

Cultural Sensitivity and Humility

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One of the best lessons I learned on cultural sensitivity was given to me one day while standing in line at the bank. Finishing a long day, exhausted, and running late for an appointment, left me in a bad mood and frustrated that I had to stop at the bank. There were three cash machines, and I stood in line in the middle, waiting for my turn. As I half expected, when the machine on the right opened up, the lady standing next to me, and most certainly not in front of me, cut in front of me and went to the machine. This was the day I decided I would no longer tolerate this rude cutting, I said in my broken Hangul, that I was next in line and she should not cut in front of me. She looked confused, until the man next to her explained the situation in Hangul. He explained that in America in a situation like this, with more than one machine, we only have one line for all three machines- compared to Korea where they have separate lines for each machine. Realizing my mistake, I was beyond embarrassed and tried to get her to go in front of me, but the damage had been done. I got my cash, and quickly left the bank. By taking my cultural norms, and applying them to Korea, I had been very rude. This embarrassment taught me a valuable lesson, which I will remember way past my time here in Korea.

There are many other cultural differences between Korea and Western cultures. For me the most challenging ones haven't been in the way that people do things, but rather cultural norms and values. I place a lot of value on individualism and non-conformity, while Koreans value the group as a whole, and keeping the peace. Learning that one way is not better than the other, and understanding that both perspectives serve a purpose, each possessing their own good and bad, is a lesson that cannot be taught by reading a text book, but only thru experience. While all these differences can sometimes be a great source of frustration, it is better for our mental health to just accept them, and remind ourselves that these differences are part of Korean culture, and learning to accept and experience cultural differences is one of the main reasons for traveling.

One of my closest friends told me before I left Korea, that living in Korea would teach me humility. In America I was completely self-reliant, where in Korea we are dependent on many people. We lose a bit of confidence, as we realize we are not capable of doing everything on our own. We need help doing simple things, such as transferring money home, or going to the doctor. This dependence can be frustrating, but see it as an opportunity to learn humility, and understand our interdependence as people. No one can be completely self-reliant. This experience has resulted in a deep appreciation for people who have helped me, often without any motive, particularly my co-teacher. It would be impossible to return all the goodness that has been given to me here in Korea. I believe that learning humility, being the recipient of kindness, results in us being more compassionate when we get home.