

## Model Minority: The Myth that Shapes Society

### Artist's Statement

This paper was originally written as a contribution paper to the field of Black Social Justice Rhetoric for my Interpretation and Argument class. It could have been about any topic tangential to Black Social Justice Rhetoric. Although I approached the course with an open mind and a personal investment in learning and *unlearning*, I never could have imagined that choosing to write my paper on the intersectionality of Asian American minorities and Black Social Justice could have brought me to where and who I am today, and I am publishing a personally transformative work here in hopes of reaching and helping others.

Honestly, my family and friends and I are very far from *unlearning* the narrative that I write about in this paper. That fact, and the inclusion of sensitive personal experiences, led me to write under a pen name, Yuan, and to use my illustration of a yellow chrysanthemum rather than a photo of myself in my profile. Yet also, both of these choices are reflections, in a way, of myself and my writing. As a Chinese character, *yuan* symbolizes the moon, good fortune, and, in the context of this paper, a continuous path towards *unlearning* and personal growth. A chrysanthemum, my author's profile photo, is one of the four "gentlemen" flowers of Chinese culture and has always been one of my favorites. Per its meaning in Chinese culture, it represents happiness and joy.

I hope my choice of anonymity can be a powerful and meaningful one because the anonymity itself symbolizes that I could be any student. I *am* any student who may be grappling with, or first realizing the reality of, this kind of ideological struggle. It is not important exactly who I am because, in the end, I am one of *us*. Don't forget that we are not alone, but one of many.

## Abstract

The large and varied impacts of the *model minority* myth have shaped both my own life and society at large. From individual to societal scale, ignorance of the *model minority* myth contributes to its existence and perpetuation, and the *model minority* myth itself weakens Black social justice movements by undermining their rhetoric and dividing their base of support. Using my own experience and empirical evidence, I illustrate this argument below in three sections, each addressing a component of the overall *model minority* myth. These sections are: (1) “The *Model Minority* Stereotype and Dismissal of Structural Racism”; (2) “The Creation and Impact of the *Problem Minority* Stereotype”; and (3) “The Narrative of Asian-Black Tension.” The first two sections deal with undermining the rhetoric of Black social justice movements. The third section deals with dividing the base of support of these movements.

## Introduction

From a very young age, my parents raised me to believe in a specific narrative of being Asian American. I was told I was naturally intelligent, hardworking, and good. Even now, this image they instilled in me seems well-meaning. After leaving home for college though, I see in hindsight that their narrative was untrue and malicious. I met brilliant peers and made good friends who were different from me in fundamental ways, the least significant of which was ethnicity. They surprised me, challenged me, and made me realize that our differences have no correlation to their character or ability. I remember as well how my parents talked about the Black and Mexican people we would pass on the street or see on TV. According to my parents, these people were all naturally dumb, lazy, and criminal. Even today, I hear their comments in the back of my mind. I know that despite my current consciousness, I have long-internalized their narrative during my childhood. I would have become part of its perpetuation if I had

continued believing the narrative as a student, voter, and adult. Instead, I am working to dissolve my belief in this narrative through re-educating myself. This paper reflects a lot of personal experiences and insights that I want to share with others in my position. I aim to reach other Asian Americans who are also fighting to unlearn this narrative and promote solidarity among minorities (see Fig. 1). I want to show them why it is important to re-educate yourself and unlearn this narrative, but also how to identify sources that feed it in order to avoid them.



Fig. 1. Chelsea Beck, *The perception of universal success among Asian-Americans is being wielded to downplay racism's role in the persistent struggles of other minority groups, especially black Americans*, 2017.

This narrative of Asian success is actually the *model minority* myth. It is a social construct that superficially casts Asian Americans as the ideal minority --smart, hardworking and honest. However, the social impacts of the *model minority* myth reaches far beyond the Asian American community. The *model minority* myth weakens Black social justice movements by undermining their rhetoric and dividing their base of support. In this paper, the phrase “*model*

*minority myth*” refers to the entire phenomenon of the *model minority* and the *problem minority* stereotypes and their societal impacts. The *model minority* stereotype allows White society to dismiss structural racism while the *problem minority* stereotype allows victim-blaming of Black Americans.

