HONORABLE MENTION

“BEST OF BOTH WORLDS – LETTER FROM A SPARTAN”

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HOME COUNTRY: INDIA

Few years ago on a crisp Fall Friday afternoon, a wide-eyed bespectacled girl landed in Detroit Metro Airport who seemed much too excited like a young schoolgirl as if she was about to see, touch and smell her new hardbound school books. The girl looked dazed, befuddled and exhausted, as she tightly clutched on to her most precious fancy purse containing her“I-20 document, Indian passport, Travelers check and almost freshly minted United States Dollars and quarter coins!” The girl wondered what the time was in her home country and if it was already night time or not at the other side of the world where she came from. I am not sure if you will earn those special brownie points by guessing who we are talking about, yeah it’s too obvious, right?! One of the many International students from India had arrived at Uncle Sam’s doorsteps to realize her dreams and as I cleared the dreaded “U.S. Customs”, I was warmly greeted by an exceptionally tall man who was not only mighty impressed with my “PhD aspirations evident from my lifeline I-20 document but also exclaimed – “Welcome to Michigan, fellow Spartan!”

Suddenly, many of my fears and bubbles of insecurity vanished into thin air with the friendliness and heart-warming nature of a “foreigner” in a foreign land. Even though, I was one of the few F-1 student “aliens” bundled up in few layers as I was feeling very cold on a supposedly normal Michigan Fall day, another dose of warm greeting and helpfulness approach by the Michigan Flyer bus driver made me feel almost like home! A bus with free top-speed internet connection and access to free mineral water bottles were definitely “firsts” for me as I snuggled into my seat. I had a brush of “Pure Michigan” for sure in few good ways. Mentally, I ticked the checkbox of “warm and friendly disposition of Mid-western people” in USA and was pleasantly surprised with the similarity of this trait with people from my home country and city called Kolkata, India.
Being born, bred and raised in a bustling, frenzied historical Metropolitan city in India which almost resembles a mini-version of New York City in some ways, I was used to all kinds of instantaneous modes of transportation that one could name it such as Taxis, buses, metro or “subways” as we call it here, three wheelers called “auto-rickshaws”, cycle-rickshaws, on the surface famed historical trains called “Trams”, personal driven four wheelers and also hand-pulled rickshaws by men. Streets lined up with endless number of shops, vendors, museums, book stores, innumerable number of restaurants of all kinds, people teeming everywhere who are “always on the go” and looked eager to reach some destination or the other; grand colonial buildings and old, beautiful houses competing for existence with modern building complexes that boasted of dizzying heights and better city view; roadside food (not so healthy but delicious), constant cacophony between pedestrians and drivers blazing their respective car horns, folks not always abiding by traffic signals who shuttled between invisible lanes, having traffic road cops, and navigating one’s life in the midst of daily traffic seemed a thing of the past for me now. I was transported to a “new world”, literally and figuratively. The sounds of silence and very quiet neighborhoods of a scenic college town in East Lansing, trying to understand the rules and regulations of motor vehicles, know the systematic “walk/show of hand stop sign” and grapple with nuances of spotting the right street in spite of very well-labelled street names was new to me. Yes, a city girl from another country who is not too adept with road directions had to uncomfortably but slowly create her own mental GPS to move around and now found herself clutching to huge, glossy colored Michigan State University campus map and several CATA bus route maps! Successfully being able to find a new building on this breath-taking gorgeous and vast campus, telling myself “all who wander do not get lost” mantra when I found myself going round and round in the “Spartan Village” maze in order locate my apartment was an achievement for sure!!

I felt I had to unlearn and re-learn a completely new life codebook here in Michigan, USA where I shuttled between two worlds a lot and still continue to do so by exchanging and comparing notes of human behavior, language, dialect, clothes, food, budgeting personal finances, personal relationships, soaking up the new culture here while missing home at odd hours of the day. The wide-eyed bespectacled international student who said heart-wrenching, tearful “bye bye and take care” to her family at the Kolkata, International airport seems to feel more wide-eyed anticipating what would follow in the years to come in her USA life journey.
Coming from a land with at least twenty-two thousand dialects coupled with multiple languages and jostling among plethora of mini cultures so to speak in terms of daily living, personal lifestyles, food, people of varying religions, I feel blessed and challenged at the same time to use the many soft skills which were latent in me as a human being. English is indeed a funny language! As much as I love and appreciate the English language even though it is not my so-called “native” language, I realized all over again in Michigan that the lingo, accent, pronunciation and dialects of English is complex! I sensed a personal awkwardness and not knowing how to respond when fellow Indians and even many Asian friends and colleagues here in MSU said my English is excellent. The personal awkwardness increased further with American people, be it American friends, peers, professors or strangers complimenting my decent command over the English language. Sometimes, I felt good and sometimes a gnawing bout of annoyance gripped my senses whether me being “good” in English was a compliment or another subtle micro-aggression I experienced. Being a true Spartan and an optimist, I believe in learning to absorb and imbibe different cultural traits from both the worlds I always find myself hopping between – India and America. Today, I feel delighted to say I have gained assorted jewels in my life's treasure box when I can tell people what a “Michigan left” is, what “To-go”, “Game day” or “Water, no ice” means or telling my friends and relatives in India that I now live in a scenic place shaped like a “Mitten” where two kinds of weather exist known as “Winter and Construction weather!” Honking one’s car horn here on the street does not happen, the buses and apartments here in Michigan, USA have toasty, warm heaters on during bone-chilling winters to warm one’s soul if not frazzled nerves, “Football” which is not a first cousin of soccer is something every Michigander here in Spartan Nation takes enormous pride in, just as “Cricket” is worshipped in India! Finally, I do not look flummoxed any more when someone in Michigan asks me “Do I want pop with my meal?!”

A simple question like” where do you come from” posed to me by many people here in this country somehow has many psychological and inter-cultural layers in one answer that I give to people. Just as a mouth-watering ice-cream cake from MSU Dairy store has many layers appealing to my taste-buds, similarly the response to “where I come from” is multi-layered and speaks of my identity as a global, multicultural citizen. Home for me and where I come from is work in progress and at times it has less to do with soil and more of soul, where I feel a kinship
with as I feel in East Lansing, Michigan. The richness of “food, glorious food” I have experienced here in USA and the strong close relationships I have built here forms a formidable part of my international experience. Home is where the heart is and before an international flight or a Skype call may connect me with my loved ones either in India or in USA, I have already traveled and connected with who I want through my mind’s eye.