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My Fulbright Experience

Moving from the City to Small-town America

As an urbanite, it took me some time to get used to small town America. Our host university in Indiana, Pennsylvania was about two hours away from the nearest major airport. There is only one cinema in town, shopping and food options are very limited, and the nearest decent mall is about an hour's drive away. It was a complete detox from urban life. Even mobility is severely limited if one does not drive. Buses come only once hourly, there is no taxi company, and there are only a handful of Uber drivers. It was not always possible to walk. Even though some of the distances within the town might not be that far, there would often be no sidewalk for one to walk on. But there was a certain rustic charm to the snow-capped hills, the fresh air and the quiet countryside. It was a refreshing change from the hectic city life I have grown so accustomed to. Everyone seemed to know each other and since the pace of life is slower, people took the time to acknowledge each other on the streets. The children of the two Chinese take-outs I frequented study in the local high school, and one of them was in the class I taught. Another Middle-eastern student's father turned out to be one of the handful of Uber drivers in town. This meant that dinner or an Uber ride could easily turn into an informal parent-teacher meeting. I rented a car regularly during weekends to travel, and the rental company picked me up and dropped me off at my accommodation. Over the semester, I developed a friendship with the staff at the rental company, such that they could even recognise my voice when I called.

I am thankful that I made certain preparations before embarking on the trip. My doctor advised me to bring along some medication, especially for pre-existing conditions, as medical care might not be easily available in the rural community. He was right. In fact, almost none of the brands of drugs we are familiar with back home could be found there. In addition, I bought some winter clothes, including some from *Tao Bao*. This turned out to be an important decision. Shopping options were limited, and we arrived in the thick of winter. Although some items could be bought from the local Walmart, not everything was readily available or cheap. The nearest outlets were 1.5 hours' drive away and there was no way I could get used to winter driving conditions, and drive on the other side of the road right away. Hence, I was glad I went with some essentials.



Field Experience

The field experience is one highlight of the Fulbright programme. Every Wednesday, we spent a full day at a local school where we observed lessons, co-taught or taught independently. The first seven weeks were spent at the rural high school near our host university. One thing that struck me about the school was the technology infrastructure. A chromebook was made available to every student at an affordable price. Those who could not afford it loaned a set from the school, which they were not allowed to bring home. The chromebooks could be started quickly and logged on to the Internet at an instant, and could also be put away very quickly, almost without any disruption to the flow of lessons. What was most amazing were the security features behind the chromebooks. It was something I had never seen in any Singapore school. Social media was entirely blocked on the chromebooks, even when the students were outside of school; the machines could not be used to access WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. The school used G-suite for education and each student had a Gmail account. However, they could only receive emails or share files on google drive with others who are from the same domain. No outsider could email the students or share files with them. This was done to address the common problems that have plagued schools in many digital societies – distractions, addiction, cyber predators and cyber bullying. In addition, the school also had a monitoring software that provided analytics for students' usage patterns, including the type of sites they visited. Using the data, at-risk students could be identified for counselling and their parents engaged. America certainly had many painful lessons in cyber wellness and this school was certainly not taking any chances. This could be something Singapore schools will benefit from.



In the second half of the school experience, we spent seven weeks at an urban school which was a two-hour bus ride away. It was unlike anything that I had ever seen in my life. The students went through metal detectors every morning, along with airport-style security and bag checks. There was a childcare center on-site for students to leave their babies so that they could attend school. To the uninitiated casual observer, this may be a clear indication of a failed American school system and the problems in American society. However, many of the students attending this school were

refugees. No other country in the world takes in as many refugees and asylum seekers like America, much less provide them with a quality education for a better future. The challenges are innumerable. How do you teach in a school where the students speak over forty different languages, some of which unspoken by the staff? When a student is ill and misses school, you cannot contact the parents to check on him because you do not speak their language. What do you do with an 18-year-old who suddenly joins your school from a refugee camp, and has never attended school in his native country due to war? Students like him join the school every other week, even one week before the examinations, because such situations are beyond the school's control. The alternative to enrolling these students immediately is to leave them out in the streets till the next academic year.

The American Spirit

Much of my learning resulted from the interactions with the Americans as well as observations of the society from up close as a foreigner living amongst them. There is so much that we can learn from the American spirit. I will highlight three aspects of it.

Though inequality is rife, there is a deep-seated belief that everyone can succeed if they are willing to work hard. From the homeless people to the refugees studying in the schools, there is the recognition that there is more than one way to succeed, and that everyone has a chance to find their preferred paths. Some of the refugee students arrived in America hardly speaking any English, but they aspire to go to college. An Uber driver I met in Florida, a Vietnamese refugee who was actually deported from Singapore in the 1980s, came to America, married a fellow refugee, did all sorts of jobs and managed to send his child to a reputable college. Two of our regular drivers for many of the Fulbright activities were actually PhD students at our host university – no job was beneath them and they were willing to work hard to achieve their goals. The quintessential American dream is that everyone can find their happily-ever-after as long as they are willing to put in effort.

We often read in the papers about the shortcomings of American bureaucracy and the inaction caused by partisan politics. What we do not hear much about is how the non-government sector has stepped in to plug the service gap. Instead of waiting for the government to deal with problems, people do whatever they can to improve the situation. One example is the Manchester Bidwell School. Concerned about the plight of under-privileged inner-city youths, the school provides after-school programmes, vocational training courses and even a degree course in partnership with a local industry, all free of cost, thanks to generous sponsors. No means testing is conducted, yet the school does not have any problems with the system being 'abused' by more well-off students. Another example is the many museums and science centres all around the country. Not all public schools are equally well-resourced., so these museums and science centres function like auxiliary education institutions, to complement the efforts of public schools.