### **The Model Minority Stereotype and Dismissal of Structural Racism**

A large part of the *model minority* myth revolves around the *model minority* stereotype. The *model minority* stereotype is a narrative of Asian American economic and educational success. This narrative attributes success to their hard work, and therefore the implication is that other minorities should be able to achieve the same. White society uses this stereotype as proof that success is possible for minorities, countering Black social justice movements’ calls for change in society as a whole and in these specific systems.

#### *The Model Minority Stereotype*

The *model minority* stereotype can be summarized with one idea: success. Success here is defined as the achievement of economic wealth and a high level of education. Superficial statistics appear to show the success of Asian Americans as students and later as working adults. These studies of Asian American median income ignore the distinct sub-groups of Asian Americans and the income disparity there. This approach contributes to the perception that all Asian American households have the reported median income, when a median income is technically the midpoint value in the range of incomes. According to the Pew Research Center, “the median annual household income of households headed by Asian people was \$85,800, compared with \$61,800 among all U.S. households” in 2019 (Budiman and Ruiz). At the surface, Asian Americans appear more economically successful than the national average.

However, a median income is neither an average nor a reflection of the lower and higher incomes. According to the same research article by Pew Research Center, Burmese Americans, for example, had a median income of \$44,400 while Indian Americans had \$119,000 and Filipino Americans had \$90,400 (Budiman and Ruiz). From these statistics, we can see that the use of an average as a statistic is misleading because higher income subgroups conceal the lower income subgroups.

Educational achievement statistics tell a similarly misleading story. Pew Research reports that 54% of Asians ages 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 33% of the same group of Americans as a whole (Budiman and Ruiz). Yet again, there are massive differences between subgroups, and these differences are being obscured. In the same age range, 75% of Indian Americans hold a bachelor's degree or above while only 15% of Bhutanese Americans do (Budiman and Ruiz).

Unfortunately, White society promotes the narrative around the median incomes and educational attainments of Asian Americans as the whole truth. White writers writing about Asian Americans reiterate rhetoric that aligns with the *model minority* stereotype. The repetition of the same narrative of success has allowed the *model minority* myth to continue unchallenged. From sociologist William Petersen's 1966 article to Andrew Sullivan's recent 2017 article, the same narrative lives on. Petersen's famous article from 1966, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," is the first recorded instance of the term "model minority" and the term "problem minority" (Petersen 1). His article influenced and popularized the *model minority* myth as we know it today (Chow). He describes Japanese-Americans as a "success story" (1). To Petersen, their "modest success" means monetary wealth (including land ownership) and education. He even describes education as "(t)he key to success" (3). In 2017, Andrew Sullivan echoed this

rhetoric in his *New York Magazine* article. He repeated the same sentiment that “Asian-Americans are among the most prosperous, well-educated, and successful ethnic groups in America” (Sullivan). For both writers, Asian Americans are successful and that success means economic wealth and education. Across decades, these two White writers echoed the same portrayals, revealing how White society as a whole has promoted this narrative.

My lived experience reflects this stereotype as well. I was constantly told that I was destined to be intelligent, high-performing and successful because I was Asian. It was not only an expectation but a certainty that my classmates held. If I did perform well academically, then I was not genuinely praised but told—by my teachers and community leaders, by society at-large—that “of course” I did well. My parents held a similar mentality. Failure or underperformance was punished but success was barely acknowledged because it was expected. I have been a *straight A* student every year of my education so far, but I am genuinely surprised to receive praise; a compliment can stay with me for weeks. My parents said the words “I’m proud of you” so seldom when I was growing up that when my mother finally said she was proud of me at my birthday dinner this last year, I started crying. I then asked her to say it again so I could record it.

### *The Dismissal of Structural Racism*

On a societal level, White society uses this *model minority* stereotype of success to dismiss structural racism and its impacts. Such an argument first equates the Asian and Black lived experience then uses the *model minority* stereotype of success to blame Black Americans for not achieving the same. Sullivan references this mentality in the closing paragraph of his article. First, he describes the history of anti-Asian hate in the United States, citing violence, immigration bans, the WWII internment camps, and propaganda (Sullivan). Then he questions rhetorically if the reason that Asian Americans are so successful “couldn’t be that all Whites are

not racists or that the American dream still lives?” (Sullivan). Sullivan’s assertion that not all Whites are racist reveals his skepticism that widespread, structural racism is still a problem. Similarly, Sullivan’s belief that hard work translates directly to success (i.e., the American Dream) reveals his skepticism of the impacts of structural racism. His skepticism dismisses Black social justice movements’ calls to address structural racism and its impacts as a societal policy.

