**2017 ESSAY CONTEST**

**Office for International Students and Scholars**

**OISS Winners and Honorable Mentions**

**A Seed Trying to Change the World**
Josue Daniel Nataren Moran

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**Home is where the heart is**
Veronica Sanchez

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**YES, THIS IS ME!**
Jacqueline Njeri

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**Office for Education Abroad**

**EA Winners**

**Defining the Osteopathic Principles Within Cross-Cultural Mission Work**
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**Thank You**

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The presence of international students at MSU provides us with extraordinary opportunities to learn about other cultures. MSU is deeply committed to building international understanding through education and is proud to host students from all over the world.

The goal of the International Student Essay Contest is to build greater cross-cultural understanding and to learn from the experiences of international students. Living outside one’s own culture can trigger a complex range of feelings that lead to powerful insights. This contest is an opportunity for international students to reflect on their experiences and share their stories as international students at Michigan State University.

**OISS Essay Contest Winners**

1st Place
A Seed Trying to Change the World
Josue Daniel Nataren Moran | El Salvador

2nd Place
Home is where the heart is
Veronica Sanchez | Venezuela

3rd Place
YES, THIS IS ME!
Jacqline Wangui Njeri | Kenya

**OISS Essay Contest Honorable Mentions**

- Hayl Hasan Hayl Al-Salehi | Yemen
- Fransisca Chidinma Anozie | Nigeria
- Abii-Tah Chungong Bih | Cameroon
- Claire Ruvimbo Gapare | Zimbabwe
- Mike Kamwana | Zambia
- Samuel Matthias Tham | Singapore
Think about a seed for a second. Can you picture it? No? Let me help you then. Think about an acorn for instance. Acorns are smaller than a table tennis ball, and they have very hard outer coverings that protect small seeds inside. Acorns might be small, but have you ever seen a more beautiful picture than an oak tree covering the sunrise of a new day? Something as small as an acorn can give birth to a majestic tree that provides shelter to animals and food to people, but it must undergo a very specific process: the seed must die. When the outer covering of the seed is degraded and the actual life-bearing portion of it sprouts, the seed experiences a painful and irreversible experience that ultimately can lead to a plant or a tree that can bless mankind. This is such a paradox because the death of a seed produces the lives of many more seeds.

Since I was a child growing up in the capital city of El Salvador, I always dreamed about going out of my country to pursue a better education and to explore the world. I was born in a middle-class family, which is a good thing in national terms since I had food and a roof over my head but not in international terms since the wages in El Salvador are very low - the minimum wage is around $260 per month. Since my parents could not afford to pay for my undergraduate education abroad, the only way for me to accomplish my dream was through getting a scholarship. I was a seed waiting to sprout and grow and become a huge and beautiful tree, but I had no idea that the cost was going to be that high (and I am not talking about money).

The journey of getting the scholarships to be in MSU is a whole different story by itself, but I will try to summarize it the best way I can. In El Salvador, the standardized test that every high school graduating student must take is called PAES. It is basically the SAT, but with math, science, language and literature, and social studies. Out of more than 80,000 students that took the test that year, I was the only one in the country to get a perfect score. This allowed me to automatically win a $100,000 scholarship to study anywhere in the world that I wanted, along with other smaller prices like special products or coupons to eat at Pizza Hut.

Since I already knew how to speak English and the US is not that far from my country, I decided that I wanted to study here; but I needed more money than what I had obtained through my PAES score. After knocking on a lot of different doors, I was able to get around 90% of what my four years at Michigan State will end up costing. In order to complete the other 10%, I worked on campus and received a little bit of help from my parents which means the world to

Josue Daniel Nataren Moran

A Seed Trying to Change the World
me because I know they are doing a lot of sacrifices to help. It was a tough adventure but definitely not the hardest part of coming to MSU.

Why did I start talking about dying seeds and sublime oak trees? My purpose was not to make the reader feel sad or confused, but I wanted to explain the way I view life. We are all seeds in this huge forest we called planet Earth, and we are destined to become big trees and fruitful plants that will our forest beautiful and full of life for every single being living in it. My “dying” process was leaving my family, my culture, my food, my country, and ultimately my comfort zone. I came to MSU by myself not knowing anyone and with no idea what I was going to do here besides studying Mechanical Engineering. Growing up in a cultural and religious bubble exposed me to one specific way of thinking with all other ways being “wrong”; and when I came here, a lot of my ideals and thoughts were challenged for good and for bad by many different things I had never seen.

