

When I Grow Up
by Krissy Cowsert

I was, yet again, on the hunt...for free lunch, that is. In a few short months, lunch forums had become an essential part of my 1L meal plan, although I did not always find the lunch-forum lecture topics interesting enough to miss out on a quick nap. My days were plagued by tiredness, seemingly endless reading assignments, homesickness, and the ever-elusive question of who I should be “when I grow up.” My dreams for my future have varied widely over the years.

As a little girl I wanted to be a swim coach, believing that swimming was a powerful deterrent to the neuromuscular disease constantly attacking my body. As a teenager, the dream shifted to becoming a pianist. I struggled to fit in and express myself, but never when sitting on a piano bench. As a young woman, I decided that I would work in a fun company culture, fearing that otherwise I would face lifelong drudgery.

And yet now here I was in law school, desperately hunting for free meals and the ever-so-brief respites from coursework. I carefully read the posters and emailed announcements to find out 1) if and what food would be provided and 2) what the event or topic would be. The speaker at this week’s forum was Tim Overton. It was a familiar name and although it took me a moment, I figured out the connection with a work project I did in our shared home state of Arizona. Overton was a practicing attorney there and very involved in the community. A familiar name was like a piece of treasure in my current existence far from home and struggling to adjust to the demands of law school.

Overton would be speaking about unconscious bias and diversity, which sounded interesting enough when combined with free lunch—the truly key detail—and the longing for something of home. So, I headed down to the forum room to eat and listen, a passive absorber of information. But for that hour and many hours after, I was anything but passive.

As Overton began to talk, I found myself captivated. Here was a man who had taken the time to travel across state lines to speak at the law school, who shared details about himself and his family, and who was willing to be vulnerable in front of a crowd to make his point. I was alert, engaged, and suddenly lifted out of the monotony of reading, homesickness, and loneliness to a clearer view of others’ problems and concerns and my own instinctive thinking. While showing us various images, Overton asked: “What would you think if you saw a person of this weight, race, age, or style of dress? What would you do near a person like that? How would you act toward them? What do you do with the automatic thoughts that come? Do you dismiss the thoughts, or do you entertain them and spiral this person—this decent, human person—into a twisted figure of themselves with lesser inherent worth than your own?” Suddenly, my own thoughts were shocking and uncomfortable.

Overton explained that having instinctive thoughts was not the problem, and I felt a rush of relief! Overton went on to clarify that the problem was being aware that those instinctive thoughts were unfair and stopping the spiral that typically followed. That point hit me in my heart and resonated with the dreams of my younger self. I knew I had a purpose. I could change

myself and help others see what I have spent my lifetime learning and practicing—everyone belongs, everyone matters, and everyone is valuable.

I am not sure I would have connected with that lesson so much if it had come from someone other than Overton—a Black man I shared a connection with already, who shared with honesty and vulnerability his past and his concerns for his children who, he knew, might be treated very differently based on the color of their skin.

I left the lecture with both my stomach and my heart full. I remain unsure of what I want to do when I grow up, even now in my second year of law school, but I recognized myself in Overton's message. It is a message that has been part of my life all along. I care deeply about the disabled community, particularly those with muscular dystrophy, and I want to see them moving through the world free from the negative effects of others' instinctive thoughts and implicit biases. I want to see them welcomed and protected while they battle the disease. I want to tell people how I feel and help them understand me. I will work only where I see employees valued. Through Overton's lecture and learning more about myself, I have discovered a work that serves all these goals: diversity and belonging, making and partaking in places where everyone is welcome, able to share, and happy to be there.