

When the Syllables Turn into Words

By Christina Cen

With a hand on my heart, eyes on the flag, and feet standing firmly on the ground, I recited, “One nation, under God, indivisible, for liberty and justice for all” in my first grade classroom. Those words meant nothing to my ears which, at the time, only processed Chinese – I simply repeated the syllables I heard.

It wasn't until a few years later when I finally became fluent in English that I distinguished those syllables into words that spoke what our country stands for. And yet later again when I began to associate justice with the woman holding a pair of scales, blindfolded from ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and physical appearance. Slowly but surely, I learned more and more about our country's government and those who control it – not just the president, Congress, or the Supreme Court, but the people like us.

Because we live in a representative democracy, the decisions of our nation are made indirectly by all of those who choose to vote. This system is what makes America the land of liberty, but also renders it vulnerable to uneducated voters. Uneducated people who do not bother to research presidential candidates, state representatives, and legislation are simply unprepared to take the nation's fate into their hands. Yes, all citizens should have a say in national decisions, but only if they understand what is at stake. The only way to ensure this is through education. A solid educational system will enlighten Americans on problems like climate change, social injustice, poverty, and more. Armed with this knowledge, people can make choices that change the nation for the better.

The recent presidential election has revealed the overwhelming prevalence of bigotry in the United States that many thought no longer existed. People who vote out of hatred or fear for another race are not the people who should control the future of our nation. However, these negative beliefs could be dispelled through teaching that superficial differences ultimately mask fundamental similarities. Ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality are all part of a person, but they do not define a person. In the end, we need to look past these differences and work together as a human race to improve the world.

A democratic nation cannot survive if it is controlled by the uneducated. We cannot be that little girl who recited such powerful words uncomprehendingly as a series of meaninglessly syllables. Instead, we must strive to turn those syllables into words and understand the importance of the message they create. Only then will we truly have liberty and justice for all.