

*LEARN, UNIFY, LIVE*



di Alessio S.

Vivid shafts of the morning sunlight pierced through the airport's glass windows. I was surrounded by many other exchange students ready to leave their families and embark on a new journey. Some of them were laughing, some were silent, others were desperately crying. My parents steeled themselves. Wearing their best smile, they hugged me so tight that I could feel their heartbeats and sense their anxiety. My dad was following my gaze, taciturn, quiet, waiting to see if I exhibited any sign of repentance. As soon as they slackened their grasp, I felt as if a chasm opened up in my stomach. Was it the last time I would have seen them? Would I have been able to see their smiles again? To hear their voices? Was I renegade of my family? An aberration?

As those vexing questions beset me, I tried to conceal my feelings. I didn't want to show doubt or reluctance. It's not that I was regretting to leave, but I suddenly felt abandoned, marooned. It was as if someone stripped away my clothes and threw me in a sea full of jellyfish.

And then it dawned on me the reason why I decided to leave. I have always been a pretty unassuming guy, but my mind has always been beleaguered by a feeling of distress. I was born hexed by curiosity; it whispered to me while I was sleeping and it yelled at me while I was studying.

My mind would start traveling to every corner of the world without really understanding what was going on. I could see the beauty of the world around me, but I could not reach it: it is the worst curse to feel much and know very little. Going on exchange would have helped me soothe that unbearable feeling of distress that was stirring inside of me.

I then summoned my strengths and bade them farewell.

I was to stay in New York for three days before going to Utah and my first night in The Big Apple was intense, in that it was the very first time I started questioning what I was doing.

I vividly remember me lying on the bed under the lambent light of my hotel room, vigorously squeezing the blankets, and realizing that I was utterly alone.

It reminded me of the night I got lost 11 years ago. It was a sweltering summer day, and I was strolling along the esplanade with my family while the sun was setting along the breakwater. The smell of brine, fish and sand was ubiquitous, and the street was extremely crowded. I was little and I was also in love with all the huge seashells that were sold in almost every shop in that village, so I very casually decided to see one of them. As I was gazing at the bizarre shapes of those huge shells, I realized that my parents were not with me anymore. I looked around but I could only see a flowing

river of unknown faces, which I soon perceived as aliens, mutants that wanted to harm me. Every stranger was my enemy. I felt ensnared and helpless, but I was promptly fished up from that untenable situation by my parents.

11 years ago, my parents had been there to find me, but they were not there to help me when I was in the US. That first night in New York I was not little anymore, but I still had to come to terms with my insecurities. My parents, the bulwarks of my life, were far away and I had to rely upon my own abilities and strengths.

I had hitherto never travelled outside Europe and when I learned that I was going to live my exchange year in Utah, I didn't even know where it was to be honest. I then learned that it was a pretty deserted place surrounded by tall mountains and stunning canyons, and that it was also the Mecca of Mormonism. I was still very confused, but I was eager to experience that new reality first-hand, without too many expectations.

No doubt about it: Utah is a weird place. Sometimes I wonder how I managed to spend ten months in that otherworldly reality. Everything is so different: temperatures drop to -20 degrees C in winter and go up to 35 degrees C in summer offering blisteringly hot days. The food was also something very hard to get used to: everything has sugar in it, and it is very hard to find something healthy to eat. However, what really unsettled me was the culture shock: more than half of the population is Mormon and they have different ways of perceiving the world around them.

Fortunately, I wasn't alone on this journey because my host family decided to host another exchange student. He was from Spain and his name was Miguel. He was a friendly person, with unkempt curly hair and a rebel cowlick hanging on his forehead, and had an aptitude for maths and physics. On our second day with our new "family", we were asked to sit at the dinner table to talk. My host dad – a very stoic and reticent person – decided it was best for us to know about Utah's culture, so that we could better face the school environment. He told us that more than half of the population in Utah is Mormon, and so they abide by a series of rules that could seem pretty strict to us; they don't drink coffee nor tea, they always go to church on Sundays, they don't curse, and they are usually reluctant to meet anyone who doesn't live by their creed.

My host dad wasn't lying. At school people were initially pretty nice to us, but as soon as they got to know that we were not Mormon, they started being more withdrawn and bashful. Some of them would avowedly slander us to their fellow classmates and more people stopped talking to us day after day. Let's face it; in Italy sometimes we swear and we don't even notice it. That couldn't happen in Utah: every single word had to be weighed and examined very carefully.

There were also many Mormons that were willing to get to know us and that were curious to know something about our culture. Still, it became very difficult for me to find the courage to face the new

reality and get out of my comfort zone. I feared that people would judge me, and that they would shoo me away.

I also felt like there were so many incongruities rooted in their beliefs. There were too many differences and things that I could not understand nor accept. Why did they condemn anyone who consumed caffeine when in fact they drank liters and liters of coke – which contains caffeine- every day? Why did they act as if they were the bearer of morality when in fact their church organized meetings to go shoot up in the mountains? Why some of them were against abortion, while the State Board of Education did not even allow teachers to educate students on the use of contraceptive methods?

I was overwhelmed: in such a different environment, it's easy to forget our own goals and to fall in a rabbit hole. It is so much easier to settle in our dream world and neglect reality. We strive so hard to have a compartmentalized life, and when we get it, we often cavil at it because it is "boring". Sometimes it seems to us as if we are not even living. But when we come across a chance encounter with life, we despise it. How easy is it to hole up in our dreams and avoid facing the impish nature of life?

