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Reflections about My Suitcase

2nd Annual International Student Essay Contest

OISS Michigan State University
October 29, 2004
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Almost four years ago, my husband and I decided to come to the U.S to pursue our graduate studies. After several weeks of discussion trying to balance our disparate careers—tourism and horticulture—we finally agreed to come to Michigan State University (MSU). We packed a few books, lots of excitement and some bravery into a couple of suitcases, grabbed our two young children and took the airplane to Lansing. Of course, I filled a personal suitcase with fears... fear for the language barrier, fear for the unfamiliar weather, but especially, fear for the cultural differences. Very shortly after arriving, my fears dissolved.

My family is from Peru, a beautiful South American country embedded in Latin culture mixed with some ancient Incan traditions. Our mixed cultural background has created friendly and cheerful people that enjoy being with lots of friends and that highly appreciate daily conversations. Consequently, friends and extended family are naturally part of our lives, blurring the distinction between private and shared worlds. Before coming to MSU, my American image, firmly dispersed by Hollywood productions, was centered on insensitive people that lived inside their own private world without caring about others. What a HUGE fear! How could I survive in a world where people do not share? How could I possibly teach my children that there is a world outside each person? How could I nourish my spirit? Just two days after experiencing in-situ the U.S. culture my biggest fear began to vanish.

My eight month old son got a terrible cough. After scheduling an appointment we headed to the Gateway Community Clinic, located at Spartan Village. It was a very cold
mid-February day. We took the CATA bus, no car yet…, and we got-off at the “MSU Clinic” station. How come the clinic was closed if our appointment was at 5:15 pm? Did I understand wrong? An employee came out from the clinic and I approached him for help. After explaining our situation, he went back inside to his office and made a phone call. We had headed to the wrong clinic! Who could possibly think there were two different on-campus clinics? I guess that our faces showed our anxiety…, we wouldn’t be able to make it to the other clinic! But we did… The “unknown” offered us a ride to the other clinic… “it is too cold, and the baby is coughing too bad” he argued. My son’s cough disappeared in a few days, but the warmth of the unknown will remain in my heart forever.

A couple of weeks later, my husband was talking with another unknown. When the guy learned that we just came for studying, he asked my husband if we already had a computer… of course not yet. The guy’s company was renewing computers and they were getting rid of the old ones. He offered one computer to us… and he brought the computer to our home! Said computer lasted for about two years. The unknown’s action will always remain in my thoughts.

Unknown 1 and unknown 2 are only the first links of a large chain of unselfish support that I have experienced in Lansing. Several other actions from unknowns helped me realize that my experiences were beyond merely lucky coincidences; they were founded in a strong value named community. The word community is well known in my country, but I had to come here to feel what the sense of community is about.

For sure, some evidences of my initial fears remain in my suitcase. I still yearn for long conversations about nothingness (Sartre-style) and about our neighbors’
nothingness (Oprah-style) before a cup of café negro... I still miss saying hello and goodbye with a kiss on the cheeks... I still wish for a two-hour lunch-break to fill our bellies and spirits... I still miss... Interesting though, that I now keep missing what I did not know to value back in my country. Interesting that I miss chatting in the hallways when I used to run away when someone was approaching.... Or to give an excuse when someone asked me to go for a lunch break... Or to rapidly extend my hand when I noticed that someone was going to greet me with a kiss.... Or...

Reflections about my family’s arrival to MSU show me that, in fact, there was a huge cultural clash between my Latino-Inca cultural background and the American culture. However, such reflections also show me that my initial fears weren’t founded. The cultural differences that my family experienced when arriving to the U.S. were not barriers; instead they were means for personal/familiar enhancement. The cultural clash experienced upon our arrival allowed me to feel what community means: to share with those that are around us, no matter whether we know their names, no matter whether they hold the same last name, and no matter whether we can chat with them everyday. The cultural clash also taught me to value my cultural practices more; to enjoy my free time more... to fully experience my conversations... to give more attention to my physical contact.

Finally, I finished unpacking my suitcase of fears! However, I just realized that I started to pack a new one. But I feel relief... At the end, isn’t the purpose of life to pack and unpack our suitcases of fears?