

Pi's diversity story

What is diversity? Diversity is not only variety or a range of different things. To me, diversity is also the differences among people waiting to be understood and accepted. What causes diversity? Diversity most often occurs when a person from a different place and background moves into a community where she does not originally belong.

I am standing here speaking because I am somehow different from the rest of you – I am from Thailand and not Connecticut or anywhere else in the US. Thai people eat with spoon and fork; while Americans eat with fork and knife, and sometimes try to use chopsticks when eating Asian food. American kids can wear anything to schools; while Thai students go to school in uniforms, which means the whole school wears exactly identical attire and similar to that of students of a nearby school. America is a country well known to all Thais; while the only Americans who know Thailand are those who fought in the Vietnam War when American troops were commonly stationed in the country.

Actually, I have lived in quite a few places in the world. Besides Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, and Westover, I also have spent a year in Great Falls, Montana, which is known for being the least diverse part of the country. Therefore, I have quite a few experiences of handling diversity that I, myself, brought to the town. Most of the times, diversity excites people, but sometimes things get a little complicated.

Once my thirteen-year-old neighbor asked if we had electricity in Thailand. Of course, we do; we also have TVs and DVD players and ipods. She said she thought we lived in caverns and lit campfires for heat. Well, to be geologically accurate, even

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if we did live in caverns, the campfires would not be necessary because at the longitude that close to the equator the weather does not get cold. Before I got mad at her for looking down on my country, I realized that it was not her fault to be ignorant so I told her that we did have electricity and running water and traffic lights and cars – many cars.

Another time, I tried to explain to a lady that Thai people did not celebrate Christmas; we instead celebrate our traditional New Year day, which is April the thirteenth. And because April is the hottest month of the year, we have a tradition of splashing one another with water and sometimes ice. It is kind of like a warm climate version of a snowball fight when you think of it. After she gaped for a few seconds at my weird tradition, she said she never heard of Chinese people doing that. Of course not, because they do not. Then she asked if Taiwan was not a part of China. It might - depends on which political side you are on, but for sure Thailand is not Taiwan and has nothing to do with Chinese government. I do not see why or how, but this confusion between Taiwan and Thailand comes up incredibly often.

Once, my host mother took me to a town committee meeting with her to show that she helped bringing diversity to the town - a physical diversity literally to the town. As a result, I spent the entire time trying to explain that I was not from Taiwan and my name was Sasilada, not “sa-sa-li-di” or “sa-si-li-da.”

Talking about names, I know most of you still cannot say my real name correctly, but that is okay as long as you can call me Pi. Unfortunately, some Thai names turn out quite awkward when translated to English. For instance, one of my classmates is named “Nutz.” In Thai, the word means the quality of being a genius;

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unfortunately, in English, it means – we all know what it means. Another friend of mine has the name “Visit”, which actually means great and superior. However, when he was trying to register for a Facebook account, the website rejected him because it considered “Visit” as an action verb and not a name. Since then, his name starts with a “w” instead of a “v.” Luckily, my name is not “Swim” or “Make a phone call.”

From all these experiences in Montana plus more of those I had here, I have learned to live with the misunderstanding people might have about me and not to blame them for their ignorance. Instead, I try to explain to them as best as I can when there is a chance, in hope that they will understand my value, my country and my culture. For diversity, I always keep in mind the following statement: “nothing right, and nothing wrong, just different.”