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In my shoes...

-The Spirit of America ...My personal discovery-

It's funny.

You spend a lifetime watching American movies, eating American food, wearing American jeans, listening to American music. We have had this kind of Americanized way of life in Serbia ever since we separated from Stalin and the Eastern block, in 1948. My father always told me about the way he acquired his first Bob Dylan LP.

Man, a Dylan LP; that gives you some sort of idea of how long we've been looking up to the West and the USA.

So, sixty years of trying your best to be, to feel and act as an American does leave a mark or two on your collective consciousness. Every now and then, you ask yourself things like, "does this Big Mac really taste the same as the one in, umm... Chicago?"; or "does Madonna really give it her all when she's touring Europe (or does she do "special" things on her American tour)?"; or (my favorite one) "is Coca Cola really the same here?"

You know what? Everyone I grew up with always wondered about the same thing: "Are we missing something here? Is there something missing in all those things? Are we really getting it? The Spirit of America?"

So, I'm in a plane (I hate flying), and we have just crossed the Atlantic. My first thought, besides "Wow!!!", was "now I finally get to see the difference!" If there is one...maybe we've all been giving too much credit to the USA. Maybe it's all the same. Would I want it to be so? No, not really, but skepticism is just a part of me; I can't help it. I guess I am a romantic, but a skeptic as well. A romantic skeptic. There you go. Beat that.

Of course (as you might have guessed), one of the first things for me to do after landing was to go and have a Big Mac and a Coke. I'm sorry, I know it sounds lame, but those things are big in Serbia; they are not just food and drink, they are symbols. So I just had to try it. Had to taste it. I had to know.

And taste it I did.

What a surprise: they tasted exactly the same. No difference; not even the slightest one.

Man, was I disappointed!

“The Spirit of America? No, nope... Maybe there is no such thing? Maybe it's just a big exaggeration?”

This is what I would tell you if you asked me about it few weeks ago. I didn't find it in a Big Mac and a Coke, so I thought there wasn't any.

But, as it turned out, I was looking for it in a wrong place.

You see, there are a lot of us here from all over the World. I know Raouf from Tunisia, Prianca, Srijani, Payam from India, Kangyu from China, Arash from Iran, Martin from Germany, Funda from Turkey and the only thing we had in common when we arrived here at MSU was confusion. I was calling my mom, and telling her (in Serbian) “what's it like here”, “have I met anyone yet”, “what's the food like”, and stuff like that. I do not know a word of Hindi, but I was sure my friend Prianca was telling her mom the same story. As was Raouf, Srijani and Funda. We all thought and felt the same at that time. That much I could tell, no translation was needed.

A couple of hours later, I had my first conversation. It was with Srijani. We spoke in English. To my surprise, it was easy to talk to her, as if we've known each other for years. After five minutes, I wanted to tell her everything. I wanted to help her if she asked for help, and I wouldn't hesitate to ask her to do anything for me. I just had that feeling. What do you call it here? Trust. I trusted her, although I knew her for just five minutes. And I was sure she felt the same way.

To cut the long story short, I felt this “trust” feeling in every single conversation with my fellow overseas students ever since that day. Every time I met someone new, I've had this feeling hit me over and over again. Let me use a phrase from my country's past: a feeling of “brotherhood” (or sisterhood,

in this case) and unity. A feeling that everyone is good, and everyone is going to help you, and you're going to help everyone.

It wasn't hard, when you think about it from a distance, you realize why this feeling was present then and still is now. We all were in a new situation, in a new environment, in a New World. No mommy, no daddy, no old friends, no native language, no familiar faces. We were all on our own. And this, I think, is just the situation, when we have to turn to each other. Out of fear, or out of sheer goodness, I don't know (and I don't care), people in this kind of situation give their best to each other. And expect no less. Suddenly, all those little gestures people make seem big, every smile means a lot, and every touch gives you a world of confidence. We, outsiders, strangers, non-Americans, we were suddenly outsiders, strangers – no more. Through good will, smiles, understanding and simple, lovely, kind words we've given to each others, we were absorbed by and given the ultimate gift – the Spirit of America. We were made Americans, just like that. We understood it.

This was the same spirit that helped first colonists survive; the one thing that gave them the strength to overcome all that nature could throw at them in this strange, alien, new World; the spirit that made people join hands in 1776, and later wrote the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution; the same feeling that helped USA win WWI and WWII, and become the greatest country in the World.

We all felt it. And we all understood it. It is a great, glorious feeling, but, surprisingly, not too hard to express in words; in fact, it was written a long time ago, in a document I mentioned earlier. So what is this Spirit of America we all felt? It's the basic feeling of Life, Liberty, and Willingness to pursue Happiness. Who would've ever thought one must travel so far to feel those simple things in the way they were always meant to be felt? It took a New World and a group of total strangers relying upon each other and giving their best for a common cause. History repeated itself, again.

So, it wasn't in a Big Mac, after all... It's in the people.