

Puzzle Pieces

Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” This parallels my inability to communicate effectively in English, which has hindered my experience of the foreign country of America in many ways. As an alien from China who is unaware of the linguistic and social norms of American culture, communication is an essential part of my journey. One can choose to view this journey as starting over completely and wasting the last couple of years of my life or one can choose to view it as a fresh start in life. Personally, I choose the latter. Because in spite of all the setbacks, America is where I made my home and it is just as much a part of who I am as my native country of China.

On a hot, humid day in August, I left my wife and 5 year old daughter behind in China in order to help our family pursue a better life and better opportunities in America. I was paving the road for them to arrive here a year later. Our decision to move was a difficult one. We debated back and forth between the option of staying in China, where all our family and friends lived but where there was little possibility for a bright future for our daughter, and moving to America, a place we did not know anything about, yet a place ripe with possibilities. In the end, moving to America won out. We wanted to have another child, but with China’s one-child policy, that was virtually impossible. This was the reason that tipped the scale in favor of moving.

Before coming to America, I thought my English was pretty decent and that I would not have any trouble communicating here. However, as it turns out, that was not the case. My bubble was burst as I realized that my English was definitely not as good as I thought it was. I had difficulty understanding classmates, colleagues, and professors, among others. I could not make appointments with doctors, nor could I hold simple conversations with my friends. This caused

me to feel extremely frustrated and impeded my American experience in many ways. The English language was not the only thing that was difficult to understand. American culture was hard for me to fully adapt to as well. For example, whenever someone offered to do me a favor, I always rejected them, because I would always feel like I owed them something in return. But that is not the mindset of Americans; they help others without expecting anything in return. In Chinese culture, however, accepting a favor from someone means that they can count on you to help in the future. Not only that, you could use your own two feet for transportation to basically anywhere in China and walk to the grocery store, to a friend's house, or to school, but here in America, a car is required to do practically everything. This forced me to buy a car my first year here in America. These differences between Chinese and American culture was a bit hard for me to adapt to. And I had to adapt to them alone, since my wife and daughter came a year after me. Not having that support system to help me deal with the challenges of being in a foreign place was tough. However, as time went on, I became better acquainted with the English language and American culture in general. Through this newfound channel of communication, I finally felt like I belonged. I found groups for international students that accepted me with open arms. And not only has America opened up many doors for me, it has also benefitted my family in countless ways as well. As I look at my daughter, I feel proud knowing that she has a bright future ahead of her and that America has given her so many opportunities that never would have been possible back in China. And then I look at my son, whom my wife and I never could have had if we had not moved. These are the joys which let me know with certainty that coming here was the right decision.

One afternoon, my wife and I met with the group of international students. We shared the stories of how we got to the place we are today. Although we all come from different

backgrounds, our stories were pretty similar. Almost all of us talked about the struggle of being outsiders in a foreign place and the desire to go back home. It is there, amidst all the people and all their cultures that I had gotten to know, that I learned my greatest lesson. It is there, when we shared our life stories, where I realized that we are all united in similar joy and adversity. It became clear that although our cultures are very different, the struggles we go through, the happiness we feel, and the triumphs we experience are the same, no matter where we come from. Even though there are cultural and language barriers, at the end of the day, we all speak human. This taught me to be more accepting of other cultures and be more open-minded about other traditions and customs. We are part of something bigger than ourselves, a bigger scheme that only the universe can know. Each country fits together into a larger puzzle, forming a bigger picture. Every race is a puzzle piece. And humankind is the puzzle.