

Transience

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Life is transient. That is what I told myself over a year ago while contemplating what I was doing and what I wanted to do with my life. Did I really want to be stuck in a job at a company, beginning a journey to retirement at a desk job? Did I really want to be doing something that I am not sure I love, something that I may end up hating? Did I really want to risk the chance of looking back when I am old and grey, regretting not going out to see the world when I had the chance?

My answer to all three questions was no. Soon after coming to these answers, I applied to teach in Korea through EPIK.

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Life is transient. I began looking for volunteer opportunities right after I got settled down in my apartment in Busan. I first started volunteering at a Food Kitchen, where I helped prepare and distribute food to the homeless and needy. However, the Food Kitchen had very minimal contact or interaction with those in need, which was not what I had in mind when I first started volunteering. I wanted to help people directly. So, after about a month, I moved on to the next volunteering opportunity available. That is when I came to the Nurimter Shelter.

Nurimter (roughly translates from Korean as “A Place of Open Space”) is a shelter that houses women survivors of domestic abuse and their children. Originally starting as a two-floor housing complex, recent renovations have added two floors to the building, allowing them to take care of over 45 people at a time. The families can stay there for up to half a year, with a possible three-month extension, while the shelter tries to arrange for the best living situation that would prevent them from going back to the abuse that they came from. During their time at Nurimter, the mothers and children receive treatment and counseling, whether it be physical, mental, or psychological, completely for free. In return, the families are asked to help cook, clean, and create a positive living environment for themselves and the other residents.

There are a handful of other volunteers working at the shelter who provide English classes for all the students, pre-school age and up, as well as activities such as yoga and Zumba. I volunteer as the English tutor for the middle and high school children at the shelter. On Mondays and Fridays, I go to the shelter to give hour-long lessons, as well as providing one-on-one tutoring sessions for the students when they have upcoming tests.

During my time at Nurimter, I have absolutely fallen in love with all the employees and families at the shelter. They are some of the most caring and understanding people you will ever meet. On days where I look like death, they always ask if I am okay and tell me that they understand if I need a week or two off. On days where they find out I have not yet eaten dinner, they prepare a fruit platter for me in the blink of an eye. They are truly remarkable

people. As an example of how much I have come to respect and love all those at the shelter, I held a personal fundraiser for them. Recent governmental budget cuts in Korea have resulted in loss of funding to the shelter, which means Nurimter now completely relies on personal donations to stay afloat. Even though I already make a monthly monetary donation to the shelter, I wanted to do more. So, I asked my friends and family to donate any amount they could, and ended up raising over W500,000.

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Life is transient. There has only been one time thus far in Korea where I felt genuinely depressed. I am not talking about the occasional times where I get a bit homesick, missing my friends and family, or longing for a solid burrito with amazing guacamole and cheese. I am talking about that one time at a train station, where I just sat on the bench, watching my trains pass on by for who knows how long, introspectively thinking and being profoundly sad. Why was I like this?

I would be lying if I said volunteering has had no effect on my teaching at school. I am one of the EPIK teachers lucky enough to have a co-teacher who trusts me to handle a good chunk of the teaching duties in class. On top of that, I create and teach my own curriculum for after-school classes, Grades 1 through 5, without a co-teacher. It is expected, then, that volunteering twice a week with that kind of workload will result in days where I am absolutely exhausted. My school is rather far away, forcing me to wake up at 6AM and get back to my apartment at about 8:30PM on days I go to the shelter. These long days add up. After one particularly rough day at school, where my students were being rowdier than usual, I was simply too tired to go volunteer. I sent a text to the coordinator at the shelter saying I could not go, and she replied understandingly. The week after, I went back to the shelter refreshed, with a fun lesson prepared, looking forward to seeing the kids again after a session off. However, two of my students were missing. I asked the others where the two students were and they told me they moved out of the shelter over the weekend.

My friend warned me to not get too close with the students; while their living situation at the shelter is stable, they may still leave at any moment depending on their circumstances. As the cliché goes, I listened to this advice with my brain, but not with my heart. It is impossible not to get emotionally attached to the kids at the shelter because their perseverance is remarkable. Knowing that they have gone through so much, yet still smile and warmly welcome me every week, triggers a protective “big brother” mechanism within me. Those two students were the first students of mine to leave at the shelter. I was shocked. After the lesson, sitting on the bench, I berated myself. “Why couldn’t I just have manned up and come to volunteer that day? What is my tiredness anything compared to what the kids have gone through? I had a lesson already prepared, so if I just pushed myself to stay on the train, I could have gone to the shelter.” I felt sad, guilty even, that I did not say goodbye to the kids before they left. After a week, I was finally able to realize that, while I regretted that decision, I should not be so hard on myself. As my friend told me, even though I am only a tiny blip that shows up in their lifetime, just being there to provide them some laughter and fun while learning English is an amazing opportunity in itself. Now, I am content just knowing that we had a happy and fun final class together.

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As I near the end of my first year here in Korea, I have decided to sign on to work here in Korea for another year. During that time, I will continue to volunteer at Nurimter. Being an elementary school teacher for my “regular” job and a middle and high school tutor at Nurimter, I am fortunate enough to be teaching the entire spectrum of pre-collegiate students, maximizing my experience here in Korea. Furthermore, I intend to look for other volunteering opportunities that will fuel my passion for directly helping those in need.

“Life is transient, so take advantage of every opportunity you get.” That has become the mantra I have discovered in Korea, and one I will carry for the rest of my life.



Starting top left, going counter-clockwise:
Beach Outing, Fun Day at the Park, Nurimter Thanksgiving Shenanigans
Hand Painting and Nail Art at the Park, Face Painting with Fellow EPIK Teacher Kasim Shahzad
Me Being Dragged to Play After Sitting Down to Rest*, Me Having Fun*
(*Photo Credit: Noelle Cruz)