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Faces of Roane State

Written Arts

16 October 2013

Coming to America

I love adventure. It always starts the same way. First, the frantic effort to pack everything I love into a suitcase. The stringent dimensions and weight restrictions airlines imposed, as always, frustrated me. But after several rounds of reality tetris, the sweet success finally follows. Voila, everything fits!

Unfortunately, upon arrival to my new host country, it was a different game, a different challenge.

And this time, the collision of differences did not always fit.

The proceeding response then is to either integrate or conform. What is the distinction between integrating and conforming? The idea of integrating seems to be desiring to be a part of societal fabric. That in itself, is commendable and essentially a good thing.

The problem is when one has to alter his/her own inherent color to be a part of that.

That is conformity. It is an evolutionary process where the parts that make me who I am are slowly eroded away, and filled in with the parts that make society. Except I'm not a tooth decay. My enamel is my crown. I need to preserve it.

For example, the manner in which I speak English is profoundly different and a testament to my heritage. I am from Singapore, a former British colony. Like them, I spell words like *colour* with an extra alphabet but I carry little of their charm in accenture. I write British, but yet I do not speak British. My accent is guttural and heavy. It is a composite of Chinese, Malay and Tamil influences. Barely comprehensible beyond our geographical realms.

I adapted. There was the jaw drop, the vowel sounds, the tongue relaxation. To an undiscerning ear, I had begun to start sounding almost American. Without even realizing, I had subconsciously given up the battle and quietly conformed. My desperate desire to be understood and accepted had been an expert in subterfuge. Nevertheless, I convinced myself that I would at least triumph in other ways.

Falsely believing that I was now properly equipped linguistically, I set out to speak to people around me and try to connect with them. Only to discover that the language most commonly spoken here was in fact not English, but American Football. I resisted and resented it.

It is a silly, barbaric game, I thought. Played with eleven players on each side. The aim is to get the ball across the goal line on the other side. The rule is that only one guy ever gets to toss the ball. Can you believe that? With the other players, they just get to run around and pray in their hearts for a pass to be delivered to them. Other times, they just stood around, growl at each other and attempt to wrestle their mirror image to the ground.

The game as I saw it, was full of raw athleticism and lacked the accompanying level of finesse. I did not care much for it. My disdain for it meant that I did not have a surefire topic to engage a random stranger in conversation. I was relegated to topics concerning weather and occasionally on better days, physical ailments. They were not the best topics to open with. Not if the intention was to make friends.

However, on one fine day the boys in the neighbourhood thought it would be a fine idea to introduce me to football. Beau, Judd, Ellis and I grabbed the oddly shaped pigskin and stepped onto the gridiron to play two-a-side. Before we began, Judd painstakingly explained to me what downs were. It was simple enough a rule but embarrassingly my mind turned out to be even simpler than that. So it took a bit of his time and quite a lot more of his effort. But we got there in the end. I finally understood and the game commenced. My very first game of American football. My 'welcome to America' moment was to arrive.

I had always figured that moment would come right after I took a big hit on the field upon being tackled. I would have had to look up dazed, at a bunch of rugged overgrown

men chuckling to themselves in mockery of my ineptness. I would stumble off the field never to play the game again. Bitter and humiliated.

But instead, that moment happened when I crossed the imaginary goal line- between the trees in the frontyard of the boys' house. As soon as I did, I looked over my shoulder and peered at my teammate Judd, all of 5 years old. His face lit up brighter than a Christmas tree as he wore a wide cheshire grin on his face and gave me an enthusiastic two-thumbs up.

The adrenaline from crossing the goal line and the contagion of the boys' excitement caught up with me then. "So this is what football is about!" I realized. It was the most fantastic feeling I had felt in a long time. I had not felt that alive in years.

At that precise moment, I knew I had crossed another line. I had perhaps given in to conformity. But oddly enough, it did not worry me one fair bit. I had not lost a part of me, but I had instead gained a new experience.

