the thought of taking that “impossible history test.” It is just another monotonous passing period, but the atmosphere feels different. The clouds have parted after nearly two months of darkness, yet the ground still glistens from the last rain. There is a charged feeling, a sense that something is about to change. Yet around me, students continue to rush from class to class, oblivious to my revelation.

“Amy!” A friend calls me from behind, begging me to wait for her to catch up. I pause, sinking into thought about my two names and the conversation I had a couple weeks ago with my mom.

“Zhi You,” she had said, “is a very important part of our family history and why we are in this country today. You are a symbol of the freedom U.S. citizens enjoy, no matter their race, beliefs, or gender. Your name is the opposite of what communism stands for. It represents the dream of possibilities your grandfather and grandmother had, the freedom they hoped you would someday live under and appreciate, and the blessing that we are able to live here.” She became upset. “You are living proof that despite the adversity we may face, there is always a solution. By relying on the name ‘Amy,’ no matter how easy it may be, you are not appreciating one of the most important qualities of human life: freedom. I hope that you will someday understand the significance of a name like ‘Zhi You,’ but perhaps you won’t until you live under different circumstances.” With that, she turned and walked away.

I continued to use ‘Amy’ for everything, ignoring my mother’s words. Perhaps I was afraid that I would stick out in a crowd of ‘Emmas’ and ‘Jacobs.’ Or maybe because I was imagining the hassle that would follow this decision. Yet ‘Amy’ didn’t represent who I was, and the longer I waited the more apparent it became.

So at that moment standing in the hallway, I decided that I wanted to be known to all as one person: ‘Zhi You.’ ‘Amy’ had been a good name and served me well for the past eight years, but now it was time to change. I would no longer be bound by a name that didn’t fit me. Finally, I was truly free to use the name given to me at birth. The missing piece to my mosaic finally slid into place as I turned to face my friend.


—Caie Kelley wrote this as a H.S. sophomore, California.
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