HONORABLE MENTION
“THE ROAD NOT TAKEN”
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“Two roads diverged in the wood, and I—,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.” - Robert Frost

The title of this essay is aptly borrowed from Robert Frost’s famous poem, ‘The Road not Taken’. Like the poem this essay is a reflection on certain choices in life that define not just the immediate course of things but also inevitably shape the course of many more years to come. Just as in the poem some paths and choices are less popular and laden with uncertainties but it is only after making those choices, treading down those paths, that we get a sense of what it has to offer and how it can change you as a person. For me making the decision to pursue my college education in the United States of America has been such a choice. It was a path less chosen by others in my community, and as an eighteen year old that didn’t really help me with my confidence entering into my first year as a college freshman. Needless to say it has opened up numerous avenues for me as I sought to develop myself as a person and as I cemented my academic interests. It also posed many challenges that have understandably made me more mature and sensible. Looking back, it is difficult to imagine not having made that choice, to think of what might have become had I stayed home and never been exposed to a new world and known many of the people I met along the way. But then again I don’t know what staying at home might have meant for me, what kind of a person I might have become then. Nevertheless I draw comfort in the fact that I feel glad and fortunate to have made the decision to leave home and to have experienced many wonderful things so far and continue to do so.

On the more mundane side of things it was a challenge getting used to the food. It is understandably one of the most common difficulties students face when they travel away from home. Although being in a major city like Boston did make it easier to get food I was more familiar with, they weren’t necessarily the cheapest of the options. Hence I found myself eating
and eventually growing used to new types of food. Although my first experience with Mexican food wasn’t all that amazing, I have grown quite fond of it now. Even the taste of a hamburger that I couldn’t really stand in the first few months, feels quite natural to me now. And as the academic year grew more frantic, the taste of the food was the last thing on my mind.

I come from a small town nested on top of a hill in the Himalayas in northern India. It is therefore not surprising that not many of the people I grew up knowing have ever traveled abroad. It was a small little world, shielded from many of the influences of the busier streets in the big cities in the plains. Although that has for reasons good and bad, changed quite drastically since then. However as far as the town I grew up in is concerned, it was a little Tibetan community centered around the presence of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in the midst. It was a heavily Buddhist community and I was brought up accordingly with a Buddhist mindset and moral understanding. This uniformity in thinking and in the moral understanding of good and bad allowed for quite a harmonious society. However it also makes us take many of the things we believe in for granted, to the extent that we can’t imagine questioning them. That for me was one of the crucial points of departure from my community when I stepped out of it. For once I saw people thinking and behaving in ways that questioned my understanding of right and wrong, regardless of whether I abided by them or not. But the mere disagreement in the sets of beliefs I saw around me and the diversity of thoughts in general made me question many of the things I had been brought up to believe in. Of course my first reaction was to be defensive and to try and defend certain beliefs that I didn’t even fully understand. I found how shallow some of my understanding of things were. I realized if I am to rigorously subject everything around me to critical scrutiny, I will have to do the same with my own set of beliefs. It was not necessarily the most pleasant of things to do. It was and continues to be a period of uncertainty and confusion whenever I have to re-evaluate myself. Putting your own beliefs to the test of reason is a daunting task. Many a times you emerge with more questions and doubts than any clarity. But I think that just brings you to the understanding that many of these things, especially moral questions do not have an easy answer, if they do have an answer at all. It at the very least develops the patience to consider other points of view and even detach oneself from one’s own point of view, even for a little while. This definitely is crucial in a multicultural society as the one we find here in the US.
One such example was when I noticed the apathy many people around me seemed to have towards animals and in particular insects. Being brought up in a Buddhist society I was taught to respect life regardless of what form it takes. So my instinctive reaction was of mild horror whenever someone casually killed a bug. I eventually discussed this with some of my friends and found out that they didn’t consider insects as deserving of much sympathy. Of course it led to the question of my not being a vegetarian, to which I didn’t have a better explanation than ‘that’s what I was brought up eating’ and ‘for dietary needs’. Nevertheless it led us to an interesting conversation about the sanctity of life in general and why we should care about suffering of others and possibly non-human animals. Encounters like these led me to take classes in ethics and philosophy which further allowed me to question my own beliefs and left me with more questions than answers. And somehow nowadays, I find myself cherish these questions more so for the sake of raising them than the desire to get an answer. I am not as uncomfortable being uncertain about things and realize that the best we can do to be more certain is to raise more questions.

As I look back at the five years I have spent so far in the US it has been an amalgam of ups and downs. Not all the experiences have been pleasant. There were quite a few moments where the problems I was facing had very little do with not being at home. However at the end of the day I do think I have come off more mature and have developed as a person. I do think I have a better grasp over my understanding of things and most definitely have a better sense of how much I don’t know and how much of what I know I need to constantly re-evaluate. This and many other realizations I owe it to the choice I made five years ago to leave home and to come to the US. However at the same time rather than overly appreciate what has been, I look forward to what is yet to come my way. There are possibly more challenges in the future to face and to learn from. Hopefully the mindset I have developed and continue to develop will help me deal and learn from them. This is of course but the beginning of my engagement with learning and one that I intend to carry on for a long time. Again to aptly sum it up in Frost’s own words:

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”