The *model minority* stereotype of success counters calls for reform in the economic system. Ta-Nehisi Coates’ influential article “The Case for Reparations” argues that the racial wealth gap originated with structural racism in the homeownership system and calls for reform and reparations of the economic system (Coates). Here the stereotype of Asian American success, seemingly backed up with statistics, appears to directly undercut Coates’ argument because White writers equate the Asian and Black lived experiences. Sullivan’s description of the Asian American experience as “some of the most brutal oppression, racial hatred, and open discrimination” reveals his, and larger White society’s, belief that the Asian and Black American experience are comparable (Sullivan). Therefore, the line of reasoning can continue that if Asian Americans, victim to the same discrimination, can accumulate wealth successfully, then Black Americans cannot blame the economic system for their failures. However, this argument ignores the key differences between the Asian and Black experiences. Anti-Asian racism is neither as historically long-lasting, or institutionalized as Anti-Black racism. Asians and Blacks do not start from the same starting line or face the same obstacles, and therefore their ending positions are incomparable.

My parents, being immigrants themselves, believe that because they were able to accumulate wealth and attain an upper-middle class lifestyle, there is no excuse for Black

Americans not to achieve the same. They do not account for the fundamental differences between a Black American's reality and theirs. Like in Dr. King's metaphor of different starting lines in a race, my parents assume there has always been an even playing field, even though Black Americans joined the "race" for economic and educational success 300 years late (Posner). My parents often say that "poor people don't know how to save money" because they've never bothered to learn. In my parents' minds, Black Americans and other minorities have a lack of initiative, not to mention intelligence, and thus they have been holding themselves back. My parents do not acknowledge that Asian American have never been enslaved and do not face the lasting consequences of this. Their mentality eerily echoes the narrative of White society, and that belief in the *model minority* stereotype allows them to be dismissive of structural racism. In their mind, their hard work has rightfully brought them success, so nothing justifies other people not being able to do the same. The impacts of structural racism, like redlining, predatory loans, generational poverty, and the wealth gap, either do not occur to them or do not count as valid reasons.

The stereotype of Asian American success has been used to counter the argument for educational reform. Many Black writers have written about their experience with the American education system. Keith Gilyard, for example, talks about how opinions on African-American Vernacular English, opinions that view AAVE as anything from "indicative of minimal intelligence or cognitive deficiency" to a variety of English that is "not quite equal", discourage and disadvantage Black students academically (Gilyard 70-74). However, if White society maintains that anti-Asian racism is equivalent to anti-Black racism as shown above, then the fact of Asian American academic success challenges Gilyard's argument. Asian American students grow up in households that speak non-English languages. Therefore, following the narrative, if



Asian American children can enter school without Standard English as their first language and still succeed, then Black children again cannot blame the education system for their failures.

My brother and I learned Mandarin as our first language because my parents and other family members have used it at home since we were born. By the time my older brother went to kindergarten though, he preferred to speak in Mandarin. He didn't understand English very well either, so he had difficulty communicating with his teachers and classmates. Once his teacher brought this to my parents' attention, they immediately stopped speaking Mandarin at home. They were afraid he would fall behind in school. I'm sure they were imagining years of academic struggle ahead. As a result, I stopped speaking and hearing Mandarin at home two years before I entered kindergarten. Now, 17 years later, I am fluent only in speaking but can no longer read and write above an elementary school level. My brother remembers even less, he can barely speak to or understand our grandparents when they call. I have always felt that we lost a lot of culture by losing our first language. But in the end, I guess we both ended up as academically successful students.

