

The New World

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I came to the United States of America almost forty years ago. One of my biggest worries prior to my move was my language proficiency. My American friends at the time reassured me that my English was not a problem. I somehow agreed with them because I was able to understand the conversations and dialogues while viewing American movies. However, my confidence was completely shattered during on my plane ride to America.

I was unable to understand the captain's instructions. The movie was also difficult to understand, sans the Chinese subtitles. In fact, if I had not checked with a fellow passenger sitting beside me, I wouldn't have known that the plane had already arrived at my final destination: Philadelphia.

At the airport, I felt helpless. I did not know how to use the public phone. I did not know where or how to call for a taxi. I did not know the address of the hospital where I was supposed to start my internship. With only a few dollars in my pocket, I was overwhelmed and scared. I reached out to the hospital out of desperation. I wonder if they had questioned my competence at that point?

On the following morning after our orientation, we had lunch. America at that time was still segregated. It was a shocking sight. People were segregated based on color. I did not know where to sit. Black? White? I decided to take on the "white" side where my other colleagues were seated.

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There were almost a hundred interns that year at Philadelphia General Hospital. There were two Asians- a Korean doctor and I. During registration, we were asked to fill in blanks of W, B and O. I was not White, not Black, but other. Later, I learned there was a law called the Chinese Exclusion Act with the expressed intention to prevent immigration from China. It was abolished just over a decade before my arrival.

The first month of my internship was confusing. Although I knew English, the slang took a lot of getting used to. Instead of saying "urinating," the patient would say things like "pee," "answer nature's call," "release myself," "pass the water," or "take a leak."

Like any other hospital, the emergency room was very large. Loud speakers were popular. I, on the other hand, preferred to run across the unit rather than use it. I was too embarrassed with my accent, although I don't think anyone would have cared.

Life in those days was tough with no one else to share the same experiences with me. It would have helped if there was someone there to help me.

Recently, the media reminded us of the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was an unforgettable sight when people wore black arm bands on their sleeves to mourn for their hero. For the first time, I understood what "the air was so thick, you could cut it with a knife" meant. Dr. King was a great man. Through the years, I have learned to appreciate the hardships that people went through the civil right struggle.

It took about six months before I started to settle in my routine. In my mind, China is my natural parent. I thank America, my adoptive parent, for treating me as one of her own.