Anyone who launches a life in a whole new culture must create some personal language jokes.

Here is one of mine:

“Hey, Rachel! Did you hear that the former president...” I was trying to tell her the guy who committed massive fraud is now in jail, but I suddenly cannot remember the word I wanted to say. I blurted out: “He is now in the ‘hell!’"

“Did I say something wrong?” I thought. I hurriedly checked my dictionary, and found it should be “jail”! I explained my misuse with embarrassment; however, my dear friend Rachel did not say anything to correct me.

“I was thinking how you knew that,” she said, “hmm...jail is better!”

I have to say, this is the most hilarious joke of my first year studying at MSU. When I heard Rachel’s response, I just could not stop laughing!

Sometimes people make language jokes due to unfamiliarity of the common language rules. I still remember that three years ago, I asked my academic advisor whether he has tried “bobble tea,” a representative beverage in Taiwan. He answered:

“Yes, my students bring me one at times.” Then, he looked at me with smile: “Hint, hint!”

“I know what ‘hint’ means, but why did he say that?” I thought, and then I asked him seriously: “What is the relationship between hint and bobble tea?” “Good question!” my professor burst into laughter and said, “let me tell you—bring me a cup of bobble tea next week. Do you understand now?”

I cannot believe how silly I was, but who knew that one word could carry so much meaning in English?
Although these kinds of little funny stories still emerge in my life, I am grateful to have some close friends and considerate teachers who help me greatly while encountering cultural shock. One of them is my piano professor, Dr. Polischuk.

As a piano major in Taiwan, getting along well with my piano professor in lessons was a big challenge for me. Thus, when I was going to study music here, the language barrier made me especially worried. At my first lesson with Dr. Polischuk, I nervously told him that my English is not very good. To my surprise, he responded, “No need to be nervous, my Chinese must be worse than yours!”

Later on, through our interaction, surprises came one after another. In my lessons, we not only discuss how to make my music better, but also explore how to make my life better. When I had frustrations and said my life is difficult, Dr. Polischuk replied: “we will make it better!” When I had a technique problem and felt anxious, he said: “we will work on it!” Even when I mentioned that I have no confidence, he reacted: “we will build it up!” Nothing is impossible in his eyes. His optimism is like sunshine going forward with me. I know he will always be there providing me back-up.

It is amazing that in US, students are encouraged to express their opinions. In my previous piano lessons in Taiwan, I was always scared into silence, but here in my lesson, I can tell Dr. Polischuk anything! This complete freedom of discussion opens my eyes. His support dissolves my worries, and his positive attitude influences the way I look at this world. It is Dr. Polischuk who has changed my entire life’s perspective on learning. If he had not pushed me, I would not trust my ability of studying at the highest musical level.

Another amazing feature of American education, which impresses me a lot, is the habit of giving compliments when providing feedback. In our studio class or performance class, all students and faculty give comments to performers, and they must begin with compliments. In their comments, like a sandwich, only the middle part is different: “I have just one little suggestion...” and then the compliments come out again: “You did a great job. Fantastic...beautiful performance! Thank you!”
I was surprised when I heard these kinds of comments for the first time. I have never received so many compliments in Taiwan! Gradually, I learned that Americans are used to being polite. They open doors for people behind them, always say “excuse me”, and do their best to avoid hurting your feelings. Here, for students, mistakes are not inexcusable, and you are always allowed time to improve.

“She is a talented pianist!” my landlord Mary always exclaims when introducing me. “We could not do it without our pianist!” my employer Sue always thanks me sincerely. I feel lots of love in this unfamiliar environment and appreciate all the encouragement I receive, including that expressed through hugs.

I once asked my friend Rachel: “When do Americans hug?” It is interesting to me because in my family, following the traditional culture in Taiwan, hugging almost never happens. Therefore, I cannot catch “the cue of hug” when people opened arms wide to me without a word...“What does that mean?” Most of the time, I cannot understand immediately, and did nothing until they said: “give me a hug.”

After a couple of years, I understand that when I am departing at the airport, no matter how flustered I am with luggage and security, I must hug those who come to see me off. When I exchange presents with someone, we are supposed to hug each other. But my favorite hugs are those of congratulation, especially those I receive after performing. These hugs make me feel that my efforts are seen and appreciated. It is such a wonderful new experience that I have never had in Taiwan, since now I understand that the meaning of a hug is huge, and not replaceable by words.