One day Miguel and I went with our host family to visit a zoo nearby. While we were having lunch, we saw a polygamous family for the first time. - Yes, polygamy is a thing in Utah, even though it is no longer recognized by the Mormon church. There was an old man, 5 women who were his wives, and 6 little kids. The wives and kids wore puffy, pastel-colored dresses that were evocative of the garments worn by the original Mormon pioneers. To me they all looked like histrionic characters of a play set in the Middle Ages. What was really peculiar to me was that some of his wives were really young and that the people around them were not surprised to see such a scene. The whole event intrigued me though.

My host brother had a completely different reaction to mine. A scornful frown lined on all his features and he said with a brazen attitude: "The women are subdued. That's rape!" He thought that the man's wives weren't really willing to stay with the man and the whole thing was outrageous to him.

My host dad was startled by his allegations. Indeed, he responded with a steely gaze: "You shouldn't be attacking people just because you don't understand their customs. I know it can be unsettling to see something uncommon, but different doesn't mean wrong; it is just different".

That was one of the few times my host dad decided to participate in a conversation without his usual noncommittal lilt. He was invested in the topic and wanted us to understand reality rather than to flinch from it. Right on cue, the way I saw things changed completely.

I realized what I was missing out on: I decided to go on an exchange year, not because I wanted to flaunt my English abilities to my classmates, but because I have always wanted a change. I wanted to get out of that bubble that hindered me from experiencing the beauty of the world outside.

At school, some people were reluctant to know me and I was reluctant to know them as well because we did not know each other. The rationale behind it is that human beings are scared of the unknown and they don't want to face it. We would rather stay in our realms and create the differences that tear us apart. We'd rather establish racism, gender inequality, bullying. Can't you see the pattern? Sometimes we can't capitulate to our desire for preeminence, so we hole up in our beliefs because it is way easier to be the king of our little clique. We are so entrenched in our opinions that we don't even want to consider what other people have to say.

I felt like I was a squatter of my own life. I went to the US to discover a new world, and not to find shelter in my own idyllic reality. I had to find a way to re-stoke the embers of that fire that burned of the longing for knowledge. So, what did I do? First of all, I started educating myself on their culture, on the reasons why they acted the way they acted. By doing so I stopped glowering at their actions, because I learned their primary reasons and their ultimate goals. I also understood that we share the same goals and intentions: we all want peace and the wellbeing of whom we love.

After that, I deemed essential to show them my culture, so that they could go through the same process I went through to understand their world. They were surprised to see how similar we are and even though I debunked all their assumptions, they were happy to embrace my point of view as well.

My experience was not easy. I didn't only travel to a new country, but I also explored the minds of people that perceive our world in a completely different way. I would be lying if I told you that this experience hasn't allowed me to know myself better. Despite the strenuous effort I had to take at the airport to leave my parents, I became more aware of the values I believe in, of what I like and of what I don't like. It also allowed me to ponder a lot about the person I want to be in the future, and it showed me the path I need to take in order to become that person.

Even though I was initially taken aback by the unfamiliarity of the environment, I learned how to deal with the unknown rather than decrying it. I started seeing the strangers around me not like "a flowing river of unknown faces, aliens, mutants that wanted to harm me", but as fellow human beings. The stranger was not my enemy anymore, because I managed to bridge the gap between us. We were able to find a common ground, and THAT was what allowed me to grow intellectually, because we were not attacking each other anymore, we were not censoring each other's words, but we were able to find the similarities in our values and understood that we shouldn't see everything black or white.

Once we grasp these concepts, it will be easy for us to really change the world.

We always tend to avoid what we don't understand. We separate from each other and we hole up in little cliques that live by our own values and creed, because it is way easier to do that, rather than get out of our comfort-zone. Consequently, we label people and we reduce them – for instance- to their political orientation. Extremism runs rampant nowadays, and we like it this way. We bind ourselves into political teams that share moral narratives. Once we accept that narrative, we become oblivious to alternative moral worlds.

My experience has shown me that sometimes we are blinded by the sheer desire for superiority. I have noticed that people love to sound highfalutin and spend their time flaunting their knowledge and their abilities. We give pompous speeches about what's moral and what's not moral, but we are so skilled at putting on a show of virtue that we often fool even ourselves. We advocate for gender equality and we claim to be feminists, but how can we dismantle gender inequality if we hate men- for example. Or if we keep emphasizing the differences among men and women by saying things like "typically male" or "typically female". How can we fight racism if we imply that all whites are inherently racist? Or if we imply that only people belonging to a certain political party are racist?

The more we emphasize differences, the more we drive people apart; this is basic social psychology. It is not a race to find the "culprit"; it is a race to improve society.

It is amazing to find someone who buttresses our values, but if we want to drive good changes in our world, we should stop acting like the guardians of our assumptions and we should be ready to listen to other points of view.

Let's collaborate with each other, let's look for the common ground, and when we encounter people who live in other matrices, let's connect with them. Let's establish an environment that fosters dialogue and not censorship, because only when we talk to people we realize our shortcomings and flatten the differences that separate us.

My exchange year has strengthened me and allowed me to tear down the borders that we create to step away from the unknown. I have experienced a tiny part of it, and I can tell you that I got out undeterred, zealous, and stronger than ever before.

Don't fear the unknown, but face it.