On the surface, this story appears to support the argument that entering school with a non-English first language does not equate to academic failure the way that Black scholars claim it does. But upon deeper analysis, this interpretation does not account for the different stance of the education system regarding African-American Vernacular English versus Chinese-American Vernacular English. The education system is far less supportive of students who speak African-American Vernacular English. My brother's kindergarten teacher told my parents not to worry and to simply speak more English at home. She did not imply that he would be academically unsuccessful or a poor student because he started behind. I doubt that many teachers would do the same for a Black student. Not to mention, my parents had to put in time and effort to switch

languages for us. My dad found and bought endless reading comprehension tests and word problem worksheets for us to practice. They spent time, worry, and money that are, frankly, luxuries of having stable and high-paying jobs. Another family might not have two earners, much less have one stable job. Families, parents, and children are not equal, especially not Black American families which have been handed every disadvantage and have not been given the same experiences or opportunities.

### **The Creation and Impact of the Problem Minority Stereotype**

Another component of the *model minority* myth is the use of the *model minority* stereotype as a foil to create the *problem minority* stereotype. The *model minority* stereotype is the idea that good behavior leads to success. Used as a foil, it defines the *problem minority* stereotype as poor behavior inhibiting success. Where the Asian *model minority* appears to succeed in the education and economic systems, the Black *problem minority* struggles. Therefore, White society argues that where the “model” Asian American community works hard, builds a stable family, and pursues education, the “problem” Black community exhibits an attitude of defeatism, builds unstable family structures, and is prone to criminalism. The *problem minority* stereotype was created from the *model minority* stereotype. As a result, it allows White society to label *problem minority* behavior as self-destructive and therefore avoid addressing Black social justice issues.

#### *The Creation of the Problem Minority Stereotype*

The *problem minority-model minority* dichotomy relies on the contrasting image of poor, uneducated Black people and well-off, educated Asian American people. First, Black Americans appear to be less economically successful than Asian Americans. For instance, in 2019 the median income of Black households was \$44,000 compared to \$85,800 for Asian households

(Tamir et al.; Budiman and Ruiz). Second, Black Americans appear less educated than Asian Americans. 54% of Asians 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher (Budiman and Ruiz). In comparison, 23% of the same age group of Black Americans also have a bachelor's degree or higher (Tamir et al.). In terms of education and economic status, Black Americans are below the national average while Asian Americans are above it (Budiman and Ruiz; Tamir et al.). These statistics demonstrate the direct juxtaposition between the economic and educational level of Asian Americans and Black Americans.

White writers like Andrew Sullivan and William Petersen illustrate how the *problem minority* stereotype originates in the *model minority* stereotype and its impacts. In Sullivan's article, he poses a rhetorical question "what gives?" about how Asian Americans can be successful despite their challenges (Sullivan). He answers himself, asserting that their "solid two-parent family structures," "social networks that looked after one another," and "enormous emphasis on education and hard work" are the reasons (Sullivan). This echoes the *model minority* stereotype of good behavior leading to success. In this case, the good behavior is supposedly strong social bonds, education, and hard work. However, Sullivan's sarcastic tone asking, "what gives?" and "It couldn't possibly be [this behavior that made Asian Americans successful] could it?" insinuates that other, problem minorities' poor behavior leads to their struggle. The implication is that other minorities, like Black Americans, are not as successful *because* they have unstable families and do not work hard or value education and, therefore, have not been successful. This characterization originated from the *model minority* stereotype Sullivan described and allows him to shift blame onto the problem minorities, the Black Americans.

Petersen follows the same rhetoric in his 1966 article in which he first discusses the Japanese American work ethic in the education system. He describes a Japanese-American student who “used to read his texts, underlining the important passages, then read and underline again, then read and underline a third time” and who explained that ““if I am to go to college, I have to work three times as hard”” (Petersen). Petersen positively describes how Japanese American students studied academics “avidly,” complimenting Japanese American work ethic and promoting the *model minority* stereotype where good behavior is hard work and education (4). He contrasts this stereotype with the *problem minority* stereotype of behavior. While he compliments Japanese hard work and “unaided efforts,” he describes problem minorities having “self-defeating apathy” or “self-destructive” hatred (1). His direct contrast of self-motivated hard work with an unwillingness to work reveals how the *model minority* stereotype of good behavior generates the *problem minority* stereotype of poor behavior. Petersen then uses this “poor behavior” stereotype to blame problem minorities like Black Americans for their struggles. His use of “self-” while describing their behavior as “self-defeating” and “self-destructing” implies that they are responsible for their own failures.

