

Richard DeSalvo
'On Culture Shock'
Tree Talk 06/29/07
Camp Pasquaney

This past fall, I spent four months in Beijing, China, studying the Chinese language, living with a Chinese family, and immersing myself in their Chinese culture. Studying abroad was unforgettable, and something I hope each of you will someday have the opportunity to do. It was such a rewarding experience; I came home with a stronger grasp on Mandarin Chinese, a better understanding of Chinese politics, history, and culture, a second set of loving, and arguably more attentive parents, and a deeper sense of myself and my place in the world.

But seeing as this summer has only just begun, I'd rather talk about the beginning. Despite how prepared I believed I was for living in China, during my first several weeks in Beijing, nothing came easily. As the realization finally hit me that I was actually in Beijing and wouldn't be coming home anytime soon, I began to experience feelings of doubt, homesickness, alienation, fear. I stepped off of a plane in Beijing, and in an instant I was an outsider, a foreigner for the first time and this felt very strange. It was complete and utter culture shock.

Culture shock is a term used to describe feelings of disorientation and confusion when one is suddenly placed in an environment completely different from one's own. Though it's entirely normal and happens to everyone, it can be a very discouraging experience. Immediately, there were many things in Beijing that placed me significantly outside of my comfort zone.

To begin with, I was completely overwhelmed by the enormous population of Beijing. Coming from a small town background and spending summers at Pasquaney, finding quiet moments alone to stop and think has never been an issue. But in Beijing, it was wall-to-wall people all the time. As I bumped along through the crowds in the markets, and could never seem to find a seat on the public bus, I felt suffocated and annoyed and I longed for the peace and quiet of home.

I also longed for the fresh air. I was shocked by the disgustingly high level of pollution in the city. In fact, my very first memory of Beijing was mistaking the sky for a dingy cement airport ceiling. The pollution is so bad, they actually say that simply breathing the Beijing air is the equivalent to smoking two to three packs of cigarettes a day. I found it hard to embrace Beijing as my new home knowing the physical environment was so detrimental to my health.

Mainly though, it was my inability to speak the Chinese language that really prevented me from feeling at home in Beijing. Language is something I have always taken for granted. Since childhood, when I've had an opinion, a direction, a question, or a complaint, I've always been able to communicate that with ease, without even thinking. But in Beijing, I couldn't give or take because I didn't yet share a common vocabulary with the Chinese people. I wanted to fit in, I wanted to contribute, and I wanted people to see that I wasn't just a tourist, but my broken Chinese was always a disappointing reminder that I was from somewhere else. The next few weeks were very hard for me. I felt alienated and alone and I often wondered if I would ever feel any sense of belonging in Beijing.

Culture shock can happen to anyone—anywhere. I know it happens here. Trust me, sometimes “a hillside above lake Pasquaney” can seem as foreign to a person as life in Botswana, or India, or Italy. Railroads, tub, sloppy cows, long blues—what is this place? “A seeing eye,” “stop and think,” “sow an act,”—what do these things mean? We have our own myths and rules, our own language and traditions, our own symbols and ways of making sense of life here at Pasquaney. But these things are very different from what we are used to at home and that’s why it’s often hard to adjust, why we sometimes feel culture shock.

Culture shock at Pasquaney can come in response to a number of things. I’m giving this talk because I believe many of you have had or continue to have doubts about why you are here, disagreements with some of the rules, or fears about what may be asked of you. It’s just really hard to feel at home in a place that isn’t your home. It could be your first time living away from your Mom and Dad, or brothers and sisters. You probably haven’t grown up taking cold showers at 7AM every morning. Maybe you’re not used to going to chapel each Sunday or living in a dorm or acting on stage. For each of us, there is something very different that causes us to hesitate in our acceptance of Pasquaney.

In his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera describes being in a foreign country as “walking a tightrope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood.”

Right now, a week into camp, you have all just stepped out onto a similar tightrope and that is a very courageous thing to do.

What I hope each of you is able to do is keep an open mind about you at all times. It’s hard to do but it’s important to realize that each time you are faced with an uncomfortable or different situation you have a decision to make about how you want to respond. Take inspections for example. Perhaps tomorrow you get a few points taken off for something you didn’t really know was a problem, something maybe you’ve been doing differently at home your entire life. How might this make you feel? You might feel embarrassed and alienated from your dorm-mates who got no points off, you might feel like this is an attack on how you do things at home, maybe you’re angry at the inspectors or at the whole process in general. I know from experience that these situations, these clashings of cultures, are the hardest to overcome. But if you have an open-mind, you’ll understand that things here aren’t necessarily better or worse—just different, and if you accept that, you will really thrive and things will begin to get easier. It’s like learning a new language: no one expects you to be fluent on day one, but once you start picking up on a few key words and phrases, entire worlds are opened up to you and you’ll begin to feel that sense of familiarity and belonging you associate with home.

I felt this way in Beijing over time. As I learned the language, I found myself appreciating more and more of the culture. I learned the name of my bus stop. I learned how to get a taxi and find the bank. I learned how to tell my homestay mother that I wanted her to stop doing my homework for me every night like she insisted.

I found that the Chinese people who heard me at least trying to communicate in their language were very welcoming and helpful and this made me feel at home. I even began to see the pollution as many of the local Chinese do, as only a temporary nuisance and more so as a sign of

Beijing's exciting development and future. It was all very cool for me, to go from feeling like an outsider and rejecting where I was, to slowly learning to appreciate the differences, to finally embracing them and feeling as if I belonged.

One thing I want to make clear here is that I'm not just talking to first year campers. Everyone is new here in 2007. I'm new to giving tree talks, you might be new to living in Dana, new to rowing or sailing, and *everyone* is new to living on this hillside in this year with this amazing combination of people we have here today. So if you are experienced in any role, be patient and kind to those struggling and realize it takes time to adjust. If you are inexperienced in any role, trust that Pasquaney has got a few things right, and take time to learn the language. If you feel like you are walking a tightrope, let the Pasquaney constants be your net beneath you. Respect, kindness, good manners, humility, the vocabulary list goes on. These characteristics make up the heart of Pasquaney culture; they are the only sensible language we know, and I hope each of you will see through the initial tough times and learn to speak it for yourself.

Thank you.