

Somewhere between here and there

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At the fifth and probably the last year of my graduate study at MSU, “What am I doing here?” and “did I ever do anything here?” are questions I still ask myself from time to time. I am still surprised how, at the spur of a moment, my feelings of familiarity with and belonging to the US can turn back to the feelings of alienation; especially with each form I need to fill out my status as a “non-resident alien”. And each time I do that, I can’t help but sing from inside Sting’s famous song:

Oh-oh I am alien

I am a legal alien

I’m an English man in New York

I am not the English man in New York, of course. I am the Turkish woman in East Lansing and there would hardly be a song written about it. So I decided to write about this woman and her story by means of this essay.

Although the *raison d’être* of our presence at MSU is associated with a degree, life is hardly about the degrees we get. Life is mostly about the people we have touched and are touched by in the way. We don’t remember a degree; but we remember the people and how we grow as we share with them. In that sense, my history at MSU is full of significant moments. For example, I can’t forget when one of my American class mates, who had been a teacher for about twenty years before he applied to the Ph.D. program and who gave me the feeling that he was not fond of where I am from, approached me towards the end of the semester and said “It is because

of knowing you that I realized my prejudice towards the Middle East and it is because of you that I now I understand I had been a bad teacher”. He quit the program that semester to turn back to teaching and as he said “to teach kids the right things in the right way” this time. Up to this day, we are still writing to each other and remembering the moment when prejudice turned into a lasting friendship.

Another unforgettable anecdote was the help room hours I spent with a student. He was struggling with mathematics and was multiplying numbers by adding them repeatedly using his fingers. Yet, whenever he was using his fingers, he was hiding them under the desk so that I wouldn't see. One day I held his hands, put them up on the desk and asked him to explain how he counted. Initially, he blushed and just stared at me. I encouraged him with a smile and asked him to teach me how he multiplied using his fingers. He then started explaining to me what he thought as he counted. I built up on his thinking and was able to teach this smart young man to multiply numbers using the algorithm but not his fingers in just two hours. At the end of the session, his eyes were shining and he was smiling so brightly; he was proud of himself. As he was packing his bag, he turned to me and said “Thank you. If only someone wanted to spend two hours with you... You could create miracles”. I smiled and couldn't help my tears from falling because of the happiness I felt.

Besides from these, my story includes two friends who are now closer to me than my sisters. I was able to share everything about myself, my dreams, hopes, heartaches and many tears with these friends, one of whom is a Romanian and the other, a Cypriot. So being here gave me the opportunity to be connected with people regardless of their background and their beliefs. Therefore, the question of “did I ever do anything here?” is answered. Although there is no mentioning of the number of courses I took, the painful exams I had to pass for my degree and

the long hours of assistantship work, I think the answer is satisfying since it is about what I will remember.

Just like any journey, my journey here has its ups and downs. I still find it hard to describe what I want to be fixed when I call the maintenance office and it is still hard for me not to get lost reading the menu in a restaurant. I find it hard to understand why American people want to have a tax cut even when they are donating things, why they say they feel awesome, fantastic and great even when they look tired or sad. I can't understand why they say "it's a great idea but..." when they actually mean "I don't agree with you". I find it surprising that they can work so systematically and regularly without having the need to change the flow from time to time. It must be the Mediterranean blood in me; whenever I feel my life is too orderly, I have the urge to mess it up a bit! But more than anything, it is still tough feeling like a flower which needs to flourish somewhere very far away from its roots. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. That's how living in the US is like for me. This brings me to my other question: "What am I doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" is the question that hits me when I feel lonely in this huge continent I stepped on. Its trivial answer can be found again in terms of the degrees we are trying to get. On the other hand, real answers can rarely be found on the surface of triviality. I could get this degree from anywhere, from home, Germany, England, etc. Therefore, a closer look reveals that "What am I doing here?" is actually a question about why I am still here, why I keep coming back. And then I remember those unforgettable moments I lived here. I smile. I realize that despite all the prices I paid, somewhere between home and here, what I found was me. And that was why I kept coming back. To keep on finding who I am...

I guess it is always the beginnings and the endings that we remember most. How can I forget the first day I landed to Chicago and then to East Lansing? Jumping into unfamiliarity with hope must either be the greatest form of courage or the greatest form of insanity! After my five years here, I think it is a little of both. What being at MSU taught me is actually about this blend. My presence here offered me the chance to embrace this mixture...of courage and of insanity; of the good and bad; of the Turkish with the American, Asian and African; of the laughter and the tear. In the mostly grey and snowy days of East Lansing, life taught me to appreciate the rainbow that surrounded life with all its diversity and shades.

So how does the story end? Let me again refer to one of Sting's songs:

Though the pages are numbered
I can't see where they lead
For the end is a mystery no-one can read
In the book of my life

The story goes on...