

The Life Equation

By

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1 plus 1 equals 2. My school life has always been about getting the model answers in exams. I used to think about life as something like exams. You either get it right or wrong. There is nothing in between.

The moment I got an offer to go to the University of Southern California for exchange, I decided to do something that is supposed to be 'wrong'. I signed up for classes like "Make-up for motion pictures" and "Fine Arts Photography", which are not the 'right' type of classes to take in a money-oriented environment like Hong Kong.

When I first started taking the classes, I had the biggest cultural shock ever. I did not understand how there could be classes with students looking at abstract art photography and just discussing how amazing they are. For the first few weeks, I stared at different art photography in class and I was really thinking, "Those photos look like they are done by some primary school kids. University students are supposed to be studying more intellectual stuff." To me, art was really just some random people photographing some random lines or objects and try to make up stories to say how fantastic they are.

I didn't enjoy my photography class until I became really stressed one week. I was in San Francisco that weekend visiting a friend. When I booked the trip to San Francisco, I also booked a trip to New York State to visit another friend. While I was in San Francisco, I got a message from the friend in New York State saying that I couldn't stay at her place as planned. I managed to talk to another friend of mine in New York State and luckily she said I could stay at hers. I enjoyed the rest of the San Francisco trip without thinking too much about the New York issue. But then, stress and I met again when I missed my flight back to LA.

I am usually really paranoid about being on time. Whenever I have a flight to catch, I always go as early as I can for security check. But my friend and her boyfriend are not so paranoid about being on time. After we got to the airport, we had an hour to check in. My friend and her boyfriend suggested having breakfast. I knew the time was tight but I wanted to be polite so I agreed. And that's how I missed my flight and wasted money and time.

When I got back to LA, I had to start revising for my midterms and I also had essays to hand in. I also had to arrange the details for my New York trip since my original plan got completely messed up. When I started looking at the details, I realized the two friends I have in New York State live quite far away from each other. My original flight is to Buffalo but my other friend is in Rochester, which takes an

hour and a half to drive to. Using the standard of Hong Kong, I thought I would be able to get from Buffalo to Rochester without any trouble. And then I realized that the public transportation in Buffalo and Rochester are nowhere compatible to Hong Kong. Driving is almost like the only way people commute. I asked my friend in Buffalo if she could drive me to Rochester but she refused by saying it's too far away. I researched some more and I found a coach I could take from Buffalo to Rochester. I booked it right away and thought everything was sorted out.

Things were really sorted out on the outside, but I didn't realize my inside was still a mess. I started crying one night when I was talking to my roommates. It started with just a casual chit-chat. I was telling them about how my trip to New York State was not going as planned. I also told them how I missed my flight back to LA and how I was stressed about the midterms that were coming. And then I just couldn't control myself and started crying.

Now that I think about it, I probably only cried because so many unexpected incidents happened and I also had to deal with my midterms and essays. I had never gone through that sort of emotional breakdown in Hong Kong because I always put studying as my priority. Whenever I had exams or essays, I put my social life on hold. Going on exchange in America is the first time I try to handle studying and having fun at the same time. I suddenly realized that I have been so focused on studying my

whole life that when I am allowed to have fun, I actually don't know how to use it as a way to release my stress. I looked at travelling like exams. I wanted to make sure that everything turned out as planned and when it went wrong, I didn't know how to handle my emotions.

I was very stressed and upset for a few days until it was time for photography class. We were again looking at a couple of pictures by some famous photographers and this time, I saw a whole new dimension in life. In art, there is no right or wrong. It's all about perception. Life is the same too. There is no right or wrong path. In the past, I kept trying to find the right path but I kept getting lost. I kept pushing myself to find the right path in life but I guess I pushed too hard, so hard that my mental state actually reached its limit. When we were in primary school, and even in secondary school, there were always school rules to follow. But on an exchange programme, there is no rule to follow. This sudden freedom allowed me to try things I never considered trying in Hong Kong. The huge freedom also caught me off-guard. It took me some time to realize that it's time to come out of the protective environment I have been living in and learn how to be independent and mature about my emotions.

All in all, the exchange experience in the USA really allowed me to learn a lot, not just in terms of cultural exchange or language improvement, but more importantly, I became a more mature person who can realize that life is not an exam with rules to

follow. Each person is shaped by a different background and it's important to embrace that and find out what's best for you. It's not the end of the world when things don't turn out as planned. In the life equation, nothing is ever wrong.



Showcasing our work in photography class



Visiting my Korean friend (in green) in San Francisco; she introduced me to her friends from Switzerland (in white) and Sweden (in grey)

About the author

YUEN Ki Ho (Sandy) is a third-year student majoring in Journalism and Communication. From August to December 2011, she took part in a semester-long exchange program at the University of Southern California. She took many interesting courses including "Introduction to Photography", "Make-up for Motion Pictures", "Fashion, Media and Culture" and "The Rhetoric of LA".