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Althea Muth

Junior

Suffer, Escape, and Fulfill: Cultural Experience Essay

AP Language and Composition

Mona Shores High School

Ms. Roxanne Schaner

11 November 2016

Suffer, Escape, and Fulfill

I had overheard plenty about what constituted a Cultural Experience essay, and I had an assortment of various ideas lined up, ranging from my first vacation in idyllic Northern Michigan with a friend (normally a regular getaway for many residents of the Great Lakes State), to the chills and nostalgia that ran through me seeing the pop-punk legends Blink-182 (though it was not my first concert), to using this assignment as an excuse to have the privilege of seeing Kanye West live (an artist I have listened to for much of my life whom I consider one of my heroes and quite frankly, a living god). Instead, I decided to explore an area of culture I admittedly do not have much experience or background in— religion, in this case, Buddhism. I possessed vague ideas on the principles of Buddhism, such as how life is all suffering and learning to let go, and I knew that my Taiwanese side of the family practiced some form. All I thought was that the incense they burned smelled lovely.

My few prior experiences with organized religion have fortunately been nothing except positive; I have a (rather unsteady) job as a pianist at a Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation, a liberal church with teachings of respecting the worth and dignity of each being with frequent music and readings, and a few occasions performing at First Congregational Church, an organization that was slightly more “formal,” if I can call it that, with scripture readings and accompanying lessons applied to real life, but the main messages being that all are welcomed and that God loves all his children. Volunteering at community breakfast at FCC and studying piano with their brilliantly talented organist have also been privileges of mine. However, prior to my sophomore year of high school, I had, in fact, never attended any form of religious service. This came as a result of the enduring bitterness and contempt of my father toward his strict Catholic upbringing where he only developed a sense of hatred and self-deprecation through the idea that you are born a product of sin. Since he felt so strongly about

organized religion and did not want me to experience what he did, I never did attend any form of church service until I was fifteen, which ended up making me shape my own moral standards and judgment through my cold, solitary logic rather than a faith that I was raised in, for better or for worse. I remember being criticized by a classmate in the third grade. She asked, "Why *don't* you go to church?" There was a time I could not produce an answer; today, the reason is a simple disinterest in sitting through a service, specifically those of Western religions. Regardless, I have always held some degree of fascination with religion, specifically Eastern religions, including Buddhism. When I think of "culture," I most immediately think my definition includes anything involving art, music, speaking, or religion. I ran various ideas through my mind and my search to fulfill this assignment eventually led me to the GR Buddhist Temple and Zen Center on October 9th of this year.

The Grand Rapids Buddhist Temple and Zen Center is a small urban temple. Entering the temple, I was greeted and asked if it was my first time there and to take off my shoes out of respect, much like how men remove their hats at church. For the service, there were chairs set up along the walls and mats to kneel on. I opted to kneel down as I felt it would magnify the authenticity, sense of togetherness, and overall effect of the service and teachings. The service consisted of a man in a yellow robe, the Venerable Hung Su, speaking and leading the service, attendees greeting each other, chants, and meditation. To my surprise, the dominant language of the service was English and the staff of the temple as well as the attendees were mainly Caucasian, with the exception of an Indian girl and her mother and an African American man sitting beside me. Needless to say, I was moderately surprised, as I was already expecting to see more people of Asian descent like myself. The various Asian markets I have shopped at in Grand Rapids were typically only patronized by people of complete Asian descent, and being biracial and rather thinly educated on my background, I felt odd and out of place in such

authentic environments as these stores. In the temple, I first felt disappointment in this expectation of unadulterated Asian culture being dissolved, as I always have held an interest in exploring elements of this culture, but throughout the course of the service, I felt a sense of belonging not present in many other spaces within our culture through the friendliness and openness of my fellow occupants of the building. No one was judged for his or her color or prior knowledge, only immersed in an environment of enlightenment. No condescending looks were thrown my way, and those seated around me introduced themselves and greeted me with warmth. The power of warmth and kindness was evident that day. When one treats those around him with even the simplest kindness, he works to dispel some of the suffering in the world. How many days are made by compliments, even those made in passing? How many lives are impacted by acts of kindness, random or planned? Now, think upon the potential effect of every person doing this.

