Of Traffic Codes and Ways of Life

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By

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The scene of the crime - I was driving towards the library. As I drove near Spartan statute, I slowed down for the three-way stop. I saw a police car on my left and a girl walking merrily on my right. I believed the girl was still from a considerable distance and so I drove pass the intersection. As I entered the parking lot near the stadium, the police car was right behind me. I wondered why. Did I violate something wrong? Hmm, I hope it was not me whom the police officer was chasing. So I continued driving. But as soon as I got in the parking booth, I looked at the rear mirror and saw the police officer making a sign. I almost freaked out. I stopped and tried to put my best behavior. “Good day, officer. May I help you?” I humbly asked when confronted. “Oh yes!” A young lady officer said. “You almost hit a pedestrian!” Oh the girl. But she was too far away, I meekly protested. “Can I have your Driver’s ID, Car Registration and Insurance?” she snapped. Blood rushed in my veins. It had just been a week since I came back from a summer break from my home country. While I do have my ID and Car registration, my insurance had expired. That morning, I called Triple A to renew my insurance and the company assured me the card will be sent as soon as possible. “Err, officer… I have here my drivers’ license and car registration but… my insurance is still on the way. I had it renewed online. I am truly sorry… I just came back from the Philippines.” She looked unsympathetic and inquired if I had prior violations. “No officer, this will be the first time. I had been truly a dutiful driver.” “Okay, we will know that!” she said as she got back to her car and ran my information against her computer. I whispered a prayer: “Dear God, please soften her heart. Please make her merciful to me, a starving student. I promise I will be more careful next time.” I called my favorite saints to assist me in bombarding the gates of heaven. I was very anxious. She came back with notes on her hand. “First, you stop when pedestrians are crossing. That is the most common reason why our students get hit. And second, you always drive with your important documents. The penalty for that is $300.00.” I
almost choked. I haven’t bought any of my books yet for the semester. I was almost in tears. “I won’t issue a ticket for now; I just give you a warning but do remember that.” Ahh. I saw angels behind her back. My prayer was granted. What a relief. “Thank you so much officer. I will keep that in mind!”

*The contrasts*-- It is my third year of stay here in Michigan State. But still, old driving habits die hard. I was so accustomed into my country’s driving style that sometimes it pops up without me knowing. In the City of Manila that I came from, I was socialized into different rules of driving. Due to combination of factors like narrow roads, lack of traffic enforcers, different vehicles plying the street, and the overpopulation of pedestrians, there is a bedlam in our streets. While there are traffic rules that supposedly guide people and the government is trying very hard to solve the problem, the task seems gargantuan. As such, there emerges a driving culture of “to each his/her own.” For example, red light is stop, yes, but you can also go when the intersection is free. Also, do not make signals before you change lane. Chances are, drivers behind you will move faster because you will be taking their slot. Just turn and force your way in. The car behind you will slow down anyway as long as the *head* of your car has gotten the lane. Or, if there are many people crossing the street, just slowly drive the car and *gently* threaten the pedestrians to give way. As such, there is even no urgent need to have car insurance; only a few had it anyway. These are but a few examples of the many *codes* we had devised to survive in our streets. And every driver knows these driving codes. Just fresh from my re-immersion, I still had the hang of it. I thought I *gently* passed the street, I never knew I almost run over a pedestrian.

*Making sense out of the situation*-- This difference in driving codes is similar in other facets of life. Being a first time teaching assistant, I am amazed by how *brusque* the students are. They casually call me in my first name, leave the room if they are bored and ask questions even if they are not called. In my country, those acts are simply unacceptable— these are supposedly forms of disrespect. Students
are expected to address teachers as “sir” or “madam”, leave the room only with teacher’s permission and speak only when acknowledged. And I, as the teacher, have the right to yell if I think my students are unruly. But, oh no! Yelling is not allowed here. That is a violation of…is that human rights?

And so I came to accept that I am in a world with different codes. It is hard because sometimes the codes are not immediately spelled out. I have to learn it by trial and error. Sometimes, I misinterpret the code and it really hurts. For example, the friendship code is delicate. It is hard to penetrate the friendship circles. As such, I had always longed to have an American friend…

We had been trading jokes, helping each other out in our class assignments, and talking about each other’s families. In my country, those intimate moments mean you are friends, best of friends even. I was so confident about the status of our relationship that I got his book to check an article I have not yet read. I was very sure he won’t mind. But lo and behold, he immediately grabbed the book upon seeing it. Without a pause, my friend yelled saying that getting things without permission is an intrusion to his privacy. I was greatly shamed. *I thought we were friends.*

I struggled for days to understand his reaction. Using my country’s prism, yelling to a friend due to a trivial mistake is not a friendly act. Why would he throw away our friendship just like that? I had a heavy heart during our next encounter. In my country, if your feelings are slighted, you express your anger or pain by not talking to the person. You pretend that he does not exist and you go on doing your own way. Until finally, the other person realizes that you are at odds with him and he will make amends. And I intended to do just that.

To my great disgust, he seemed perfectly impervious. He had totally forgotten the previous incident. He kept on joking even if I had not uttered a word for the whole day. He appeared not to get it. What was wrong with this guy? The pain in my heart was overbearing, I could not take it any
longer. My old country style of cold treatment did not work. I had to confront him the way he confronted me. I had to use his code of resolving conflict. I had to do it the American way. “Can I have a word with you,” I started. I went on to narrate how I viewed the incident, what assumptions I had, and how badly my feelings were hurt. I also told him that our friendship was already sour and I will be pretentious if I say otherwise. But to my amazement, he reacted differently. He apologized profusely and he said it was not his intentions to hurt my feelings. He just wanted to make the impression that privacy and individualism were virtues he held dearly. And he was thankful that I was being honest because now he knew where he stands. We are better friends ever since.

I realized that my supposed conflict with others were simply products of the differences in the cultural codes that we were in. I interpreted an incident in one way; they interpreted it the other way. Coming from different worlds, we have built in prisms on how to view things. And it is a matter of honest communication and eagerness to learn that we can bridge the gap.

Like the traffic codes, I need to learn to stop in the spots they designated as red lights or else, I will crash to their cultural taboos. Yet, I should also not hesitate to go when a green light eggs me to capture a great opportunity and learn new things.

Now, I am appreciating the driving codes in Michigan State. As a pedestrian myself, I find it really cute when drivers stop to let pedestrians go, with accompanying smiles and waves. I tried it once and it feels good to let people go by especially when they smile and acknowledge the courtesy. It had been my habit ever since. And I hope to imbibe this traffic code and will never break it.

The end