

ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE, TRANSFORMING LIVES

“I read a book and my whole life changed” said Orhan Pamuk the Nobel Prize winner of 2007 in his book entitled "The New Life." It was not a book that transformed my life entirely but a journey that I had from my home land. "Advancing knowledge transforming lives" the well-known motto of my prospective university perfectly fit in the picture depicting the drastic change in my life. It was 8th of August 2007, the day after I quit my research assistantship position in my country. I remember feeling so strange having locked my office and given the keys to the secretary after so many years working there. During my flight to Detroit, a suitcase, my passport and a backpack full of home-made cookies for the first night were all that were accompanying me in my journey to the dream country. My hopes were too cumbersome to put in the suitcase, so I took them aboard with me. Having flown for thirteen hours, I stepped into this new land and took a deep breath, and had a look to the sky. Thought it was a small detail, I was consoled by the fact that the sky appeared to be exactly the same as the one back in my home country. After leaving the airport, it was surprisingly easy to find the university housing office and get my keys to my new house and life; the keys were drastically different from those I had recently relinquished to the secretary at my former place of employment, perhaps symbolizing how different my new life would be here. I had a close look at them and noticed “Do not duplicate.” “Duplicate?” I thought as I attached them to my key-chain that I brought from Turkey, “I am just getting started.”

I remember spending the night looking at the suitcase standing in the middle of the living room. The suitcase, which was too small to carry my great expectations and endless hopes for my new life, held memories of my family and our journey to the airport. I remember my sister out of breath and struggling to carry it, dragging slowly with both hands. She had found it too big and

was wondering how I could carry it during the whole journey. However, I had found it too small. I could put neither my house, nor my family, nor my beloved ones from my country inside.

One of my first real interactions took place in the housing office, where I was told about all the regulations and procedures in a language I had difficulty understanding the accent, but had to nod as if I was successfully following the whole conversation. A similar event struck me in a fast food restaurant the next day, where I was attempting to articulate my order using a textbook language that I had studied for years through conversations between “Mr and Mrs Brown” and similar presentations and role plays. What I failed to realize was that I was using an unpractical language for a fast food restaurant where things are ordered by single words instead of sentences which includes a variety of speech acts. Sentences like, “Would you please give me a chicken sandwich with a can of coke? And for dessert, could I possibly have a few helpings of ice-cream please, if you happen to have any?” simply did not fit into the surrounding of burgers and fries. I came to realize the inappropriateness of this utterance by the help of the ironically polite response I received. “Of course, ‘sir.’ Is there anything else you would like to have, ‘sir’?” “No, thanks. I appreciate it, though,” I replied, slightly bewildered. “My pleasure, sir.” answered the undoubtedly amused cashier.

Language problems were easily solved out thanks to my American friends who have done a lot to take care of me since my arrival. I was learning the colloquial language which is closely connected to the American lifestyle quite rapidly by chatting with them about the similarities and the differences between our cultures. I was also so lucky that the first two weeks were too busy to have time to think about my home country and to be home-sick. The ITA orientation gave me the unprecedented chance to listen to many inspiring lectures, meet people from all over the world, and actually served as a laboratory where I could observe several different cultures at the same time. It was like having breakfast in China, visiting Russia for lunch and having dinner in

Japan followed by a French dessert. I am so grateful for what I have learnt from my new 'world-friends' in this orientation program.

In addition to the ITA program during the day, I took part in a number of different events in the evenings and at the weekends. To name a few, I helped a friend move into a new house, helped another friend to knock down the shed in his garden, and fixed the toilet of yet another. Though these jobs were grueling, I should state that I learned a lot doing each one of them. However, what I found especially interesting and a little *offending* was that I was constantly offered meal for *my services*. In reply, I said, "I am not doing this for free dinner; I am happy to help you because you are my friend." Then, I started to think that this was a cultural norm that I had best adapt to, instead of resisting each time. To my dismay, I discovered that it might have been an unsubstantiated and premature generalization when another friend asked for help: "You know how to use SPSS, right? Will you help me with an analysis?" I replied "Sure, you will cover my dinner, right?" As soon as I said this (so confident that I even used the correct chunk), I barely noticed the surprise in her eyes, and tried to compensate "just kidding, of course I will help you". This time she found herself in an odd situation and said "If you want, I could buy you a dinner, though," which made me feel even more embarrassed.

One part of the culture to which I have still not become completely accustomed is the cuisine. I frequently find myself lost in the supermarket and occasionally checking out with nothing or some 'sparty' products like a notebook or a few pens. I remember looking at a million kinds of the same product, such as milk, cheese, and yoghurt, and recognizing none. I did my best to purchase items that I thought I could cook, but things did not always go as planned. An enormous disappointment was when I bought a can of beans and was so excited to cook and eat them...until I took the first bite and realize that they were sweet. Having eaten fast food for days, that was my first attempt at cooking in the US. The first question that occurred to me was "How can a human have the heart to do such an evil thing to such sacred beans?" "Oh God! Why

beans? Why?" Obviously, I was not used to eating sweetened beans, and I cannot say that I acculturated myself to this culinary delight yet. What's worse is that it took me another week to realize that I can also find regular ones without sugar.

Another surprise came when I was invited to a colleague's baby shower. I could not stop wondering why other people are invited to shower a baby. Can't the parents wash the baby by themselves? While the "shower" idea was not very clear to me, an even bigger shock was when I was told that there are also bridal showers. That was one of the moments I could not hide my surprise and stared at my colleague with two huge dazzled eyes. Fortunately, it did not take long to learn that the ceremony was all about caring for a mother and a baby by giving them gifts, flowers, and good wishes.

During my first two months here, I have myself into countless embarrassing situations through which I have always learned something invaluable. Those funny experiences and contexts were precious opportunities to learn and to develop a favorable attitude toward my new home. Possessing the spirit of a *spartan*, I wrote my eight commandments to live by here in East Lansing: Thou shalt put away the suitcase and embrace your new life. Thou shalt be understanding of the differences and enjoy them. Thou shalt not be obsessed with Turkish food and try new food. Thou shalt learn to cook traditional American food, sing songs, learn how to dance (salsa and country), and learn about sports. Thou shalt study hard, while not forgetting that there is more to life than studying. Thou shalt call your family frequently and share your experiences. Thou shalt share what you have with your friends. Thou shalt be flexible and ready for challenges and embrace both joy and trouble with the same calmness. With these commandments and a bit of luck, I just might survive this journey advancing my knowledge and transforming my life.