Something is behind my understanding… at least for now.

Junsuk Lee

Language, cultural sharing, and nationality…….

These three words are what have always popped up in my mind whenever I visit the Survival Center. My being a foreigner from across the Pacific Ocean, English as a foreign language, not much understanding of American history, and almost no understanding of American life… These lack of understanding, I felt, somewhat hindered me from being fully engaged in the communication with the people at the center.

The first impression of the center was familiarity. I have visited several welfare facilities like the Amherst Survival Center in Korea. I have frequently visited such facilities and helped the volunteers to prepare lunch and dinner for those who need a supply of proper food and other necessary goods. Basically, the Survival Center has been doing the same thing as other facilities that I visited in Korea. So, when I put the first step in the center, I felt that I came to another same place as I have done several times, but only the location was different.

As time went, however, I felt that something different from what I had experienced in the same kind of places in Korea was there. The atmosphere of the center was quite delightful and friendly. The people at the center, regardless of whether you were volunteers or beneficiaries, recognized each other and talked like an old family. Regardless who they were, they sat wherever available to sit, and had lunch with lively talks. This delightful scene was so different from what I had witnessed in Korea. No intimate talking, gesture, and general lively behavior… These were something like rules that I could always observe and even expect, otherwise uncommon, at the same kind of facilities in Korea. I serve, provide necessary goods, and “help” them, but not as a friend. There was always a dividing line between the volunteers and the beneficiaries. It was mostly just giving, not cooperating or helping developing the beneficiaries own way of dealing the world. Much less communication and understanding was there in Korean facilities. This invisible wall between the volunteers and beneficiaries even affected the relationship among the beneficiaries, further reducing the possibility of creating a happy atmosphere and possible creativity and initiative that would have come from such atmosphere.

I like such a lively atmosphere. But the only unfortunate fact was that I could not feel that I was fully in the part of that atmosphere. I was physically there, but not mentally. I tried to be among them, but I could not: I could not understand their English, culture, experiences, and differences coming from different nationalities. I wanted to feel their experiences and their sharing of their own lives. But I could not… I could not fully comprehend the medium of communication, the language. The comprehension of a common language is a very beginning step for any kind of communication. But I could not even start this first step. I heard something, but it did not come to me as a perceivable concrete concept or any kind of meaning. I just heard some sound, but could not understand it. That was a barrier that stood between them and me. I wanted to respond, but I could not as I could not understand what they had said in the first place. I did not want to give an impression of an aloof and uninterested outside helper to those people at the center; but I am afraid that I might already become like that.

I believed that we could understand each other without a full understanding of a language. But now, without a common understanding of experiences and history, even this human instinct understanding did not seem to be at work. This feeling of “alienation” made me feel much less comfortable and a little bit nervous in my stay at the center. I felt that I just became a passive server and outside helper who was not engaged in the community of service. I felt that I just became a donor or supplier of another physical welfare for those faceless beneficiaries through the translation work. This first experience of disconnection and alienation was totally frustrating to me, who wanted to be more actively engaged in a new community.

I am sure that this disconnection and alienation will be felt less as time goes. But I wanted to be honest regarding my first feeling. I do know that the differences in language, culture, and nationality would not disappear as fast as I wish they would. But I am also sure that this frustration will eventually turn into happiness and feeling of involvement later. This is because I am certain that I am there to be a new member of the community of the center, sharing and understanding each other, rather than an aloof and temporary visitor of the community. I will define the progress of my community-based learning in this term of integration and being an intimate member of the new community behind the wall of differences.