A STORY OF SELF

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I load myself into the two seater Toyota pick-up and nestle my body in between my dad and brother. We rattle up the dirt road, out of the valley, into an expanse of vineyard blanketed mountains. The manual transmission hits my knees every time Dad down-shifts. We roll up to the gate and I hop out into a sea of naked, mangled vines. We're here to work. I watch my dad's rough, grease-stained hands skillfully prune away the unwanted growth. He hands me the shears. Now, it's my turn.

I grew up in Northern California's wine country in a small town called Healdsburg. The agricultural wonderland is home to a diverse set of demographics that make up a broad socio-economic spectrum. There are the wealthy Bay Area couples who flocked to Healdsburg when they heard about its "undiscovered" charm in Architectural Digest. Then there's the Italian families who made Healdsburg their home-away-from-home after fleeing the Old World during the first Italian Diaspora. They sold moon shine door-to-door during Prohibition, pioneered the wine industry, and then bought up the whole place. In true Italian fashion, they still raise their children to pinch pennies and "eat everything on your plate." And finally, there are the Mexican immigrants who make up the region's primary labor force. They are the new Italians, working hard for a better life.

As a child, I was plainly aware of these warring class dynamics. My father was a blue-collar farmer who picked us up from school in a rumbling work truck, while my classmates were swooped up by stay-at-home mothers in glossy SUVs. The other parents' casual business attire stood in sharp contrast to my own father's work uniform: a tattered- T shirt, a pair of Ben Davis pants, and Cat work boots. In the grocery store, people snickered at my dad's ranch-ready outfit while they stood in the checkout line with a bottle of Zin and a handful of artisanal cheeses. It

was apparent: The luxurious life of Healdsburg's bourgeoisie was made possible by the hard work of farmers like my father and a tireless community of Mexican immigrants.

My dad's fellow workers, and their families, were a significant part of my life as a young girl. I attended their weddings, celebrated their kids' quinceañeras, and sat at their abuelita's kitchen table for pazole supper. For me, these families were so much more than the faceless image of Mexican immigrants plastered across Americans' television screens. They were friends, influencers, and most importantly, people. I wanted desperately to share the silenced realities of this marginalized group with the rest of my community. I wanted to rip off the veil and expose the roughened hands that came home after a day of picking. I wanted to amplify the voices of wine country's laborers so that the woman buying Zin at the grocery store or the suburban mom in her SUV could experience the reality that made theirs possible.

As I began to travel outside of my small town, it became clear that the exclusivity of wine country's elite was not a singular phenomenon. At 15, I went on a mission trip to Cambodia. The organization that organized the trip collected donations to build wells and latrines for families without access to clean, running water. Unfortunately, I did not touch one shovel on this trip. No one did.

I remember the white Sprinter van bouncing over pot holes scattered throughout the countryside of Siem Reap. I watched through the window as we passed through rural neighborhoods of homes set atop tall stilts. After an hour of rolling plains, the van came to a halt in front a typical home with bamboo woven walls and luscious greenery framing its entrance. Our group clambered out of the van, clutching their iPads, and engulfed the home. A white swarm of women flooded into the open-air kitchen, snapping photos of the sleeping baby and the wood-burning stove while the family watched, compliantly. The next exhibit on our tour lie

behind the house -- a dirt hole adorned with a shiny plaque boasting some European name that looked misplaced amongst the Khmer writing. The women, whose name the plaque bore, posed with the family in front of the new latrine. She looked thrilled. They looked tired. In that moment, my body ached with the same kind of pity I felt for my father when the women in the grocery store snickered at him.

After coming home from Cambodia, I realized that the toxic culture of exclusivity was rampant. Its alienating effects were being felt by my father in Healdsburg and by my new friends in Cambodia. Elitism had erected walls of difference that had marginalized communities I cared deeply about.

My civic engagement has been inspired by the potential to break down these walls in order to create communities of inclusivity. Through the elevation of others' lived experiences, I believe I can build a common ground that transcends the us vs. them dichotomy. In journalism, I have found the tools to elevate marginalized voices. As a journalist, I able to tell the stories of under-represented communities subjugated by exclusivity. For me, journalism is the amplification of voices at risk of being silenced. It is the creation of inclusive communities through platforms of visibility. Though journalism may not be everyone's choice of civic engagement, it is the essence of journalism that we must practice.

As a community, we have an obligation to *listen* to the stories of our fellow humans. We don't need a recording device or a political platform of privilege. We just have to open our ears to other's experience so that we may become more aware of the collective realities shaping our society. It is the simple act of *really* listening when you ask, "How are you?" that cultivates the empathy needed to break down walls of difference. It is the hope that through listening we begin to see our society as a collective rather than an atomized series of experiences. I believe that the

genuine act of listening holds the power to link us through a shared thread of humanity, so that we as a society may find strength in collaboration rather than marginalization.