A Song For Us

I came to Michigan from Korea as a spouse of an international student in 2009. I spent my first year exploring the people and culture here as a wife of PhD student and mother of a preschooler. I was content with my new found home but I wished to do more than taking care of my family. Back then, it was always me who laid down my daughter in bed since my husband stayed late at the library. One night, my daughter said to me, “Mom, at school, I love to sing.” Smiling at her, I said, “My little princess can sing English songs now?” And she replied, “Mom, we all can, ‘Cause we have voice!” That night as I turned off the light of her room, I knew it was my time to learn a new song.

In the fall of 2010, as a thirty-three year old nervous life-long education student, I walked into the classroom 218 at Berky Hall of Michigan State University. A totally different phase of my life started that day, a serendipitous journey to play my tune in the American Academia.

The class I took was a graduate level introductory course in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing. I went through a cognitive crisis as I tried to make sense of everything going on in the classroom. Reading and writing were hard enough to take up all my time but what overwhelmed me the most was the vigorous class discussion. In Korea, we think and organize our thoughts thoroughly before addressing it. When I tried to say something after putting my thoughts together, the conversation had already jumped into another topic. Above all, those rhetoric and writing students seemed to speak so eloquently and fluently that it was impossible for me to cut in their meteorically paced discussion.

I felt so stupid and small. Differences in language, learning style, and classroom culture dried up my own sense of confidence. But I knew that the true source of my problem was a self-imposed ‘fear’; a fear of being out of context, being seen stupid and ending up as an outlier. After some time, I started to open my mouth with a couple of sentences during discussion time, but mostly I did not articulate all my questions and thoughts, staying isolated only pretending to understand and guessing contexts.
There had been four major writing tasks required to students in my course. Though every writing assignment was challenging I did my best to make my paper look acceptable with help from the writing center. I had hoped to get some feedback from the professor after submitting my first annotated bibliography; however, there was no feedback. I was curious, but I did not question her. After the class presentation, after submitting project proposal and final paper, there had been no written feedback at all. I kept silent about that, assuming that maybe my writing was not good enough to be considered meaningful. I also assumed that maybe this was an American way that professors don’t give feedback to everybody.

As the course went on, the professor and other classmates encouraged me in many ways. It seemed they welcomed me into their own discourse community. Toward the end of the course, I sent out a group e-mail asking for an advice on a couple of future courses, but no one responded to me. I felt so bad and rejected; I assumed again that maybe this was an American way; they don’t take care about other people’s lives.

“Eunyoung, did you get my e-mail? Have you decided on the next course?” Paul asked me at the last day of the class.

“No. I haven’t heard from any of you,” I replied numbly.

“What? I sent you a reply on the day I got your e-mail!” he said.

“Me, too! I even sent you the link of the course instructor!” Esther said.

“But...There was not even one mail in my angel account!”

“What?? Angel?? Not your MSU mail?”

It was at the very last day of that course when I found out the existence of my own MSU E-mail account. There was no orientation for life-long students and I did not pay enough attention to everything. At home, when I logged in for the first time, what I saw were fifteen e-mails from my professor all of which were exceedingly encouraging feedbacks for each paper.

Hi! Eunyoung,

Your paper shows strong command over the readings and where you see yourself developing a passion for the work of community writing. ... You've accomplished all of
There were also a bunch of e-mails from my classmates responding to my question. Their earnest comments, links, and the references were all right there! I was speechless. I found that my false assumptions had trapped me into ignorance and isolation. I judged this culture and its people without making further inquiry, and I put myself into a marginalized position with a fear of being interpreted as deficient. That day, in front of those encouraging e-mails of supports and kindness, I threw away my fear and prejudice. ‘People here are accepting me as the way I am! I made a couple of decisions that night. I decided to be honest and ask question when I don’t know. I decided to be myself and be open-minded. Above all, I decided to be free from my sense of inferiority.

Now I am a full-time student pursuing my master’s degree in College of Art and Letters. I am still struggling with my writing and discussion, but not with the heart that I used to have. Previously, I compared things with the eyes of judgment; we are doing it this way and they are doing it that way. I also used to degrade myself with the fact that I could never be good enough here. Now I am no longer caught up with the rigid thinking of assuming our apparent difference. Now I know that when I speak in my own true voice people would listen. I came to understand that beyond the surface level of our differences, we share great similarities as human beings. We all need encouragement, support and warmth from our loved ones to face the uncertainty of our everyday life. We all have a story to share; a story of love and fear, a story of joy and sorrow. Above all, we all can sing songs; songs of hope and songs of harmony. And our songs have same beautiful resonance over us, over our shared tune of humanity.
A Song For Us

Don’t you ever abandon yourself
Pursuing your dreams at others’ land
Yes, things are different here
Doesn’t mean you are deficient here.

Now, unlock your box of fear
And fly to the sky of courage
Don’t be afraid to take a challenge
Beyond your self-imposed bondage

Let us just be ourselves
Delighted with what we can offer
Can’t you see beyond the difference
We can share the same stories

So keep on telling my sister,
Till all hear the voice of truth
Keep on singing my friend,
Till all join you with clapping hands

-Eunyoung Lee