

People and Places

I still remember the night I left my home country, India to come to the United States to pursue graduate studies. With only a few hours to go for my flight, I was a bundle of nerves. My 80-year-old grandmother asked me what was bothering me the most. Was it the coursework that was scaring me? Or was I afraid of losing touch with family and friends? I thought for a moment and replied that it was the idea of living in a country where the people look, talk or dress nothing like me, that was making me nervous. She smiled, "That's the thing about people and places! They all seem different at first, but they are really just the same everywhere!" At that time, I didn't believe my grandma. She had never once left the country, what would she know! But in the past few years that I have lived here, I have realized how true her words were! Below are three experiences that made me realize that people are just as humane, open-hearted, and kind wherever you go.

My first surprise was on landing at the airport in USA, as I steeled myself for answering the immigration officer's questions. I had heard of people having a tough time at the immigration counter and had begun to think of immigration officers as tough, unbreakable creatures. Officer: "So you are a physical therapist back home?" I answered in affirmative. "What should I do for this muscle pain that I have?" Me (taken aback at the line of questioning): "Neck stretches, strengthening blah blah". After some routine visa questions, Officer: "How many times do you think I should stretch?" Me: "Looking at how bad your posture is, fifty times!" The officer looks at me in surprise. I remember he still has my passport in his hand and keep my audacity in check. "I mean, you should repeat them as often as possible, maybe every hourly". Officer: "Wow, you guys are tough!" With my passport now back in my hand, I walk away smiling, thinking maybe immigration officers are not that bad! And if you are lucky, you can see the more humane side of

them! In the past, I have been dragged aside by family and friends back home for free physical therapy consultations at random places, but this one tops my list!

My second story is about my first Thanksgiving in the U.S. My American landlord, Jodi had called me over for dinner. Jodi had adopted three kids, who were all deaf and used sign language and lip reading for communication. Despite that, I could see they were laughing and joking like any other siblings would. I was a little apprehensive and shy at first, as this was my first time interacting this closely with an American family. But Jodi made me feel comfortable and asked me about my life back home. As I was telling them about my younger sister, Jodi's only daughter pointed to me and said something in sign language. Jodi said "She wants to know your opinion on coloring her hair red or purple. Since you have a younger sister, she thinks you probably are more fashion-savvy than her brothers!" And that's how we both hit it off! I spent rest of the dinner chatting away with her (with the help of Jodi's translation skills), just the way I would have with my little sister back home. I had a really good time at the dinner and left feeling less lonely in this big country. Over years, I have realized that Thanksgiving is an intimate family event, and Jodi's invitation speaks volumes about her open-hearted, welcoming nature. That night, she didn't just share her meal with me, she shared her family.

My third story is about the time I decided to visit a popular Indian temple in Pittsburgh, on the occasion of Diwali, an Indian festival. It was located about an hour's drive outside the city and wasn't accessible by public transport. Since I didn't have a U.S. driver's license, I took a cab there. I spent about an hour at the temple and decided to call the cab company for a ride back. Somehow, there weren't any cabs available in that area at that time. This was before the days of Uber. I tried for couple of more hours without any luck and started to panic! I was stuck outside the city at this temple with no means of getting home! The security guard, who had just gotten

off duty, saw my anguish and offered me a ride home. I was obviously very suspicious of a random stranger. But I did need a ride home. He took me to the reception and had them verify his identity and informed them of his offer to drop me home. He had me call my roommate and give her his contact and the car number plate as well. When I asked him if my home would be on his way, he said he lived a few minutes away from the temple. So, he drove an hour each way just to drop me home! I was bowled over by the kindness of a stranger, especially towards someone from a foreign country.

The above three stories are just a quick snapshot of the myriad of experiences I have had meeting and knowing different people in the U. S. I came to this country expecting people who were, in essence, very different from me. And sure, they look different, and talk with a different accent. But weren't the experiences that were most memorable also the most familiar, the ones I could relate most easily to? Giving physical therapy consultations at least expected moments, discussing fashion with Jodi's daughter, experiencing random acts of kindness from strangers, weren't these moments exactly what I would experience back home too? Maybe my grandma was right, maybe at their core, people and places are same, they just look different on the outside!