

Lessons From My Life In The Melting Pot

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It would have been easy to fill these pages with entertaining and amusing anecdotes and experiences. Instead I chose to write about something "real." My name is Muhammad Usman Ilyas, and I am from Islamabad, Pakistan. My country came into existence in 1947, and is cobbled together from a set of adjacent Muslim majority areas in what was British India. Immediately after gaining independence the greatest challenge was giving the people of this young nation, who hailed from different provinces with their own distinct cultures and languages, an identity that would unite them and hold them together. And whatever else might have happened in the following 60 years, the desire to forge a sense of unity and identity among its citizens gradually led to the subdual of diversity, and the setting in of uniformity. I think it is far easier to come up with a stereotypical description of what a Pakistani is that is true than for any other nationality. Gradually, it becomes very easy to view all people around you through a monochromatic lens. The ones who are different begin standing out and are viewed as "odd". From there it is a small step to start seeing other nations in terms of their stereotypes. I grew up in Germany and had some exposure to "life in the west." So when I was admitted to MSU I was not naïve enough to believe that all of America was Hollywood (which is where a good

many people get their impressions of Americans from). But I did expect a good deal of uniformity amongst its citizens. After 9/11 there were plenty of horror stories making the rounds in Pakistan about unpleasant experiences Pakistanis had to go through, so much so that my parents were even against me going. But the accounts were always of someone's distant relative, a friend's friend's friend, nothing concrete enough to be reliable. My first name is Muhammad, so I was expecting it to earn me some extra special attention at the airport on arrival. I was also prepared to be sized up every time I would hand over my credit card or passport to someone and greeted with skepticism every time I would tell someone that I am in the United States to get a PhD.

That was almost 4 years ago. I have been living in East Lansing since February of 2004. And I must say that life has been anything but what I had expected. My time here has changed a lot of my views and pre-conceptions. I have been taken by surprise by the diversity of people and plurality of cultures and views that are home to this society. I see MSU's traditional emphasis of "Excellence in Diversity" as the United States' approach to building a vibrant and successful society in microcosm. The stereotype of the ever suspicious-of-me Americans that I had built for myself in my mind simply did not hold, although there have been the occasional few that did fit my created profile. What I have come to realize is that there are all kinds of people here, the kind that I feel happy to have made acquaintances with and the ones I wish I had never met, but more the former than the latter. What I had been taught for much of my life is that

uniformity is good, because it eliminates any cause for disagreement and discord that differences supposedly lead to. Nothing, as I can see now, can be further from the truth. I see people from every conceivable corner of the globe in one place, getting along in harmony. People from opposite sides of troublespots on the globe get along great with each other. Anyone who follows international events even a little bit will know that traditionally Pakistan and its neighbor India have been rivals for the better part of their 60 year existence. My advisor is originally from Iraq but has a regular stream of students that come from Iran. Some of my best friends here in the lab that I use to bounce ideas off, get help from and collaborate with are from India. I knew very little about life in India before I came here. Since then I have come to know about how very similar lives people across the border live and how similar our cultures, values are. It is sad indeed that I had to travel half the globe across 10 time zones to talk to a neighbor so I could have this realization. Assuming anything about anybody based on their country of origin is a mistake. Inferences drawn on the basis of a person's nationality are perhaps as valid as those drawn on the basis of his/her race. Indeed, I hope that when I return back to Pakistan I can convey this lesson to others.

Another thing that I have often heard people back home, and indeed many TV commentators in the US itself, hold against life in America is the supposed decline or lack of family values. Once again I was in for a surprise. I had the opportunity to work at the Department of History for about 3 years. During this

time I interacted with numerous faculty and staff members there and occasionally got to hear about their personal lives and families. As far as I had the opportunity to observe, I found there virtually no difference in the way people in this country want to bring up their children and the way I want to bring up my 4 year old. We, and I mean all people, want the same thing, we want our children and our families to have a good education and lead happy and carefree lives free of want. Simply put, in a way, we are all the same. We all want the same things out of life. The supposed difference between what is considered appropriate and what is not are really not as great as they are made out to be by people's pre-conceptions.

My time at MSU has been like standing on high ground, overlooking the world below, and with every passing day and with every new acquaintance the view becomes clearer and lets me see farther and understand more. The perspective I have gained makes a lot of the problems we see nations squabbling over in the world today as petty and, quite simply, as not worth the cost it incurs. The word I was going to use initially for this was tolerance, but that would be wrong. Tolerance implies that I am biting my lip and restraining myself from confrontation. That is not what I mean. The best way to describe it is embracing our differences and is necessary in today's world more than ever before. I am certain that the time I will have spent here at MSU will be among my most treasured memories. But not for the quality of life that residing in the US brings with it but for gaining this greater perspective of the great diversity this planet is

home to. I do not think this would have been possible without having lived life in the great proverbial melting pot that is the United States.