

A New Culture – Help Me, I’m Drowning!

Essay dedicated to M. Pierard & A. Ogunnaike

Beyond the obvious educational and career-broadening aspects, I find that living and studying abroad is an intrinsically transforming experience. The intellectual challenge of life outside of the “cultural cocoon” – that is, outside of the home environment – can be socially and inwardly alienating. On the one hand, the cultural demands of life in a different country, the “outside” world, entails the learning of a completely different language, the “reworking” of your own habits and a dire desire to fit in. On the other hand, the intellectual aspect of the journey, the “inside” world, is characterized by frustration born out of naturally hindered communication. This overwhelming frustration leads to a natural self-refashioning and to the slow solitary confinement of our personality. However, after the necessary period of adjustment and the achievement of inner balance, the true adventure begins; we grow smarter, more open, more confident and, in many cases, wiser.

The outside world that we have to explore is one of different habits, and the surrounding culture in which we land can be so unsettling that we feel lost and somewhat out of place at the beginning of our “odyssey”. As a Belgian, I am personally accustomed to kissing acquaintances on the cheek as a form of greeting or leave-taking, whereas in the United States, it is seen as an invasion of privacy. Our natural European (dare I say of French origin?) proclivity for physical contact as a form of greeting is regarded as some sort of idiosyncratic behavior that breaches the boundaries of Americans’ personal comfort zone and after a few uncomfortable situations, I learned to keep my distance. This “distance” seemed to contradict with the American habit of literally flashing a broad grin at complete strangers when making eye contact. Habits such as these are part of a larger and more complex social code of conduct to which we need to grow accustomed, all the while facing the more

laborious challenge: the communicative one. Indeed, the prime objective of an experience abroad is to learn a foreign language and to have a full immersion experience in the target culture. I quickly realized how different the communicative challenges of being a UD student were from those I faced in my English classes in Belgium. Throughout our linguistic education, we are trying not to drown in this ocean of cultural twists and turns, but to stay afloat and, if feasible, to “swim” or to “fit into” a new culture.

Nonetheless, “fitting in” is a much more convoluted task than merely understanding a new culture and slowly learning a new language. Indeed, while educating ourselves in the ways of the host community, we literally have to change on the inside and compromise. One of the greatest challenges of this experience is undeniably to try to cope with a limited knowledge of the target language. Lacking the linguistic skills to express our own thought patterns is an incredibly frustrating and demoralizing feeling that many of us experience. With a personality constrained by the language barrier, international students have to settle for expressing basic ideas and adopt a somewhat shallow discourse. These linguistic constraints lead to the emergence of some sort of “new personality” and thus to a “self-refashioning” brought about by a craving to communicate in the foreign language. Moreover, speaking a different language is an extremely strenuous task; a genuine intellectual workout. Using only the foreign language all day long is exhausting. As a graduate student who also serves as a Teaching Assistant, I find myself completely “wiped out” on Tuesday nights after having taught three classes and attending my three-hour literature seminar. The combined outcome of the two aforementioned factors, the self-refashioning of the personality and the wearying aspect of communicating in a different language, may lead to a solitary confinement of our personality. We feel trapped inside of our own mind with a “self” that we cannot share and, even if we try, it is utterly exhausting. This state of mind, this deep and undisclosed desire to be understood, is called “homesickness”: drawn into the new culture, unable to be ourselves

and tired of trying, we feel nostalgic for “home”, a familiar place where everything is easier and more instinctive.

Fortunately, this difficult period is not the apex of the journey; quite the contrary! After the rapturous feeling of starting a new adventure and the ineluctable, yet short-lived despondency following the realization of cultural and linguistic constraints – i.e. homesickness –, we are ready to fashion a better version of ourselves. Enriched by our adaptability and our newly gained confidence, most of our apprehensions slowly melt away leaving our mind open to the vastness of the world we live in. Indeed, instead of missing our old habits, we learn about new ones that complete our “self” and we “grow up” culturally. Moreover, we transcend our need to unilaterally learn from others and actually start sharing our home culture with them, helping our hosts see their culture in a new light. In this spirit of cultural exchange, the learning of a foreign language becomes considerably more effective, and as we expand our linguistic knowledge, our latent (native) personality slowly reemerges and fuses with the new mature version of ourselves: we have become a citizen of the world.

To decide to live abroad and to acculturate to a new environment is to accept to embark on a life-changing journey, requiring patience, motivation and discipline. On the outside, we might think we are out of our depth, swimming in a new and frightening culture, startled by unfamiliar social customs. On the inside, we have to *pro tempore* suffer from “linguistic schizophrenia” and tortuously remodel our social self, turning the original “us” into a hermit. However, these phases are only the first steps of the journey. The next step is one of cultural, linguistic, and personal enrichment: we adapt, grow up, and become stronger. Having achieved equilibrium in a new culture, nobody wants the journey to end and to go back to their previous life, quite the contrary. Now open to the world, we are looking for the next adventure, longing for the next revolutionary experience. What are you waiting for? Dive in!