

Claire Doyle, NE – 2021

Once I was staring at a building with two round windows that looked like the eyes of an owl and a door frame that looked like a mouth open in surprise. I thought to myself: there it is—another face in an inanimate object.

Pareidolia is the incorrect perception of a stimulus as a pattern or meaning known to the observer. Like most humans, I perceive faces in ambiguous patterns like a scattering of clouds, the cracks in a ceiling, and the grooves of a Cheez-It. Even Leonardo da Vinci allegedly saw countenances in cave walls that inspired his paintings. How, then, is it possible for humans, who have a distinct tendency to find faces in abstract arrangements, to not recognize any humanity in their politicians? With the increasing polarization of the country, particularly in the months preceding the United States Senate Youth Program in 2021, it seems that more people view the government as a fantasy novel—full of monsters, villains, and heroes—rather than a real institution made up of human beings.

The United States Senate Youth Program restored my ability to see faces in the nation's leaders, places, and in myself. I came into the program with preconceived notions about the character of political figures that I'd never met. Meeting politicians from both sides of the aisle, like Senator James Lankford and Senator Tammy Baldwin, and hearing their stories expanded my world view. I had forgotten that our political system is an aggregation of human beings. The USSYP became the pedagogue through which I relearned this verity.

Second, as impactful as meeting the political figures was, nothing compared to the power of seeing the faces of my fellow delegates from all over the country. An eminent researcher and interior designer, Ingrid Fetell Lee, outlines ten aesthetics of joy. One of them—abundance—mimics the excitement a kid gets in a toy shop looking at endless rows of diverse gadgets and games. Similarly, I experienced this happiness by getting to know the idiosyncrasies of my many confreres. I met a New Yorker who doesn't drive because she lives in the most bustling city on the continent, an Alaskan who describes the Northern Lights, and a Mississippian who gave updates on the hurricanes thrashing against his state during the program. Places I'd before chalked up to stereotypes and reputations now had palpable visages.

Of course, being surrounded by incredibly accomplished peers inclines one to feel vestiges of imposter syndrome. However, one of our speakers, USSYP alumnae Brian Kamoie, described these feelings as meaningful. He said that feeling “not qualified enough” stems from a profound respect for the work one does and a sincere hankering to do well.

Because the program was virtual, our experience differed from those of previous delegates. When events are held in person, I look out from my vantage point at those around me and never see myself. On zoom, my face was one of many staring back at me through the screen. For the many shortcomings virtual events have, I was grateful for this difference because it trained me to see myself fitting in with everyone else. No matter how inadequate any of us could have felt, our eyes saw that we belonged. Not only is it important to see faces in everyone around us, but it's equally critical that we see ourselves.

Ever since I discovered I had pareidolia, I knew that everyone around me had it, too. It does not make me special. It makes me human. In the same way, I believe the USSYP restores our ability to see the faces in our politicians, in every region of the country, and in ourselves. Because our government is made up of real people, we know that we can and will be a part of it.