My unpredictable and exciting adventures are still going on. I cherish the time I have at MSU, and wonder to myself: “How many more years can I welcome a new year with snow?” (I have never touched snow until I came here!) Although the bitterly cold weather of Michigan chills my bones, my friends and teachers at MSU are like furnaces in the winter: they provide the warmth in my life, saving me from confusion and loneliness. With their encouragement and assistance, I am brave to face all challenges.

HONORABLE MENTION
My husband told me this story one day, before I left China for MSU on September 14:

When his German boss called and asked, “How are you Mr. Wan?” My husband, who had perhaps just drunk a bottle of wine, said this: “VERY GOOD!” His boss sounded extremely surprised, “Very good? Are you sure, Mr. Wan? You sound like an American!”

My husband was confused: Why should “very good” be a problem? And why can’t I be very good?

His boss then explained, “Well, unlike our American colleagues, our dear Chinese colleagues usually say ‘Just so-so,’ ‘Just fine,’ or ‘I’m ok’…”

They both laughed -- it’s very true that none of their Chinese co-workers ever said “very good” in reply to this simple daily greeting.

After reflecting on this subtle discovery, I couldn’t help wondering: Are we so downbeat that even an occasional expression of satisfaction comes as a big surprise to foreigners?

In China, we are a typical middle-class family; and we are a middle-class family even by American standards. We live in a one-million dollar apartment in Beijing; our son goes to a private bilingual kindergarten; we go to movies, theaters and concerts; we stay in five-star hotels during vacations. So why aren’t we happy?

Well, I forgot to mention that our wonderful one-million dollar home is no bigger than the two-bedroom apartment in Spartan Village. We live in a 22-storey high-rise residential compound which is home to more than 5,000 people. Work is stressful, but we’d rather stay in the office than go home. Wondering why? Try to live with your in-laws for four years and you’ll understand.

Thanks to the visiting scholar program offered by Michigan State University, I was finally granted a respite and I landed in America. In Chinese, America (Meiguo) literally means “beautiful country.” But we never think of America as a beautiful country. Through history textbooks and your Hollywood blockbusters, America, to many of us, is synonymous with
imperialism, violence, and aggression. My mother was extremely worried when she heard that I was going to study in the US: Be careful! Americans are dangerous! They have guns! They can shoot whoever they want!

As a native of Nanjing, whose parents were lucky survivors of the 1937 Massacre (when invading Japanese troops savagely killed more than 300,000 people in Nanjing), my mother was born to be afraid of guns, and she has passed that fear on to me.

But if my mother’s concerns were true, why do Americans appreciate their lives more than we do? Are they irrational? I brought this question with me when I arrived in Spartan Village.

Surprisingly, everyone is so nice. Wherever I go, total strangers will start a conversation with a big smile on their faces - How are you doing? - as if we’ve known each other for quite some time. In China, if we tried to smile and say hi to everyone we met, our face and tongue would be numb by the end of the day. But here in America, on MSU campus in particular, the chances are that we’ll run into a hopping squirrel more often than a human being. Of course the Americans are nice to strangers, I said to myself.

The second day in Spartan Village was quite frustrating, as I could not get cable news on my newly-bought TV. Three teams of maintenance workers came by, and they concluded that the problem was with the TV.

“Return the TV, and get a new one,” they said.

“That’s impossible! I’ve already opened the box; I lost the instruction book and it’s been three weeks since I first bought it.” In China, if you open the package, it means you take the product, good or bad. You want to return it? Just imagine how much you have to pay for a divorce. To save money, I had bought the cheapest set, totally forgetting lessons learned at home: cheap means bad. Now, I had to pay the price. I hated myself for making such stupid mistake.

After being fretful and upset for three days, I turned for comfort to my Chinese American friend.

“Of course you can return it. You can actually return it even if it’s just because you don’t like it. You know nothing about consumer protection? It’s your right!”

My right?
Living in a culture which appreciates obedience and harmony, I never complain even if I feel like I've been wronged, because I know for sure, no matter how reasonable my case is, I will never win a lawsuit against a big company or the government. Like many of my fellow countrymen, I always console myself by using the idiom: *Suffering is a blessing in disguise.*

My friend, however, dragged me to Walmart. Without a single question being asked, I returned the TV, got a full refund, and bought a new one.

