Justice in My Journey as an Immigrant

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When my family and I first stepped off the plane at JFK Airport in 2013, my whole world felt upside down. We left everything behind in Uzbekistan so my parents could offer my siblings and me a better future. My earliest American memories aren't movies or skyscrapers, but confusion. The honking of cars, unreadable signs, and a dizzying sense that nothing was familiar. I was a fourth grader with a backpack full of fears, trying to figure out where I fit while barely knowing any English.

Looking back, I know that this was when I started thinking about justice, not just as a word, but as something real that shapes everyday life. Aristotle described justice as a "complete virtue," something that isn't just an ideal but a habit that exists in both public and private actions (Debbarma 266). Coming from Uzbekistan, where following rules was expected but fairness wasn't always guaranteed, I learned quickly how much being treated justly can mean to someone struggling to belong. My first American classroom felt like another planet. I remember using the same battered notebook for every subject, my father cutting my hair with kitchen scissors, and my classmates laughing at my awkward silences. In Uzbekistan, teachers would sometimes punish students harshly, so I kept my head down and my hands interlocked, scared to draw attention from the teacher. When a classmate finally spoke to me in Russian, I felt a flash of relief, someone recognized me even if just for a moment.

Justice, for me, started with tiny acts, when a teacher put a star sticker on my notebook the first time I tried answering in English, or when another student lent me a pencil without judgment. Aristotle was right: "habits of justice" begin small, but they add up. Giving everyone a fair shot or simply including those who feel left out can make the difference between hope and loneliness (Debbarma 268). Middle and high school brought new obstacles. I wanted so badly to fit in that I would cry after my father cut my hair, hoping a new style would make me look

American. I tried joining sports teams, eventually winning the Beat The Streets medals in wrestling and getting involved wherever I could. Still, there were moments when classmates mocked me, or when I hesitated to speak up out of fear of being wrong. But each time a teacher recognized my effort, I felt my courage growing. I saw that being treated fairly gave me strength, so I started trying to give that to others.

By the time I arrived at Brooklyn College, my sense of justice had deepened. I realized that justice isn't only about how you're treated, it's about how you treat others. John Rawls's theory helped me put words to what I'd lived: real justice gives everyone an equal shot, no matter their background, and it demands that we recognize our own luck or privilege (Rawls 334). Rawls wrote that no one "deserves" to be born into one family or another, with certain talents or resources. Thinking this way changed how I moved through campus. Whether tutoring peers, serving as a student senator, or giving tours to new students in Russian or Uzbek, I did my best to ensure everyone felt welcome and heard. Of course, my journey hasn't been without setbacks. The COVID pandemic hit especially hard. Being isolated brought back old feelings of loneliness and self-doubt, and for a while, I felt lost again, afraid things might never return to normal. But reaching out to a guidance counselor changed everything. Someone listened and took me seriously, reminding me that having support, being treated justly, could save a life. It was around this time I became determined to support others, whether as a psychologist, mentor, or club leader. Justice became not just my cause, but my coping strategy.

At Brooklyn College, I've put justice into practice in ways big and small. As a club leader, I advocate for more diverse, inclusive events on campus. As a blood donor and volunteer, I make sure even those on the margins feel like they belong. I learned that supporting others in need isn't charity, it's justice in action, the fulfillment of a duty to the community that raised me.

But justice is not always easy. Sometimes, I clash with tradition, like when I respectfully pushed back against arranged marriage customs in my family. Standing up for personal choice, even when it hurts those you love, takes courage. I've learned that part of justice is risking misunderstanding to protect what's right, not just for myself, but for others who may not feel safe to speak out.

Being an immigrant influences my view of justice each day. I know firsthand how discrimination and exclusion can harm someone's spirit and even their health. Research confirms what I've experienced, perceived discrimination and unfair treatment can raise stress and lower both physical and mental well-being for immigrants and refugees (Szaflarski and Bauldry 175). Seeing how even minor acts of bias can weigh someone down convinced me that standing up for fairness and inclusion isn't optional, it's necessary for everyone's success, not just my own. From philosophy to psychology, justice keeps showing up in my life as both challenge and reward. As Aristotle said, just action is the result of a trained mind or habit (Debbarma 266). For me, this often means going out of my way to notice who is lost or silent, and reaching out in their language so they feel like someone sees them. It means questioning my own first impressions and refusing to let old biases win. Justice also means building bridges. Part of my work as a BC Navigator involves not only giving tours, but helping new immigrants navigate the bureaucracy of admissions, translate forms, or find ESL classes. When the Russia-Ukraine conflict drove more students from Eastern Europe to CUNY, I volunteered to help them settle and connect with resources. Making someone's first day less scary is a small way to repair injustice in the world. Even with these rewards, justice is an ongoing journey for me. I still face challenges, balancing hope and disappointment, speaking up when it would be easier to stay silent. Sometimes, I go home at night wondering if I did enough to stand up for others. But I'm reminded of Rawls's

“veil of ignorance”: to build a truly just world, we must act as if we didn’t know what cards we would be dealt (Rawls 340). This idea pushes me to keep advocating, for better access, fairer policies, and more voices at the table. My parents’ story is part of this too. Their willingness to leave everything behind for the chance at fair opportunity inspires me to make the most of each day. Their sacrifices motivate my academic drive, but more than that, they remind me why justice matters. It is what makes sacrifice worthwhile, what gives meaning to every struggle, and what makes community possible. In the end, justice is personal to me because my life has been shaped by both kindness and exclusion, generosity and misunderstanding. As now the Vice Chair for Senior College Affairs for University Student Senate, an immigrant, and a friend, I keep working to turn justice from an idea into a daily habit, one word, one action, one new connection at a time. I hope that by sharing my story, I can help others see that justice isn’t just a prize to be won, but a process, something we each build, choice by choice, for ourselves and our communities.

Works Cited

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