One of the biggest things that was shocking for me was the fact that racism still exists. As I was growing up, I would see ads on TV or Facebook campaigns talking about why eradicating racism is important. If I am being honest, I would get a puzzled face and a big question mark above my head and ask, “What are they even talking about? Racism has not been a thing since a long time ago.” For people living in El Salvador, we are all Salvadorans that speak Spanish and like the same type of food; and we never identify as black, white, Latino, or any other race. The concept of race is not engraved in us like something to feel privileged or unprivileged about, so I came here thinking that this was going to be the same thing. But since the first time I tried ordering Subway in the Atlanta airport and I was made fun of because of my English and my skin color, I realized this was going to be a whole new world for me!

For instance, in my freshman year I had a group for my general chemistry recitation that met on Tuesdays to solve the handouts containing chemical equations that needed to be balanced and atomic models to be drawn. My group was composed of two American girls and me, and since the first day we met everything was so awkward. They would never let me write in the paper or even ask my opinion to fill out the sheet even though I would know the right answers. They clearly did not like me, and just to make it worse, they would make fun of our TA, who was from India, because of the way he spoke. Incidents like these surprised me and showed me that not everything is easy in life, but I also had a lot of challenging but enriching experiences.

One of these challenging experiences that helped me grow a lot as a person was having to make friends that are completely different from me. In my freshman year, I was not only one of the few people from Latin America, but I
was also the only person from El Salvador out of the 50,000 students that MSU has! This basically forced me to make friends from other cultures, languages, and religions, which I would have probably never done if there were more Salvadorans in MSU. Honestly, I am so grateful that this happened! On my freshman year, most of my friends were from India and Eastern Asia and practiced religions like Hinduism and Islam. Back home, religions like these are not really appreciated and acknowledged; but since my freshman year, I have been having very deep conversations with my friends about the meaning of life and about religions, and these have allowed me to grow so much as a person. This helped me get rid of many biases I had and it also helped me understand how different and amazing people are. Being aware of how diverse the world is, has been probably one of the greatest lessons I have learned here.

My “dying process” of being in a foreign land with a foreign language and culture was hard at first, but I was able to understand that it has a purpose: to bring a new life for me and for those around me. The hard lessons and the hard times have taught me to become a better person and to pursue a better future for the seeds that will want to sprout in five or ten or twenty years from now. My life has been like pollen that is taken away from the flower to sprout and be fruitful in unknown lands. It has not been easy, but I have learned so many lessons that have helped me grow as a person. Even when my morals and ideals were challenged, I was given new meanings to who I am and to what my purpose in life is.

One of the biggest lessons has been realizing that we are not here to stay as seeds and have a very easy life without a process that will make us grow, but we are here to fill the woods with our flowers and our fruits. For that to happen, each of us must undergo our own “dying process” that will give life to our forest. My process has been full of homesickness, discrimination, and sleepless and busy nights; but it has also been full with diversity awareness lessons, friendship lessons, leadership training, educational opportunities, and life-changing experiences. And this is where I find another crazy paradox: my dying process has been full of enriching experiences that outweigh the hard times!

Before coming to MSU, I was just another acorn with no clue on how to become a tall tree. Now, I know that my purpose is to be the best version of myself to bless others around me and to educate them and show them how awesome our forest is. I want to go back to El Salvador one day and help future students to find their own life purpose. This is the way I want to bear fruit to this world: by shining a light in people’s hearts so that they can see how amazing this life-bearing process is. And I am so happy to know that I found out about this purpose in Michigan State. After all, I am just an acorn trying to sprout and grow; but for this world forest to radiate glory, more trees and plants need to be born from dying-living seeds.
My senior year of high school was a year full of emotions due to the changes Venezuela was facing. Although my graduation in 2014 was a time of celebration and recognizing my accomplishments, I remember the dark cloud of uncertainty that hung over me as well. Protests had been going on for weeks, people were being killed on the streets, classes cancelled, and families were not able to leave their homes because of the danger and chaos surrounding our city and the entire country. From my parents’ perspective, staying home after graduation was not an option, so when I received my acceptance letter from MSU, our problems were solved. I was going to have the opportunity to receive an excellent education with a bright future in a country known to have the opportunity for success for anyone who worked for it. This was every Venezuelan’s dream; I was that one in a million.

MSU became my home. It seemed like a dream arriving here, like I was living the American college life I always saw in the movies at home. I remember excitedly telling my friends, “It’s like the movies! The cheerleaders, the football season, the dorm life, EVERYTHING!” It was surreal to me because college was not like this back at home. Weather was also such a new experience for me. I heard that Michigan was extremely cold. In Venezuela, we don’t have four seasons; rather it’s summer all year long. Although it’s still taking me time to adjust to the cold changes, seeing the snow blanket MSU in a gleaming white and feeling the cheerful season always reminds me that I’m happy to enjoy it. Having the cafeteria available anytime, eating all that you can, every day, any time of the day? “That is not possible,” I remember thinking. And I can’t forget the little twinge of excitement I got every time free things were being passed around campus. It was so different from home and at last, I was away from the confusion and chaos in my life.