Petersen and Sullivan’s arguments represent how White society as a whole uses the *model minority* stereotype to create the *problem minority* stereotype and use it to blame Black people for their struggles in racist America. Much of Black social justice rhetoric argues for society and the government to take responsibility and make reparations. The *model minority* myth allows White society and government to reverse the argument and blame the victims—Black people—for their struggles. Black social justice movements demand reparations because they hold White society responsible for Black Americans’ struggle. The shift of blame back onto Black Americans themselves undermine these movements.

## The Narrative of Asian-Black Tension

### *The Master Narrative: Tension*

News and social media play a major role in perpetuating a narrative of Asian-Black tension and discord. News coverage of COVID-19 anti-Asian hate and affirmative action, and anti-Black racism on Chinese social media platforms like *Weibo* are clear examples. News coverage of COVID-19 anti-Asian hate crimes reveals a heavy bias. The minority of crimes perpetrated by people of color are sensationalized over those perpetrated by White people. While 75% of the perpetrators of these crimes were actually White, viral videos and images mostly featured people of color as the perpetrators (Yam). This skewed news coverage leaves an impression on viewers that there is tension and violence between the Asian and Black communities.

Social media, especially Chinese sites, spread anti-Asian sentiment, reaching many generations of immigrants. On *Weibo*, for example, there are many users who post anti-Black messages (“Anti-Black Racism on the Chinese Social Media Network Weibo”)<sup>1</sup>. Despite being a Chinese “mainland” site used mainly by Chinese citizens, *Weibo* and its content impact America through generations of Asian immigrants, because, even generations after immigrating, many minorities maintain cultural and familial ties to their families’ “mainland.” My parents are immigrants, born and raised in Taiwan and Hong Kong, respectively. I am the first generation in my family born in the United States, and I still have deep, familial and personal ties to China and Taiwan. Accordingly, I use many Chinese social media sites, like *Line*, *Weibo*, *Wechat*, and more. As a result, the content of those sites affects me too.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the controversial nature of this article, the author requested to be left anonymous. China being a dictatorship with censorship of the media makes this kind of writing risky to the author’s safety. I emphasize that sources and arguments in this article are credible despite the anonymity of the author.

Through a combination of my family's influence and my ties to Chinese culture and society, I believed strongly for a long time that there was no unity or connection between Asian and Black communities. I realize now that actually this was only a narrative that I had bought into. I had never seen news or content about Asian-Black solidarity growing up. While researching, I was shocked to find evidence, in fact, of historical Asian-Black solidarity efforts.. My best friend, Ally Chu, another first generation citizen, shared my disbelief when I showed her the articles.

During my college application process as well, I was repeatedly told that as an Asian student, colleges would favor Black students over me, so I had to be unquestionably better. Among my Asian American peers and friends, there was a sense of injustice towards affirmative action in particular. Our parents told us for years that our spots in college were being stolen, that the selection process was unequal, so we needed to work harder. While there is an abundance of proof, statistics, and articles out there that refutes this perception, it was a widely accepted truth, especially in my area with a high concentration of Asian-American students, that affirmative action was advantaging Black students and other students of color at the disadvantage of Asian students.

Personally, I still hold mixed feelings towards the college admissions process and affirmative action. Acceptance and rejection letters correlated to self-worth at the time and possibly even now. Now that I am in college, the problem has passed, but I acknowledge that this does not mean that it is solved. I still feel lingering bitterness from that time. I still don't know what to say to the Asian American high schoolers I know. They are still approaching the problem that I left behind unsolved: is affirmative action unfair when we know we are educationally privileged already?

*The Hidden Narrative: Solidarity*

The master narrative of tension overshadows the hidden narrative of solidarity. This sensationalization of Asian-Black divisions covers up a long history of Asian-Black solidarity, especially in social justice matters (Demsas and Ramirez). Asian and Black communities have united for causes such as the Third World Liberation Front Movement, police brutality, Black Lives Matter, and anti-Asian hate (Demsas and Ramirez). Especially in light of recent anti-Asian hate, “Black talk show hosts, civil rights icons, faith leaders, recording artists, athletes, directors, writers, entertainers, producers, fashion designers, academics and even a Black former President” are standing in solidarity with the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community (“Black-Asian solidarity has a long and storied history in America”). This is only the most recent addition to a long history of Black-Asian solidarity which ranges from Frederick Douglas’ support for Chinese and Japanese immigration in 1869, to “joint Black and Japanese American Activism” successfully repealing the Emergency Detention Act of 1950 which was used to create the Japanese internment camps (“Black-Asian solidarity has a long and storied history in America”). Shared interests as well as shared fears have motivated Black-Asian solidarity in the past.