With my new Samsung TV connected to the cable, I lay down on my sofa and randomly flicked through the channels, happy and satisfied - life was so beautiful knowing that my individual rights would be respected and protected. All my previous feelings of nervousness disappear in a flash.

So why can’t we argue for the same protection back home?

All of a sudden, some lines from *Shawshank Redemption* struck me: *These walls are funny. First you hate them; then you get used to them. Enough time passes, you get to depend on them. That’s institutionalized.*

Are we all victims of institutionalization in our society? Perhaps. Before I came to the US, China was all I knew. I am used to Beijing’s toxic air and the never-ending traffic. I’m used to swallowing my complaints and never asking questions. I was raised to follow other people’s directions and not my own heart. I was taught at a very young age that an individual should always submit his or her own interests to the interests of the group. There was never any talk of ‘individual rights’.

But who can we blame? China opened itself just a little over three decades ago. We are actually new comers in this sophisticated international arena. There are so many lessons that we must learn from the rest of the world.

Change is hard, and it never happens all at once.

But like Andy, the hero in the movie, we can always hope. With more Chinese people like myself going abroad to study and do research, we will bring home the most advanced social, economic and technological knowledge – knowledge that will help us to break through the walls and set us free from institutionalization.
One day, after studying for a month in MSU, I was a little startled to hear myself replying “very good” to the question “how are you doing today?”

It’s not just because I want to blend in, I figured. It’s because I really am.
HONORABLE MENTION

“EAST LANSING: PICTURES WITHOUT THE SUN”
UZO ODONWODO
HOME COUNTRY: NIGERIA

When I first landed in Atlanta I was full of excitement. And praise. I always tell the story, and my eldest sister likes it a lot, of me searching for the nearest bar and ordering a drink to congratulate myself for the Great Escape. I also tell the story of the grizzled, Asian man who when I asked where I could get a Star larger beer said, half-laughing, “This is America, son. It’s all about the Budweiser and Bald Eagle.” I couldn’t wait to see America.

Yet, I spent the first weeks wondering if my love for America was appropriate. It was like when I loved a girl for the first time in my angst-filled adolescent years; the deeply complex and complicated emotions that threatened my entire being. How appropriate was this love, this inability to miss Nigeria, the country in whose red belly, my umbilical code is buried?

The first day was easy. Of course, America was everything I had thought. Ok, not everything they had told us back in Africa. There were no gold bars or dollar bills by the sidewalks. And the streets were not gold-plated either. But the bulb in my room never blinked. The water in my bathtub answered to me promptly and people smiled too often, almost too much. Plus there was just too much of everything, from TV channels to cheese. “Just too much”, I said to my mum over the phone.

The week after, on my way back from the Art Prize in Grand Rapids, Ahmed, the Ethiopian driver says to me ‘Am American, buddy’ His English is anything but perfect but he insists he was not from Africa but ‘from here’. Then I watched him trying too hard to be American. It is almost comical. Halfway through the journey however, he volunteers an information that would stay with me for a long time: “This is woman country, my friend’ he said, “only three people they respect in this country. Children, women… and dogs!” I am laughing. He keeps a straight face, explaining away the fact that men have to find a way and survive. His story was etched on his brow; so was his pain. And even then, even in the dark of his Sienna minivan, I was determined not merely to survive, but to excel.
You see, I am a writer-turned lawyer. Before I got a letter from the MSU College of Law Office of Graduate Program admitting me to the Masters of Laws program in Intellectual Property Law, I had been ‘paying my dues’ at a Nigerian law firm. Of course this involved days and nights, waking and sleeping hours in the law firm slaving and getting grossly underpaid at the end of the month. But we were the lucky few who had jobs! So, I came to East Lansing with great expectations and enthusiasm. I was going to get the requisite education and launch a legal career at an international organization. Yes, I had it all planned out. It turned out however that I had thought about everything but the weather.