Acclimating to the changes endured by an international student was hard but I was so excited for my new Spartan life that I always focused on the positive and exciting things going on rather than the hardships. However, after my first year at MSU, things started to get worse back home. My parents had a plan for my future and my career, but because of the economic crisis worsening every year, the funding planned for me became nothing compared to what I needed to stay at MSU.

“Thousands March in Venezuela to Demand President’s Ouster” and similar headlines plastered the front pages of the newspapers and TV channels. The experience was crushing; in my earlier years, I was fortunate to not experience economic issues back home. My parents are humble and hardworking and their efforts and sacrifices have positioned them and their children where they are. So, when I started hearing complaints about how expensive everything was because of Venezuela’s situation, the headlines on the news became my new reading material and I began asking questions I never thought to ask when I was at home to understand what was inciting so much stress in my parents.

The months passed by and my grandparents and aunt were sending me money, telling me that my mom asked them to help her because my parents didn’t have enough to cover my tuition dues. Dread started to set in because I felt as though I was the burden that was looming over my parents causing them to stress and worry, which made me become more considerate and aware of the situation. I began working on campus to help relieve some of the economic stress which led me to meet some of the most hardworking and amazing friends on campus.

The most difficult aspect of being an international student, and the most underappreciated, is that we live in two realities. In my case my Spartan life was and still is full of exciting and new things happening every day. I am surrounded by my friends and by a multitude of resources and materials. Life seems to be relatively carefree. But I also have my reality back at home where my parents are struggling day in and day out to find food and medicine for my family, where they have to stand in lines for hours just to buy basic necessities, where a 6PM curfew is enforced because you are in risk of getting robbed or killed anytime later. It feels like I am here in body, but my mind and heart is in Venezuela suffering for the ones who suffer and in need of help with no power to find that help.

The stress and anxiety my family was going through became my personal problem, as well. Series of anxiety attacks once in awhile were added to my list of responsibilities to deal with. Honestly, I didn’t even know what anxiety attacks were until I came to college in the US. Here in the U.S., anxiety is a mental health concern which needs to be addressed. At home, it was a stigma; I was unable to even realize that I was experiencing anxiety until I spoke to some of my friends here at MSU. I can understand the reasons for my anxiety, however: the fear of not being able to graduate from MSU which is a constant concern and stress factor weighed down on my shoulders.

I also feel the responsibility and pressure knowing that my entire family is
looking towards me to succeed, to use the funds they have spent on me to better us, and to be a good example for my younger siblings. I also must try to not feel guilty because I have so many opportunities easily presented to me when they are still in a country where medicine, food, and basic necessities are scarce and where the money they have is not enough to buy these basic needs. They are in a country that seems to be void of potential growth or a happy future.

I never thought this was the way my Spartan experience would look like. The “movie-like” college experience is not a reality for me anymore, but I have learned from that. I feel that after all that has happened in the past years, I have become more aware and empathetic of the situation going on in my country and more specifically towards my family. I have changed the way I perceive situations in life and have become less self-centered and more in tune to the struggles of others. I appreciate more in my life and I am grateful for the opportunities and the love and support my family gives me, regardless of their struggles.

Last but not least, the most important thing I have learned from this experience is that we cannot take our life and our opportunities for granted in this constantly changing world because one day we are here, the other we might not.

Considering all the positivity I have taken away from this trip we call “life”, what I have enjoyed the most is that it doesn’t have an ending yet. Among all the things that have happened, I am here still studying at MSU, trying to figure out what will happen in the future, and having hope that this story will be worth telling. The best part is that I am the only one capable of leading my story, so I’ll keep going until I reach my goal, which is to graduate from MSU so I can give back to all of those who helped me in the process to fulfill their dreams, as well.

Yes, they did warn me. They did warn me that a “Hey, how are you doing?” only needed a smile and a wave as a response. Sometimes I’d forget and start to reply, “Hi, I am…” only to see my friend disappear into a crowded hallway, then feel people’s piercing stares. Shoot! I forgot they also warned me to tune my voice down. “Njeri, you are no longer in Kenya chatting with mama mboga (a vegetable vendor),” my friends would tell me. I would sink into my seat, plug in my headphones and wait for the stares to subside. Be like everyone else!
Yes, they warned me that cheese would be my breakfast, lunch and supper. Excuse me, “dinner”. During the first few weeks at MSU I thought there must be something wrong in the kitchen of every cafeteria and restaurant I went to because my Shosho (grandmother) taught me “sugar is to tea, as salt is to food”. She even made me try food with sugar so that I could learn not to mix those two. Now, I could not understand why all my food was laced in honey yet it wasn’t for storage. Yes Njeri, it is strange but be like everyone else and enjoy your meal!