While Asian-Black solidarity has an established history, it’s not without its own issues. The podcast “The History Of Solidarity Between Asian And Black Americans” with anti-racist consultant and author Kim Tran acknowledges those potential issues. Tran makes the important distinction that the Asian and Black experiences are fundamentally not the same. She acknowledges that our shared interests include “address[ing] colonization and dismantl[ing] White supremacy”, but at the same time she points out that the harm done is different (“The History Of Solidarity Between Asian And Black Americans”). In other words, Asian Americans

have never experienced “what it is like to be enslaved in this country, to be mass incarcerated” (“The History Of Solidarity Between Asian And Black Americans”). Tran believes that we should view “racial difference and racial injustice in their own specific and unique lived experiences” rather than “rank” them (“The History Of Solidarity Between Asian And Black Americans”). I wholeheartedly agree that we should not compare sufferings. Lived experiences are not shared to be criticized and invalidated. No person or group’s suffering is lesser than or less valid. Tran’s message of acknowledgement and validation of differences will allow Black-Asian solidarity to continue and strengthen.

## **Conclusion**

Awareness of the *model minority* myth’s impacts motivates us to *unlearn*. Consciousness of the impacts of the *model minority* myth on educational and economic systems redefines our perception, and connections to our own lived experience makes this issue personal. However, there are steps beyond becoming conscious of the *model minority* myth’s fallacies and personal biases that need to be taken. To maintain and expand consciousness, identification of the powerful sources that perpetuate this narrative is imperative. The perpetuation of the narrative of Asian-Black tension continues so we have to critically take in information from media sources. *Unlearning* and staying conscious is a continuous process that unfolds beyond the research covered in this paper. To eventually dismantle the *model minority* myth, we must commit to this process.

It is important to note that while some of the arguments countered in this paper are blatantly untrue, they can still be effectively used to shut down discussion of social justice. Often in refuting social justice rhetoric, an argument does not have to be sound or logical because



denial and willful ignorance are tools just as strong as reason. In an argument, the easiest way out for the other person is to refuse to listen to reason or truth. Despite that, information remains vital to changing a person's beliefs because an effective argument needs a factual base. That is my goal in this paper, to provide the groundwork for slow change.

On a personal level, trying to encourage parents, siblings and other family to question the narrative of the *model minority* myth has become a goal, and I know it is a life-long process. Having a conversation with someone who does not want to listen feels fruitless; I have found that I get frustrated very easily when trying to reason with my parents. Both my mother and father have believed for all of their adult lives that their beliefs about society and people are irreproachable. Whether confronting their racism or homophobia, I have yet to get through to them, and trying to explain sexual identity (as it differs from gender identity) leads to a one-sided fight and often tears for me. The imbalance comes down to this: I *want* to and still do love, trust, and respect my parents; They have put me through a lot, but I've also put them through a lot. I acknowledge that it is hard for them to change when they were born into, raised on, and have lived by the same beliefs that they hold now. I will need time, patience, and acceptance that they may never change. Just as anyone trying to encourage someone else to unlearn and re-learn something does, you will need the same if you choose to commit to this process as well. For both of us and for all of us, I wish perseverance, kindness, and empathy to keep us going on our journey. Good luck, and thank you.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my best friend for sticking by my side throughout the process of writing the paper. She stayed on the phone with me for hours as I bounced research ideas off of

her. We began to unlearn the narrative of the *model minority* myth together and I hope we continue to. Our lived experiences parallel each other so much that although I wrote this paper for myself, this paper is also written for her and our friends and peers. Love you honey, and thank you for everything you do.

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And finally, to anyone reading this, whether you feel you've walked in exactly my shoes or not, thank you so much for taking the time to read this paper. I know it's very long and can be dry, but I put a lot of love and effort into it. To know it reached someone makes me smile and makes it worth it. Thank you all.

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