
What the Broken Glass Saved

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“The window is smashed!”

“Wait... where are our bags?!”

On the last day of our two-week summer vacation in America, my family and I were sightseeing at a famous tourist site called Lombard Street, in San Francisco. Because our ultimate objective had been to take photographs, we had only one small bag with us, containing our phones, passports, and my father’s wallet. Finished and feeling satisfied with our photo-op excursion, we headed back to our car, unaware of the appalling incident that had happened in the thirty minutes that we were gone.

I was the first to reach the car. I immediately noticed that something was amiss. On one of the seats, an obnoxious person had spilled their drink, and the sparkling ice was scattered on only that corner of the vehicle. Forgetting the fact that the window had been closed, I immediately felt slightly irritated and alerted my father, who was a couple steps away. That was when my sister stammered that her window was broken. What I had thought was ice had been her window, completely smashed in. My brain froze entirely when I heard what she said next: “Our bags are gone!”

My family managed to remain somewhat calm, but I could not stop myself from crying. Not because my bags were stolen, and not because somebody had ruined our vacation, but because in that moment, all the unpleasant memories from the last two weeks suddenly engulfed me, and I regretted ever coming back to America.

To be honest, I had not been having a particularly good time during the vacation. America just was not the America I remembered. Perhaps it is because I was too young to notice anything back then. Perhaps it is because I grew up to be overly sensitive. Somehow I felt betrayed by my own memories. Later, I realized that it was not the country itself that bothered me, it was the people. It seemed as though the once friendly and kind residents of America had been replaced by identical clones, whose insides held the opposite character traits. Out of all the hurtful happenings, I can only remember three of them; the excessively cranky, “JESUS, oh my God!” I got in return when I apologized for bumping into a lady, the way employees at several brand stores chose to ignore only us and the Chinese customers after just one glance, and how airport workers snapped at me over the littlest things which they had neglected to mention to me in the first place.

To someone else, these incidents could have been no more than minor disruptions.

However, this kind of behavior is very hurtful to me, and was much more common than I expected. As a result, I was burdened by mounting stress. Soon, I began to confuse my exasperation towards those people for resentment towards the entire country; which I used to be so proud of. Needless to say, some people I met were incredible people who made me feel a lot better in their companionship. But because they were so rare, it solidified my belief that the America I knew had changed for the worse, and was gone. So when I found myself staring at the broken pieces of glass that were shattered on the empty seat, I was pushed over my limits; it was the final blow. It is one thing to go to a new country and have negative experiences; it is another to have them taunt you and make you wonder where all of your amazing memories came from.

While we were looking distraught, the residents and tourists passing us by looked at the mess, whispered amongst themselves, and went on their way. My father caught sight of a police car driving by and tried to wave the policeman over. The policeman, having briefly analyzed the situation, yelled “Just call 911!” as he proceeded to drive away, actually waving at us as if we had stopped him for a casual chat. At this point, I had given up expecting anyone to come over to check if we were managing alright, the way I remember the Americans from my childhood would have done.

If no one had kindly offered us their help, I would have been reluctant to visit America again after this trip. But just as my father was about to call the police, a man pulled up besides us and got out of his car, just to ask if we were doing okay. He then proceeded to call the police for us, and gave us directions to the nearest police station. We talked for quite a long time, with the man giving us advice on remembering what we had lost, checking if we still had our passports, and apologizing for the crime even though it was not his fault. According to him, starting a year ago similar incidents had been happening to tourists on a daily basis. He was extremely sorry about his, as the area was his hometown and he remembered how peaceful and nice it used to be before the issue arose. A lady who also stopped by afterwards said the same exact thing, after benevolently showing deep concern for us as the man before had done.

By the time I got home, I had calmed down enough to thoroughly reflect on the vacation, and it dawned on me just how ignorant I had been. Those two residents, in addition to the select few who treated us very well, made me realize I was unreasonable for misdirecting my dejection towards the entire country of America, instead of towards the remainder who did not. Just as there are unkind people in Japan, there are unkind people in America, and in every country. I had just been lucky that I was surrounded by generous people when I lived there; I was not in any way betrayed by my memories. America had not changed. I had. But if the actions of a group of residents can influence a person’s opinion about a country —*especially even those who had lived there before*— what exactly does that indicate?

Locals play a large part in international exchange. If you travel to another country, you have a one hundred percent chance of meeting local people. Inevitably, how you think about that country will be deeply influenced by those people. Will they be

charming? Or impertinent? To make a positive impression, it is essential that the residents of a country be kind-hearted to foreigners; after all, they hold the key to the doors that will either welcome the guests, or be closed in their faces. Acting the same way towards other residents is just as crucial as well. Those acts of kindness are the windows to the heart of a country. But most importantly, an exchange will not be established without reciprocation. The kindness that is being offered must be accepted. When I chose to trust the man who was helping us instead of blocking him out, that was when ours began to form. Because of that exchange, I was able to disregard the other experiences that haunted me. I was able to see America for what it always was; a great country with diversity in every aspect, including the character of its citizens, and it only took the kindness of one man for me to figure that out. So what is needed for international exchange? Through this unexpected episode, I found the answer; the locals' ability to engage actively *and* altruistically with foreigners, and their ability to reciprocate from the heart. It all comes down to what you can actually do for, or with someone, instead of watching them go by.

How do you act towards people who are strangers to your country? Do you hold the doors open for them? Or do you keep the keys stashed away in your pocket?