## "I Don't Belong Here"
### By Byron Fitch

It was April 2007 and I was corporate bound! Chasing the dream! Despite the question of whether African Americans can actually share the American dream, I was determined to see if it could be done. I had just made the bold move across the country to the Midwest for a promising, new career in management consulting. This company had promised me the world – B-I-G money potential, career growth, bonuses and an *exciting* culture in which I could s-o-a-r to greater heights in a *short* amount of time. It didn't take long for me to realize, that though my life looked really good from the outside, it felt pretty bad on the inside.

As I experienced greater frustration each day, I paused hoping to hear a word from my soul that might help me shake it all off and feel okay. After all, I was living the dream. One day in a quiet moment, the "dream" filter was removed from my vision. I saw the following – the weather was freezing cold (*by nature of the Midwest climate)* and the aurora felt stale, and uninviting. "This was no place like home." I saw that I stood out like a sore thumb among all of the White people everywhere I turned. And to make matters worse, I would cringe inside when I would get random comments such as "Why did you move here from Atlanta?", "You finished College?"

"Your parents are educated"…just to name a few. I thought to myself, "Have I accepted being the "token" black man?" Had my expectations been so unrealistic?  I wanted to be fully embraced, accepted, and encouraged to be my "true" authentic self.  Despite it being 2007, and this country on the verge of electing the first ever African-American President, my surroundings were not so progressive. Initially, I attributed what I was experiencing to racism, the *obvious* barrier to my fulfillment. So I tried to bury my feelings and desires for acceptance, but there was *more* beneath these feelings than even I knew.

Fast forward to 2008, this same company transferred me to Atlanta. Moving back to Atlanta better known as "The Promise Land" was the chance I needed to experience acceptance. Surely, my worries and discomfort would be over. Yet, for the next 3 years, I felt like the same outsider I was back in the Midwest. Even though I was back home physically, I still felt like a misfit.  In 2011, I happily transitioned from this company to another corporate environment that promised me the same thing = *even more* money, *more career opportunities*, and a great culture. This would do the trick and put me squarely back in the dream! And BOOM…the same thing happened to me again!  The same empty feelings career wise surfaced. Why? I thought this is what I wanted but still felt such a disconnect and no sense of belonging.  There was no one

in sight that looked like me to mentor, build, or nurture me personally or professionally.  The negative vibrations from my frustrations magnified until I'm sure they were coming out of the side of my neck. Those unresolved feelings that lay inside came to life as I complained

about the job day after day.  Then it happened, I was laid off from this company at the end of 2013. It felt very shady and I was completely devastated. Here I am…being newly married, the main breadwinner of my family, and totally clueless about my next move. I was obviously one of those people who had to get to the point of *crisis* before I could truly hear my soul and the voice of God.

When the house was quiet, and I was praying for direction, it came to me.  All this time I was allowing the dreams of others to dictate what I thought was right for me. All this time, I had been masking my "true" authentic self to fit into a culture that was never designed for me to succeed long-term.  No wonder I was in a constant internal battle between honoring and representing myself versus flexing to be that "token" Black man that they wanted me to be. That was never going to work for my good. I finally realized that God heard my complaints and through divine intervention removed me from that soul-sucking place.

After making a total switch to Higher Education, I saw even more clearly that the traditional corporate setting was a place in which I was most unhappy, bored, and uninspired.  I also concluded that the hopes of B-I-G money, impressive office space, and a fancy title was not fulfilling or purposeful for me. Furthermore, I discovered that I had been looking outside for validation from people and organizations…not realizing that God had already given me this ultimate confirmation from day one.

So looking back on my 10-year journey, I know I have found my calling in Higher Education, an inclusive culture, though not perfect, in which I can be my "true" authentic self – A black man who is bold, daring, confident, caring, ambitious, and called to lift up the people around me. Feelings resolved – I came home to myself and I am finally in a place where I belong!☺