Service did not make me an expert in Buddhism by any means, but I did learn core concepts I did not know previously. The focus of the service on Sunday was “Right Intention,” which is an element of The Noble Eightfold Path. Considered the way out of suffering, it includes the Right Understanding, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Note that “right” in this case is not a standard of morals or opinion-oriented, it translates more as “proper.” In the service it was likened to baking a cake, as there is a right and wrong way to do so. The right intention is the intention of harmlessness and freedom from ill will and cruelty. When one avoids hurtful anger and being greedy and malicious, he practices right intention. The Venerable Hung Su told a story of a time he was angry over an unimportant matter he did not name but stepped back and thought upon whether his anger was necessary or justified. In the end, it was something he could let go. His stories gave the audience of attendees a more personal and relatable experience,

rather than solely lifeless verbiage or sanctimonious speech. He also repeatedly reminded that one is never commanded to follow the teachings of the Buddha; he is simply asked, and the choice is up to him. This struck me as some I know who have become disenchanted with Western religions have done so because of the uncompromising and harsh nature of some services. Buddhist temple appeared to be a striking opposite; it was welcoming and soft. The chants were easy to understand, reasonable, and therapeutic in nature to recite- one on wasted time impacted me particularly well.

Entering the temple felt like entering a different world. Even the neighborhood the temple was located in felt like a different world. The temple was situated on South Division Avenue, a road with various, richly ethnic neighborhoods and many decaying abandoned buildings approaching downtown. Walking down the street, I looked around and found myself among seasoned loiterers and vivid graffiti. Entering the temple, the smell of incense burning was a welcome greeting, a smell ever so slightly familiar to me, provoking memories of nights in the Taipei, Taiwan apartment of my grandmother dating back to approximately seven years ago. I remember sitting on the bookshelf on the balcony of her apartment, observing the streetlights illuminating the life occurring beneath me, my mind rid of all worries and cares. Today, it remains one of my most surreal and otherworldly memories. This offered me an escape and led me to the idea that there are infinite spaces within our culture that serve as means of escape. An escape could be a favorite place, a hobby, or a multitude of other items. For example, the Lake Michigan beach holds some of my most beautiful memories. Music provides a healthy outlet to tell stories or release feelings for many. In the modern age of today, we live fast paced lives, buzzer to buzzer, deadline to deadline. In turn, we experience stress and anxiety which lead to irritability and bitterness and more tangibly, physical health problems. Stress can lead to the very real problems of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and more (Mayo Clinic Staff). I wondered if since stress

leads to health problems, was meditation proven in some way to alleviate these ailments? My mother, who prays, meditates, and does yoga, always advocated that forms of meditation and positive thinking did. Turns out, she was correct. In fact, meditation, particularly Buddhist-style mindfulness meditation, where one concentrates on his or her breathing and the present moment, can offer a diversion from the grips of stress-related ailments. Research from John Hopkins University suggests mindfulness meditation can ease stresses including anxiety and depression (Corliss). Meditating upon my breathing and the present, reciting chants, and simply taking in the atmosphere allowed my anxieties to dissipate, even if only for moments. Experiencing a state of peace and belonging in the temple allows for a form of escape for those who attend services there.

However, “escape” did not only conjure that concept in my mind; it provoked questions and thought as well. More and more, I realized that myself and many others seek escapes not just pertaining to the agitations of everyday life, but we also seek to escape our own intentions and motives. The focus of that Sunday was “Right Intention,” and it was unclear to me whether I, or anyone else in our culture, could truly cleanse all of his or her intentions of cruelty and ill-willed desires. A very direct example is that I did not attend a service at the temple with the primary reason of learning or enlightenment; I attended because I have a mandatory essay that I am placing this sentence in right now. Someone may handwrite me an apology full of dissembled excuses, and I know it is actually for the purpose of alleviating his own guilt. Corrupt politicians claim to focus on the well-being of the people they serve, but instead seek more power for themselves. This brings about a circle- our intentions are selfish, which leads to our suffering, which can be escaped— through the Noble Eightfold Path, including none other than Right Intention. If our intentions are tarnished, how can we even begin to escape the suffering in our lives?