Someone joked with me that the Americans are the greatest evangelists in the world, not in the religious sense, but in how they believe they can do good for the world and save the world. The altruism shown by many American individuals and organisations is truly admirable. One family we met had been reaching out to Taiwanese teens who had come to study in the town. These teens were there on their own without their families, so the family helped to provide transport, general advice and even temporary lodging. A retired accounting Professor I met at a concert told me that she had been helping new Burmese immigrants in the town. While their parents were hard at work, she became the surrogate grandparent to take the kids to co-curricular activities. The amazing thing is that these individuals did this without any formal organisational support, and dipped into their own pockets to do so. They simply saw a need and stepped forward like the proverbial good Samaritan. Some of the altruistic endeavors have also morphed into something larger. The Duolingo story is one such example. The founder started the company because he wanted to make it easier and cheaper for prospective students going to America to take the mandatory English proficiency test. Today, the tech start-up has become a widely-used language learning app used by students all over the world.



I believe these three aspects of the American spirit have contributed to the vibrancy of the American society. It has given the society a soul and a heart. It has forged a common sense of identity. The American identity was not just built on a common history. With new immigrants, it is also sustained by a shared ideal. What is big in America is this ideal: the ideal of their founding fathers, the ideal that rings true for much of their history, even during tough times. There is always a desire to make the world a better place. It is not just about survival against the odds, because you forget to live if all you think of is survival. It is not just about competition and ensuring others do not steal your lunch, because the pie can be enlarged for everyone. It is not just about acting in one's own best interests, because all will return to dust one day. There is certainly a lot a young nation like Singapore can learn from America, so as to create a shared ideal.

Personal Takeaways

In Singapore, everything runs like clockwork. We frown upon the slightest inconvenience and get all worked up when things do not go the way they should. While we pride ourselves in being an efficient nation, this has also led to a very stressful lifestyle. In rural small-town America, I learnt to accept that some things are just beyond our control and there is no need to get very upset. An overnight snowfall can block roads and result in a two-hour delay to the start of school; a snow storm can cause power outage; a polar vortex coming from nowhere can plunge us into minus 21 degrees Celsius temperature and result in classes being cancelled for two days. Disruptions are almost a way of life, despite best-laid plans. And that's all right. There is much to learn from the resilience of the rural folks and how they carry on and make adjustments, almost unperturbed, no matter what life throws at them.

Another important quality that I have observed in the US is the ability to tolerate a certain level of chaos. This tolerance permeates the entire society, from how parents handle their children, to the classroom environment in school and the society in general. I think this is one secret behind America's leading position as a creative nation. Creativity is a messy process, and it is difficult for it to thrive in an environment that places over-emphasis on the need to follow the rules and to be orderly. While many Singapore parents try to be Tiger Moms (and Dads) or helicopter parents, many American parents in contrast believe in giving their children a carefree childhood, by allowing them to muck around at home or roll in the mud at the playground. The American classroom, where flexible seating arrangements and differentiated learning are often the norm, also looks a lot 'messier' than the classrooms in Singapore. Furthermore, a wide array of viewpoints and talents are recognised in America. I truly appreciate the order and efficiency we have in Singapore and as a parent, I like it when my children are well-behaved, obedient and neat. But I cannot help but feel that we need to learn to entertain a certain degree of chaos and give our children some space to 'mess around' if we are serious about nurturing creativity. We probably will never have the kind of tolerance for chaos seen in the US, nor would we necessarily find it desirable. But the key is to strike the right balance.

In a popular TED talk titled 'The Danger of a Single Story', novelist Chimamanda Adichie talks about the problem of going away with misconceptions after only listening to a single story about a person or a country. During the Fulbright experience, I have come to realise that I am guilty of this as well, despite being well-read. My understanding of the Republicans and the Democrats, as well as of American politics, was little more than incomplete stereotypes fed by media stories. The truth is that on both sides of the political divide, there are good people with very compelling reasons for their views. My experience with African Fulbrighters taught me that my previous opinions of African countries have been rather parochial. Many of these nations are fast developing and there is a great hunger for education. I have concluded that unless one has encountered the locals directly and lived in a place for some time, you can never be sure that what you have read or watched on the news is accurate.

Last but not least, I am greatly inspired by my fellow Fulbright teachers. We, Singapore teachers, like to wear our long hours as a badge of honour and talk about how much we have sacrificed for education. However, compared to what some of the teachers in other countries are going through, we really have a lot to be thankful for. I learnt that some Mexican teachers continue to show up for work despite being owed their salaries, until they can no longer afford to ride their motorcycles to school. I learnt that some schools in Papua, Indonesia, are so remote that they are unable to get teachers to teach in these schools. I witnessed a Mexican teacher using his own technology grant from the Fulbright programme to purchase chromebooks for his students instead of spending it on himself. His school did not even have concrete buildings. I heard about the struggles of a Uganda teacher trying to get special education recognised in a country where disabled children are killed by their own parents. Even in America, teachers have more contact hours than Singapore teachers although their class sizes are considerably smaller. They are paid less than us after taxes, and often face many more challenging conditions teaching in public schools than we do. In spite of these struggles, these teachers from all over the world continue to show up day after day for their students. Their stories are a true inspiration to me and a reminder that I am truly very fortunate to be part of the Singapore education service.