First, it was sunny, just like Nigeria and every day after class, I played soccer in the East Lansing soccer complex. After, I watched the TV and studied for classes the next day. Everything was perfect. Then, it got windy. The sun dived deep in the horizon and wouldn’t come up. The trees changed color. It was as though the earth had wrapped a rainbow around her waist and everything was beautiful. Yet things were dying too; the leaves falling from the trees, the grasses in the field greyed my sense of optimism. Everything was dying. And the wind will bend down and fling the leaves on our faces till we turned our backs. And then I had to cover my hands, my legs, my neck...well, everything but my eyes. It was a strange thing. I couldn’t even play soccer in the cold. I just lay in bed wondering if it could get worse.

And it got worse. Snow, lovely flakes of snow that I had rushed out to take a selfie with at first became the thing that disgusted me the most. It stayed on for days like a distant relative that visited from a far off country and just wouldn’t go. The days turned to months. It was sad. The blue clouds conspired with the sun and hid her behind its dreary grey blanket. I cuddled up in a corner and wrote fifty songs of despair. It was a strange thing, how much the weather could affect a person. All I wanted to do was abandon my dreams halfway, go home and bathe in Africa’s eternal sunshine. It was the worst of times. I almost gave up.

At school, it didn’t help that we spent hours learning weird American things: how to make eye contact when talking to people (even though making eye contact with an older person will probably earn you a slap on the face in my culture), how to smile always in order to be polite, and how to address people. Mrs., Ms., Ma’am, Miss …. And the co-joined last names, the wife’s
and the husband’s. Sometimes the women spurned her husband’s last name altogether. “They get greatly offended when you call them something they are not comfortable with”, the Professor declares. “People who are older than 18 get offended when you call them Mrs. and people who are over 30 years get offended when call them Ms. because it presumes that they are unmarried”. She went on and on until I was dizzy.

After a while, when I became tired of carrying my passport around, I took the CATA Bus 1 to the Secretary of State office to get an Identification card. It was a bad experience. It exposed me to the US I’ll rather not see. You see, I was ensconced in the welcome hug of young, vibrant and beautiful America. But in that bus, I met the wretched of the earth, the dregs of humanity: the cloth-worn poor, the homeless, the needy, the drug addicts, the struggling single mums, the beggars, the freaks and the addicts of unknown addictions. It was the America I would rather not see.

Then I discovered something I loved about America, something I really, genuinely loved; the one thing that kept me going. Chipotle. It was a Mexican grill on Grand River Ave. that looked like a replica of the makeshift ‘Mama Put’ restaurants in Nigeria. They sold rice. And beans. And avocado (Guacamole). And coke. All the things I was familiar with and actually loved. The first day my friend Mike took me there, they played Fela. It is funny how the smallest things can pry up the well of memory; sometimes it’s a sound, or a smell, or taste. That cold afternoon in January, I rediscovered home away from home.

Then, I fell in love with Law and Order and Cops Reloaded; the latter being the program where cameramen followed police officers on their duties. It was fun because I always imagined the parallel outcomes of each encounter in Nigeria and how the police would respond. It made me laugh out loud; it made me giggle. Mostly, it made me mutter underneath my breath, ‘America is a great country’.

And then there was Mike, the good American (forgive the tautology). His smiles, like his concern was genuine. It was not like the smiles on the sidewalk and elevators that were so superficial I always wondered why people ever bothered smiling at all. He introduced me to his
friends. They all owned guns and argued fiercely for the right to own guns. But they were an intelligent, crazy, interesting bunch...a mishmash of everything especially when we were all together in a bar. And we went to a bar every Monday. So, they introduced the other side of East Lansing to me: the ice skating, the Spartan football games and the tailgating, the sarcasm and wit, apple and cider, Peanut Barrel, how to shop and how to tip. Because of Mike I wrote in my diary: In America, people either love you too much or not at all. This is true.

In the end, I fell in love with East Lansing and the weather by discovering all the fun things to do when the sun becomes too lazy or reneged. I will graduate this December and hopefully take up an internship at the World Intellectual Property Organization. I know already that I will miss this rustic environment with the small shops and the good people who even tried to make an effort to smile. More important, I will miss the roar of Spartans on game days. In conclusion, it is an irony; life is an irony. Beyond the ululation of having arrived in the greatest country on earth, I almost gave up on my dreams on the dreariest of days. Churchill was right: Victory is not final, failure is not fatal. What matters is the courage to go on.
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 nestled 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.”
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 breathtaking 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.