Oh! Yes, they definitely did warn me that topics on body size, sexuality, and dress were taboo to mention. I therefore never knew what to say when a classmate came in well dressed. I felt the urge to say something as is tradition back home, where anything different never goes unnoticed, but they had warned me that in America a compliment might be viewed as a form of harassment. By the time I came up with a politically correct compliment, a week would have passed and my classmate would be back to wearing pajamas to class. What a waste! But I have to be like everyone else!

All the warnings were enough to scare me to submission. For weeks, every thought and every action was countered by a “what if…”

“I really don’t know how to do this chemistry problem. I should ask this guy next to me” I would think.

“…but…what if he thinks I am using the question to hit on him? I will just ask the girl instead” I would then turn to the girl on my right but before I could utter the first word, “…but…what if she thinks I am hitting on her too?” As if to answer me, a voice in my head would whisper, “You know LGBTQ, right? We warned you!” I would then stare at my blank sheet of paper until the end of the class.

After a whole semester of fearing to reach out, I ended up with a dent in my GPA, very few friends, and no “Spartan Spirit” left. I did not understand the implications of this at the time because I had followed the rules and I truly was like everyone else; I enjoyed food swimming in honey, cheese, and butter. Football was my favorite sport even though I did not have the slightest idea what made the small ball so special that armored men would tackle each other for it. It is still a mystery that I hope to discuss with coach Dantonio someday when I am lucky enough to get a ticket.

I had also mastered the big smile and wave response. Actually, in retrospect, I don’t think molars should be seen while smiling but they did tell me that the broader the smile the better. They just failed to mention the part about doing it
with your mouth shut. How I found that out is a story for another day.
It was not until the school closed for summer that I realized the loneliness that
had piled up over the school year. After everyone left, I was completely alone.
With no one around to stare me down, I started realizing some things about
myself.

I hated most cheeses.

Food soaked in honey and butter was repulsive to me.

I could not genuinely smile anymore because I had already gotten accustomed
to the fake smiles and waves. Sometimes I would sit outside Bailey Hall in the
summer sun and as I smiled at the sun, my hand would slightly rise - as if it was
getting ready to wave.

Looking at my Stuinfo account, I could now feel the extent of the dent in my
GPA and I was scared! Furthermore, during the time I was trying to be politically
correct and trying to be like everyone else, my friends were actually getting
summer jobs, internships, more friends, boyfriends, and some were even
getting married. As I looked at my reflection on my laptop screen, I could no
longer recognize myself. *But, hey, you are like everyone else!*

Yes, they had warned me about so many things but there was one thing they
neither warned me about nor prepare me for; LOSING MY INDIVIDUALITY! At
that moment, I knew I had to rediscover myself in this strange land. Catch up on
the time lost. Build myself from bottom up. Oh, there were so many things that
I did not know about myself but I was excited to see where that journey would
lead.

I knew that my extensive business background would not help me in getting a
job in science – which I am passionate about. My first step would be gaining lab
research skills so I enrolled in BLD214L, which is a Biomedical lab class outside
my Biochemistry department. With the help of my friend, Rellika, I created a
basic resume which I used to apply for various lab jobs on campus. Out of the
twenty emails I sent out, only one professor emailed me and invited me for
an interview. “Remember to smile with your mouth closed, Njeri!” I told myself
before I entered the professor’s lab to meet the other research assistants. *Try to
be yourself!*

“...what do you like doing outside of class”, One of the assistants asked. I
paused for a second then with as much confidence as I could gather I replied,
“Everything is quite new to me right now, so I am still figuring that out.”

YES, THIS IS ME!
Obviously, I was being honest given my situation at the time but apparently the assistants were so impressed, that the closing remarks in the job offer email was ‘We hope this will make your list of things you like to do’. This was definitely a statement that deserved showing my molars to after reading it.

As I continued to discover that Swiss cheese made me sick and that basketball was actually my favorite sport, I took calculus classes in the second session of summer to catch up with the rest of my classmates, who were already done with their math requirement. Concurrently, at my new job, I made friends with the other two assistants and my professor, and to date research is at the top of my list of things I like to do. My confidence gradually got a boost and at class I began having people I could discuss homework with. I learnt that there was a clear distinction between being politically correct and just being nice. I learnt to be myself and for the first time in a long time it felt great! Girl, you’re becoming yourself!

