

# America, the Land of Transformation

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A dictionary defines “grown-up” as a person who has reached the age of maturity and/or shown the characteristics of adults. Years ago back in China, I graduated from the prestigious Beijing Medical University (BMU) and continued residency training at one of BMU’s affiliated hospitals. At age 26, I had long passed the seasons of pimples and acnes. Following the “Golden Rule”, I had always respected and cared about others. Helping the needy and saving the sick were my top priorities. According to the standard definition, I felt overqualified as a “grown-up”.

I was wrong. In real life, the meaning of “grown-up” is much more complex than the simple definition the dictionary gives us. A drastic change happened to my life -- after careful consideration, my parents decided that America would provide a better future for their children -- my family emigrated to the US in 1990. That fall I was accepted into Graduate School at University of Maryland with a full scholarship. It was during the first semester in America, I grew in stature and transformed from a medical graduate to a mature grown-up.

My journey to adulthood started the moment my flight was airborne from Hong Kong Airport. It was not only the first time I traveled alone, but my first time on a plane. The thunderous roar of the engine and the loss of gravity during the takeoff were quite overwhelming. Everything was so alien, it took me a while to figure out the lavatory and to conquer the claustrophobia while inside.

It was a 23-hour flight, plenty time to paint the picture of America, the land of my destination. I still could not get over with the fact that I was PAID IN FULL to pursue further education there. Back then, global communication, such as internet and cell phone, was not readily available. In my carry-on backpack carefully stored was the letter from my uncle in New Pork City. Although I had read the letter numerous times and could even memorize the content by heart, I took out the letter and read it again – my uncle had promised to take me to all the places in the city before I continued my trip to Baltimore.

It turned out my flight lasted much longer than scheduled. The delay in Hong Kong led me miss the connection from San Francisco to New York City. Knowing nothing about the airline system, I fell into total panic in this new land. My entire belongings were two luggage and \$100 in cash. Plus I would miss my uncle who supposed to pick me up at the airport.

Only after one dares to leave the familiar, one can embrace the unknown. With cold sweat and tremor, I explained to the flight attendant my dilemma, especially about my unable to afford a new ticket and clueless on using the public phone in the airport. Without hesitation, she not only reconnected me to another flight to New York City, she called my uncle on my behalf and informed him my new flight number and arrival time. Just imagine my surge of joy especially I was told I did not owe her a penny!

By the time the plane approached New York City, it was around midnight. Gliding down from the myriad of city lights, I couldn’t help tears dripping down my cheeks. Home, at last! America received me with open arms and vibrant energy. It hit the high note of the day like the grand finale of a symphony. This first night in the New World forever twinkles in my memory.

After the adrenalin surge, I had a long sleep at my uncle's house. My worried aunt kept checking on me, as I snored through dinner time the next day. In the following week, we toured the city, soaking up every scene in this new land. Among all the places we visited, the Statue of Liberty was my favorite, still is! For me, freshly out of China, the concept of freedom was new and exciting. There for the first time I felt an invisible bondage was broken, the boundary was leaped across, like a hermit crab crawling out the small shell to look for a bigger home. If Heaven were the city paved with gold, New York City would be the "Heaven on Earth" to me.

All the excitement seemed so short-lived. Nothing could bring me back to the reality faster than the school life in Baltimore where I faced the challenge of my lifetime. To my astonishment, I had a hard time understanding what the professors uttered during the lectures. Their English was nothing like what I had learned in China, it was as foreign as Chinese to most of the students in the classroom. Though I could express myself and ask questions, their replies made no sense to me. Gone was my ability to communicate!

Believe it or not, language barrier almost paralyzed my life in the New World. I had troubles getting a direction, communicating with Social Security officers, opening a bank account and many more. Without help, I was not even able to order a hamburger at McDonald. The frustration was manifested ten-fold to the worse with my self esteem. Would people believe me as a full-fledged medical doctor? Without the aid of spoken language, could you recognize me as a woman of worth?!

What disturbed me the most was the dark side of inner city life. A hotdog vendor was killed on our campus during lunch hour when he refused to give the robber his money box. A student was murdered in the bar two blocks down from my dormitory... My whole world was turned upside down. Where was my "Heaven on Earth"? Was my fate to live in fear? To become the one who never gives up pursuing dreams, despite fear and uncertainty, requires maturity!

"God helps those who help themselves." I made up my mind to grow successfully in this land of abundance, called America. Pretty soon I was fully engaged in the survival mood, and I discovered a new best friend – my tape recorder. Never letting it leave my sight, I carried the recorder in the classrooms, at the laboratory and on the bus. Often it remained awake with me till 2 or 3 in the morning. To learn English, I watched TV, read newspaper daily, and attended conferences and seminars. Whenever at a party, I practiced my English boldly. After many sleepless nights, my ears "popped open" and the lectures started to make sense. One day I even dreamed in English.

During many lonely nights, I wept and wet my pillow. Before I came to America, my parents used to be my constant support, mentally and financially. As new immigrants, they were fighting their own battles to survive. Without fluent English, the only jobs they were offered at that moment were hotel janitors and Chinese restaurant workers. It was time for us to switch roles – *my* comforting shoulder for them to lean on. Swallowing down my tears and hiding away my own pain, I was determined to cheer them up and point out to them the silver lining.

Looking back twenty years later, I realized that the first semester in America was the period of growth which equipped me to face the difficulty in life with confidence and calm. Like a caterpillar in the cocoon, only after breaking and squeezing through the tight bondage, it earns the privilege to fly freely as a beautiful butterfly.

No doubt, the first semester was the turning point of my life. I learned to appreciate what I have and who I am, regardless of my circumstances. I learned to become the blessing to others, like my aging parents. I gained a realistic view of America, her strength and weakness. So many people touched my life with their generosity and kindness, like the flight attendant, my uncle and aunt, my professors and schoolmates. Each one of them contributed to my path to maturity.

Today I often share my experiences with the new immigrants who have just arrived in America. Let no hardships and tears destroy your American dreams. There is always light at the end of tunnel, the future is always brighter. Be patient and give your caterpillar enough time to grow and change.

Some say America is a big melting pot, for me it is where I matured and discovered my true self and inner strength-- it is the land of transformation.