Being, Belonging, Becoming

Dignity

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Context: These poems have been created using the words of past and present learners from the health professions in India who have ever experienced othering during their training, and who have volunteered to talk about it. **Click here** to read the editorial about the project. Alternatively, you may right click over the hyperlinked text, copy the link, and paste it in a browser of your choice.

I. Dignity, Denied

There are many kinds of violence,
and not all of them leave a mark on the skin.
Some are quieter:
the way someone looks at you
when you speak differently,
believe differently,
walk differently through the world.
I've seen this look often,
and it always arrives
before the first word is uttered.
It says:
you are not like me, and that is a problem.

It usually begins with something small.
A word.
A joke.
A label.
"Boring," if you prefer books to parties.
"Strange," if you don't join the rhythm of the crowd.
What begins as difference
becomes distance,
and then judgment.

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It hardens not through malice but through habit—
a kind of lazy cruelty
that doesn't even know it's being cruel.

Respect should not be something
we earn by resembling the majority.
And yet that is how it often works:
the more you blend in,
the more you're granted
the simplest human dignity.

But
if you speak a little too softly,
If you walk with assistance,
If you pray in another way,
or ask for space to breathe—
then suddenly
you're asking for too much.

II. Dignity, Declared

There is no shame
in needing support.
There is no weakness
in asking for a building
that lets you enter
without struggle.
What is shameful
is a world
that turns such requests
into burdens.

I once believed
that if you worked hard
and treated people with respect,
they would do the same in return.
But respect, I've learned,
is not always reciprocal.
Sometimes it must be insisted upon—
not with anger,
but with persistence.
You keep showing up.
You keep asking.
You keep being human
in a place that wants you
to feel small.
And eventually,
if they're willing to learn,
they see you.

Not as other,
but as another.

The differences between us are real,
but they don't diminish our humanity.
They expand it.
The question is not whether we are the same.
It is whether we can look at what is different,
and still see someone worth listening to.

Acknowledgment: without the authentic contributions made by the respondents, it would not have been possible to create poems on othering that illustrate such a wide spectrum of issues.