Now, with everyone back for Fall semester, I can confidently ask a question in class, compliment my fellow classmates, appreciate a good game of basketball and enjoy a ham-turkey-Colby jack cheese sandwich. Sometimes when I smile, I do feel my arm twitch a little but I am not afraid to show my molars anymore, especially when I read a funny meme or see someone I really like. I cannot say I have completely figured myself out but I know I have a good head start and the journey is far from over. Now, I am myself. I am Jacqline Njeri!
MSU is proud to have one of the nation’s largest education abroad programs – one that spans the world and helps to build international understanding through education. The annual Education Abroad Essay Contest aims to capture the essence of education abroad by encouraging students to reflect and write creatively about the unique living and learning experiences that education abroad provides.

Studying outside of the U.S.A. produces powerful insights into the differences among the cultures of the world and deeper understanding of our own culture(s). Writing and submitting an essay gives students the opportunity to reflect on, and share, their experiences so we may grow our own understanding of the world and our place in it.

**EA Essay Contest Winners**

**1st Place**
Defining the Osteopathic Principles Within Cross-Cultural Mission Work
Brianne Feldpausch

**2nd Place**
Impersonal Politics on a Personal Scale
Jayme Shepard

**3rd Place**
Shifting Ice
Celia Hallan

“Gracias, doctorita.” Directly translating to, “thank you, sweet doctor,” these words occupy a special place in my heart after my two-week medical mission trip to Peru. After eight months of fundraising to purchase supplies, I anticipated our medications being the most highly sought after item I would offer, but I believe people craved my Spanish words of reassurance just as strongly.
With Peruvians lining the perimeter of our clinic waiting, it may become easy to switch from a person-centered approach to the faster-paced, disease-centered mode. However, practicing our osteopathic principle of seeing each person as a unit of body, mind, and spirit remains just as important, and, as I learned in Peru, is essential when cultural barriers stand between healthcare providers and the patients they care for.

A Mother’s Concern
“Quién está siguiente?” (“Who is next?”), I called out to the line of people huddled in shy groups along the sidewalk in the 90-degree sun of Iquitos, Peru. A concerned mother and her three children followed me into our clinic room, past three other patients surrounded by doctors and medical students, into the back corner. I asked the mother to sit in our solitary chair, and I knelt beside her. Twisting her hands in her lap, she looked at me with wide, worried eyes and asked me to examine her tallest and thinnest son first. The mother explained that *Samuel had been having nosebleeds multiple times each week for the past year. After finishing his history and physical exam (H&P), I explained we could perform a minor surgery to help reduce Samuel’s nosebleeds. Nodding her head in reply, she whispered, “Gracias, doctorita.”

While waiting for the doctor to prepare materials, I scribbled away on our H&P form for Samuel. When my eyes drifted up from the paper, the mother tearfully caught my eye and hesitantly asked if Samuel would be okay. Disappointed in myself for not seeing the tears sooner, I put my arm around her in reassurance. As I rubbed her shoulder, I explained the procedure is fairly simple, and his nosebleeds should be much better after. I consoled her that I underwent the same minor surgery as a child and experienced few nosebleeds since then. Through tears, she repeated, “Gracias, doctorita. Gracias, doctorita.”

The Avatar
With sweat running down my neck onto my scrubs, I called the next patient. From the moment *Maria sat down, she began listing the many concerns she had compiled since she last saw a doctor. Flipping her wrist over, she pointed to a winding blood vessel on her forearm and declared, “Primero!” (“First!”). Maria believed this blood vessel was a worm under her skin. I showed her my own forearm blood vessels and gently explained she had nothing to worry about. Seeing the relief on Maria’s face, we continued with her H&P.

Working alongside a translator that day, I asked Maria questions, then my attending physician asked the translator to inquire further. Before sending Maria on her way, I asked the doctor if we should be concerned about the pterygium, an encroaching of white connective tissue, covering Maria’s iris. The doctor quickly looked up and stated, “I didn’t even look in her eyes. Let me take...
a look.” She should have been looking in the patients’ eyes, not only to check her eyes, but also to establish a connection. The focus of the interaction had shifted from the patient to the translator.

**A Conversation Without Words**
Sitting on a wooden bench inside our boat along the Amazon River, I completed the medical history of the last of four children with their mother. My attending physician listened as I reported on each child, but his eyes were not on me. Instead, they looked with joy and laughter upon each child while examining them. Even with very limited Spanish, he connected with each patient. When needing to listen to lung sounds, he blew into a glove and demonstrated how to blow a glove finger, like a birthday candle.

Sitting on his lap, the Peruvian children giggled as they attempted to “blow out” the birthday candle-like glove, while he smiled and listened to their lungs. Though he did not understand their words, nor they understand his, he cared for the body, mind, and spirit of his pediatric patients simply through the universal language of love. Despite his minimal understanding and use of Spanish, these simple actions let him overcome the cultural barrier to reach his patients in a way that the previous doctor, even with a translator, could not with Maria.

