The Week I Almost Skipped

Before coming to the United States, I had already learned how to be a foreigner.

I am Ethiopian, but for almost three years, Italy was my home while I completed my master's degree. By the time I was preparing to cross the Atlantic to begin my Ph.D. at the University of Delaware, I thought I understood what it meant to live abroad: unfamiliar cultures, homesickness, and being independent while far from everything familiar.

America taught me that every new beginning can still surprise you. But before America could teach me anything, I had one decision to make.

Instead of traveling directly from Italy to the United States, I returned to Ethiopia for one week. It would have been easier not to. I was preparing for a Ph.D., an international move, and another life. But my grandfather was getting older and had been sick. Something in me kept saying: Go home. So I did.

For one week, I put the future on hold and spent time with my family, especially my grandfather. There was nothing extraordinary about those days. We were simply together.

Not long after I arrived in the United States, my grandfather passed away.

Grief is strange when you live thousands of miles from home. Classes begin. Assignments appear. People introduce themselves. You smile and keep moving, while somewhere far away your family is experiencing a loss you cannot physically share.

I missed my grandfather deeply. I still do. But one thought brought me peace: I went home.

That week taught me something no university course could. There will always be another deadline or opportunity, but the people we love do not come with guaranteed tomorrows. Sometimes we need to stop preparing for the future long enough to be present.

After that week, I said goodbye to my family and boarded an Ethiopian Airlines flight to Washington Dulles. The flight was about eighteen hours, and I barely slept. I had also brought the wrong charging cable, so by the time I landed, my phone was dead.

At border control, the officer asked where I would be staying in Delaware. After eighteen sleepless hours, my brain chose that moment to forget the address of my apartment in Newark. I stood there desperately trying to remember.

The officer looked at me and said, “You might be tired, but I am pretty sure you are smarter than this.”

I eventually remembered.

I still smile when I think about it. I had expected my first interaction at the border to be intimidating. Instead, his humor relaxed me. Those words became my unexpected first welcome to America.

My second welcome came at international student orientation in Trabant.

I walked into the multipurpose rooms and saw students from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere. We had different accents, passports, languages, foods, and stories, but almost everyone was beginning something unfamiliar.

Until then, the journey had felt intensely personal: my visa, my flight, my family, my Ph.D., my uncertainty. Suddenly, I realized I was not doing this alone.

That feeling followed me into UD’s international community. International Coffee Hour quickly became one of my favorite campus traditions. I appreciated that community even more during summer, when Newark becomes quieter and many friends travel home. For international students whose families may be an ocean away, that quietness can feel much louder.

During those periods, a cup of ice cream and a few familiar faces at a summer social can mean more than you might expect. Community cannot eliminate homesickness or grief, but it can make a quiet afternoon feel a little less far from home.

American academic life brought another surprise. Having studied in Ethiopia and Italy, I thought I understood university life. Then came the homework, quizzes, and research. And somehow another deadline appeared before I had finished worrying about the previous one. The pace was an adjustment, but it taught me consistency, time management, and when to ask help.

Living in three countries taught me that adapting does not mean leaving who you were behind; each place simply adds something new to who you are.

America came with amusing surprises too. Growing up, I encountered much of it through Hollywood. Then I arrived and discovered that college football really can be that serious, roads really can be that wide, and almost everything seems bigger here.

Yet what has impressed me most is not how big America is, but how many worlds can exist inside it.

I have met people whose childhoods were completely different from mine and discovered unexpected similarities. I learned that curiosity is one of the easiest ways to cross cultural distance. Ask where someone comes from. Learn their name. Ask about their food, family, or traditions, and genuinely listen. Often, they become curious about you too.

That is how strangers slowly stop being strangers.

To a new international student at UD, I would say: find your community. It can be one good friend or organizations such as the African Graduate Student Organization and Graduates in Electrical and Computer Engineering, which have given me spaces to contribute as well as belong.

But do not make your community a wall. Meet people who understand where you come from, and people who do not. Be curious. Share your culture and learn theirs. And when life becomes overwhelming, remember why you came, but also remember who you left behind.

Call home. Make time for the people you love.

I once thought moving from Ethiopia to Italy and then to America was mainly about education. I thought I was collecting degrees, research experience, and opportunities.

I understand it differently now. I have been collecting perspectives.

Ethiopia taught me where I come from. Italy taught me I could build a life outside what was familiar. America is teaching me how many different ways there are to belong. And my grandfather taught me that while we are busy preparing for tomorrow, we should not overlook the people who make today worth remembering.

Sometimes, the week that seems to delay your journey becomes the week you are most grateful you took.