As a culture, especially Western cultures such as the US, where we happen to live, people say we value our health and sharing kindness, but under pressure, these values and our good intentions quickly fall to the wayside. How many times has a New Year's resolution, for example, more exercise or healthier eating, dissolved within a matter of weeks? A resolution of mine a couple years ago was, "be more positive." Quite the habitual pessimist with a tough schedule I was, one can take a guess at how long that lasted. With the pressures and anxieties of our everyday lives, many resort to self-preservation, which becomes selfishness, and seek instant gratification, with intentions both questionable and not. In fact, I have observed throughout my entire life that our modern culture is obsessed with instant gratification, which in turn will inevitably lead to suffering. In their minds, people believe the quickest option is the easiest all around, while it may be detrimental in the long run. For example, we eat overprocessed, packaged food that leads to serious health problems such as cancer in the future. We buy cheap clothes that will fall apart with any prolonged use. We perform our work at subpar levels because we want to make it through another day. It is a perpetual cycle. It is a "wash, rinse, and repeat."

It is this nearsightedness that comes from our stressful lives that seems to make life more bearable on a day to day basis but damages us later on. We can generally agree that we value peace, happiness, and contentment, but we have shifted and redefined our intentions to provide excuses for our sometimes less-than-stellar actions. I am going to take the more cynical route and suggest that perhaps there is no absolute escape, but that does not mean that our culture cannot channel our energy into turning these weaknesses into strengths that will make life easier or more fulfilling. It is possible to change one's lifestyle. It is possible to start working out a little every day, cut out a certain food, use a calendar to forecast upcoming events. It is possible to make smaller changes that are not panaceas but

absolve at least some stress. While there are realities that we must accept as inescapable elements of our culture such as fast pacing and a buzzer to buzzer schedule, perhaps the closest thing to a cure is to know self-discipline, work toward a goal or prolonged gratification, and practice understanding of others' situations to the best of our abilities. We may be trapped in this mess we call "life", but if we all remember that we all just so happen to be trapped the same, just under vastly different circumstances, we can begin to attenuate negative feelings that contribute to our suffering by attempting understanding and respect for each other.

If I desire anything, I desire to be brutally honest, if not in my exchanges and dialogues in my daily life, but in my works that will survive to some degree beyond my existence. The Venerable Hung Su enumerated in the service, "We are all going to die, and this building will one day crumble." This life is only temporary, so what will be done in the time being to accomplish the idea of fulfillment? I will be brutally honest in admitting that I can be fake to give a semblance of good graces. I have a big ego. I focus on my own self. I will be brutally honest in admitting that though I did glean lessons, am I going to utilize them in my own life? Perhaps not *completely*. However, I do utilize them in some form; through trying to be pleasant toward others and focusing on what is important: my studies and music. The meditation booklet I purchased reads, "If even mountains are subject to change and dissolution, how much more so is my body, which is susceptible to disease, breakdown, the elements, accidents, and all kinds of harm? I must utilize my opportunities now, before that chance is lost forever" (Guided Meditations 10). Relating back to the recitation on wasted time, I reinforced something I already know to be true in my head; that I must strive to live a consummate life to the farthest bounds of my abilities, as we all should. People do not have to experience unnecessary stress, but they should push themselves to work their hardest. People do not have to neglect their personal well-being, but they should make an

effort to at least make the days more pleasant for those around them. One of my counselors at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp last summer, when asked about her most profound piece of life advice, advised, “If you work hard and are respectful, you can get anywhere you want in life.” At a service at Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation, the speaker of the day, a Unitarian Universalist minister from Kalamazoo, engaged the congregation and inspired her audience to “make the world a more beautiful place,” through simply doing what they love. We are given the most beautiful of times and the most painful of times, and both will one day pass, as I have learned nothing is permanent. There were days a few years ago when I hated myself, had no idea where I wanted to be going, surrounded myself with negative people, and was blatantly unknowing of my abilities. Now, excitement overwhelms me today as I see everything around me slowly fall into place. Our self-centeredness may not be the greatest vice if it is used to better ourselves and use the gifts we have been given to work toward our goals and prolonged gratification, as long as it is paired with respect and kindness for others. Sometimes it is okay, even empowering, to look in the mirror and think, “I have it all.” So today, I implore my reader to share some form of kindness, even in something as simple as a compliment, and to work as hard as possible with what he or she is given, as then worry and the attachment to worry may abate, even if not completely, and perhaps, one day, suffering will be no more.

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