**Unheard**
*Daniel could not sit still as he expressively described his pain. His sun-worn hands fidgeted, and he kept standing up, then sitting back down. Not realizing only the high-school-student translator and I spoke Spanish, his eyes darted wildly between the translator, two medical students, the doctor, and me, while describing his pain with lavish gestures. He spoke so quickly that I barely understood him. With his face scrunched up, he became so dramatic that the student translator began laughing. But Daniel did not smile in return. Instead, his eyes whizzed faster between us as he searched for understanding. Then, as though at a last attempt for understanding, Daniel made a motion at his throat and told us he was in so much pain that he wanted to kill himself.

Taken aback by this gesture, the translator laughed again as she repeated his statement in English. Seeing the hurt in his eyes, noticing no one else move, and feeling sick to my stomach, I took the two steps closer to him and placed my arm around his shoulders. Though I am not completely fluent in Spanish, and reassuring words are not specifically taught, I looked into his eyes and gently said, “Lo siento, señor. Vamos a ayudarle.” Which means, “I’m sorry, sir. We are going to help you.” With a deep breath, his face softened, his arms stopped fidgeting, and he tearfully whispered in return, “Gracias, doctorita.”
While these instances occurred in Peru, they could easily occur anywhere in the U.S. between an osteopathic physician and a patient of a different cultural background than the one he or she is accustomed to. Though easily ignored in a fast-paced environment when speaking through a translator, our holistic training as osteopaths guides us in seeking ways to prevent the language barrier from becoming a physical barrier. After reflecting upon my experiences and our challenges, my proposal is to work with native Spanish-speakers, specifically those who have been patients, to create a list of Spanish phrases of comfort and empathy. Along with encouraging providers to learn Spanish medical terminology, this list should be encouraged just as strongly.

As I discovered in Peru, language and cultural barriers do not necessarily prevent a doctor from connecting with his or her patient. By employing cultural humility and competence, along with empathy, eye contact, and active listening, we can creatively overcome language and cultural barriers to promote osteopathic principles in caring for each person as a unit of body, mind, and spirit, both in our local communities and around the world.

Impersonal Politics on a Personal Scale
Jayme Shepard

Since I was young, I have always been infatuated with cultures. As I grew up, I found myself gravitating toward language classes and learning as many as I could handle at once. Somehow I stumbled upon Korean, and instantly fell in love. My hometown did not offer any Korean courses, so I self-taught myself for about ten years. Then, when it was time to finally choose a university, it made perfect sense for me to come to Michigan State; they have an outstanding linguistics program, one of the best study abroad programs in the country, and are one of the very few universities in America that offers a Korean minor.

When I first came to MSU, I was so excited to finally take actual language classes in Korean. I loved every single day and was beyond excited when my professor suggested that I spend a semester abroad in South Korea. The next spring I was on a plane to Yonsei University in Seoul, the capital of South Korea.

The spring of 2017 was a very interesting time to be living abroad because there was much changing in the world. Right before I left, Donald Trump had been elected president and divided not only America, but most of the world. With the ensuing travel bans and shifting global views on Americans, my family and I had a moment of hesitation before I departed. I was planning on going to South Korea, which was extremely close to the self-proclaimed biggest enemy of America and the new president: North Korea. There was also the fear that
harsh travel bans could be put into effect while I was abroad and it may be hard for me to visit neighboring nations or even get back in the United States at the end of my studies. However, my time abroad was not only marked with the changing of the American government. Shortly after I arrived in South Korea, their president was impeached. She was accused of corruption and neglecting her duties.

Unlike America, a vice president does not come into power when the president is removed from office; in Korea there is an entirely new election. South Korea has a very vivid history of fighting for their freedoms from imperial powers, and they do not take their right to vote or the freedom of speech for granted. For months it was hard to go anywhere without hearing election jingles or having supporters vibrantly dressed in their party’s colors trying to convert me. The candidates would also hold impromptu rallies in the streets, and I was lucky enough to stumble onto numerous of these events, including one held by the future president, Moon JaeIn.

I was also lucky enough to be attending a Korean-US relations class at my host university in Seoul. This class took a detour during this election period and focused heavily on South Korean politics and how the new decisions were heavily changing South Korea’s global policies and international relations. The former president had begun a project called THAAD that was highly controversial. The project proposed a missile base in South Korea that would only be deployed in self-protection against North Korea’s nuclear weapons. These missiles, however, had the power to reach beyond North Korea and into Chinese territory. China was therefore heavily insulted as it seemed that South Korea did not trust China either. The main issue for the new election was how each of the candidates would react to this situation. The newly elected president, Moon JaeIn, campaigned on the platform that this project should be eliminated, but as of today the project has still not yet been scrapped.

Also during this debacle, I had a once in a lifetime opportunity. One of my Korean friends got permission to go visit some of his friends that were working as soldiers in the DMZ between North and South Korea, and I was invited to go with him. Even if it was from a distance, it was surreal to actually be able to see North Korea with my own eyes. Through binoculars we were able to observe a few small North Korean towns (with their mammoth golden statues of their leaders) and even the North Korean soldiers that were patrolling the streets. I also had the opportunity to go into tunnels that were originally built by the North Koreans into South Korea as a surprise ambush tactic if they ever decided to try to invade South Korea again. After emerging from a tunnel that went under North Korea, it was strange to be back in South Korea. Especially with its amusement park and heartbreaking memorials that are situated right across
the border in view of the North Koreans. The situation that we had talked about so heavily in all of my classes suddenly became insanely real; there are actual people on the other side of the Road of No Return.

At Yonsei University I also had the pleasure of taking a course on Korean history. As a lover of history, I was consistently shocked as I would go through one of the most modern cities in the world and stumble upon a castle that was thousands of years old. It was very interesting to learn about this history from the viewpoint of a Korean and be able to physically visit the places mentioned. I traveled to the neighboring town of Jeonju with my friend. This town is known for being the largest still-standing cultural town in the country. We spent the day in traditional outfits and exploring the castles along with many Koreans who were also rediscovering their culture. I was also able to visit the historical capital of the peninsula, Kyeongju, when my parents came to stay with me. It was breathtaking for me to see all of the historical sites that I had grown to love through my history books since I was a child.

The Korean people have a very long history of being a population dominated by external imperialistic forces, but somehow they have been able to maintain their identity and history so distinctly. This history is shared by both the North and South Koreans; they were one nation for thousands of years and endured everything together until about 75 years ago when two foreign powers came into the picture and split the peninsula into two warring sides.

Heavily influenced by the classes that I attended, the people I met, and the places I explored, my time in South Korea has shifted the way that I view the world and my career choices. Previously, I had wanted to only be a linguist. Since my return to MSU, I have added a second major in Global Studies in Social Science with a specialization in Asia so that in the future I can work with North Korean refugees. There has been increasing pressure from various nations on the North Korean regime, and it is looking like the country is going to eventually have a major change. There are currently many North Koreans fleeing through the Chinese border, and the people are becoming increasingly aware of the reality of the outside world. If the regime collapses, it will be the worst refugee problem the world has ever seen; as of right now no country is offering to take responsibility of the North Korean citizens should the government capsize.

There is also the problem that many North Koreans do believe that the outside world is evil and they would not be willing to relocate to a new country. Would China take over? Would the peninsula reunite under the jurisdiction of South Korea? Since the North Korean armistice is technically with America and not South Korea, would America be responsible? Would various countries fight for
the territory? Or would another similar government simply take over and the Korean Peninsula remain split? There is no telling what will happen, but my study abroad made me very involved with the Korean people as a whole.

I intend to use the knowledge that I have gained throughout my various experiences all over the world to aid refugees and help humanity as a whole to regain our compassion and help each other in times of need. I would not have adopted this drastic career change without my time in South Korea, and I am beyond thankful that I was able to be so greatly impacted by this experience.

**Shifting Ice**

*Celia Hallan*

Antarctica changes your mind about ice. In Michigan, ice is at best cubed and at worst a dangerous addition to the roads. In Antarctica, ice is beautiful. And ice makes you feel small. Our Zodiac stayed far enough away from the iceberg that we could see its entire 400-foot length, cracked, towering, and shot through with rich blue like a sapphire crown. It dwarfed the humpback whale swimming in front of it. Silence pressed in from the frozen landscape. Except the whale, everything seemed poised to never move again.

“I have been leading expeditions here for eight years,” said our guide. “Every year, it is here.” “Unglaublich,” whispered Herbert. Incredible.

As we floated, a smaller iceberg nearby flipped without warning. A crack and rumble from the distance told us a glacier had calved. Even for ice suspended in freezing saltwater or crawling by millimeters for thousands of years, shifts occur in a second. Global change occurs in every field. Every day we hear globalization, economic changes, new technologies, and wars and natural disasters rearranging lives. Antarctica, however, impressed on me that the global changes dominating our news overlie fundamental shifts in the planet’s natural systems – systems so integrated into our lives that we ignore them out of habit.

Even as climate change and other environmental challenges gain more international recognition, more immediate economic and security changes tend to command the attention of individuals and leaders alike. Ignoring environmental concerns is easy, comforting, and dangerous.

Antarctica’s existence as a preserve for peaceful international science, wilderness protection, and tourism offers a unique representation of the values of global society. Growing up a conservationist and an outdoorswoman, I knew
that wilderness depends on people valuing the principles of cooperation and aesthetics, and I found true wonder in the natural world.

Antarctica reflects those principles and provides that wonder on a scale unlike any other place I have been. This makes the systemic changes silently occurring in our largest natural laboratory concerning collectively and personally. Collectively, it shows that our impact on the planet’s systems extend to the places we made it our goal to protect. Personally, it makes me recognize the emotional strength needed to build a career in environmental protection.

Students of ecology, oceanography, natural resource management, and any other field directly connected to the earth face the real prospect of spending their working lives studying the degradation of the systems and creatures they love. Watching the seeming permanence of the crown iceberg while witnesses proof of shifting ice touched on a familiar conflict in my mind. How can I subsume the genuine fear and sadness that comes from seeing the natural world’s fragility to my academic drive to understand it? What will it mean if I build a career around lessening human impact on the environment but cannot stop drastic changes to the places I love? And how could Antarctica help me reconcile those conflicting thoughts?

Part of the answer came from studying the history of Antarctica itself. The professors who led the program study geology and paleontology – both sciences that, to put it mildly, take the long view of life. With Professor Gottfried, we learned to spy evidence of the tectonic shifting and folding that produced the Antarctic landscape. With Professor Fordyce, we traced the fossil record of the penguins we saw everywhere back to their towering ancestors of tens of millions of years ago. That mindset taught me to recognize the dynamic forces that have always influences natural systems and that will continue their influence in tandem with the actions of humans.

We have the responsibility to be good stewards of the planet, but we will never be the sole driving force of life. Taking a long view of natural systems today runs the risk of obscuring the real impacts that humans have on the earth. Understating the threats of rapid extinctions, deforestation, pollution, and countless others increases our vulnerability and heightens my anxiety.

Yet in Antarctica taught me to balance the long and short views. Every day on the boat, we practiced feeling awe at the natural spectacles around us while speaking frankly about their changes. We photographed glaciers while hearing facts about their speed of recession. We laughed at penguins stealing pebbles from each other’s nests while learning how much the colony had shrunk. There was an open recognition between all passengers and crew
members of a collective joy in knowing our surrounding had a place on Earth, collective understanding of their impermanence, and collective sadness at their loss. I saw that beauty and wonder still exist in changed systems and will exist into the future. Frankly addressing the overlapping facts and feelings gives more comfort and produced more drive to action than panicking at their contradictions.

Another part of the answer came from meeting Herbert Koenig. Our study abroad group shared an expedition ship with roughly 50 other tourists from around the world. Most were retired couples, some were families. But Herbert had come alone. A retired German chemical engineer, he had recently decided to travel again after the death of his wife. He spoke English poorly. He bonded with our group immediately. During the first Drake Passage crossing, when seasickness forced me to lie in the ship’s lounge for hours on end, Herbert sat with us and showed us pictures from his trip to Cambodia, give us life advice like “spend your time loving what you do,” talked about his family’s battles with cancer, and promised that exploring Antarctica would be “Nicht zu fassen” – unbelievable.

During our landings he wandered off so frequently that our expedition leaders made a joke over who would go collect him next. Every evening saw him standing on ship’s bow silently absorbing the horizon. From him, I learned that you can spend your entire life acknowledging pain in the world and still live, as he would say, in “scheu” – awe – of every part. The human connections we make remain a constant part of travel as the world changes. Just like the crown iceberg, the world and its challenges are beautiful. And the world and its challenges can make you feel small. Herbert showed me that we can decide to recognize the good and bad, the stable and shifting, the growth and degradation as part of what gives us human experiences. We can choose adventure in the face of loss.

Speaking with Herbert, confronting instability with the expedition leaders, and learning deep history with my professors showed me a new way to balance the fear and sadness I feel when confronted with changes to the natural world that I love. I used to believe that studying and working to protect the environment should be enough to erase the negative emotions. But now I believe that those emotions cannot and should not be erased. Feeling them does not erase the wonder found in the wilderness, the fascination that comes from understanding the systems that shape our lives, or the comfort we take from each other. The degradation of the global environment is a tragedy and danger we must not ignore. But neither should we ignore the genuine joy of travelling, learning, and just being alive.
Ultimately, Antarctica taught me to listen to the lessons of the natural world and the people who explore it. Love the world we have. Work for the world we want. Hold connections to our natural systems and our fellow explorers equally close in our minds and our hearts. And as the global environment changes, draw strength from knowing that somewhere, unglaublich icebergs exist, stable in beauty and constantly in motion.

Thank You

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Congratulations

To all of the 2017 Essay Contest winners!

Office for International Students and Scholars
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Jacqline Njeri

Office for Education Abroad
Brianne Feldpausch
Jayme Shepard
Celia Hallan