

ESSAY #24: "Where Drive and Talent Can Take You—The Fulbright"

Personal Statement for the Fulbright Scholarship

When I first saw a skeleton hanging on the window of a house, I shrugged and wondered what type of neighborhood my family had moved into. What else could I think? I was a recent immigrant from Israel and the concept of Halloween was one of those American cultural entities which I had yet to learn about. It was the start of several years' worth of an interplay involving mutual ignorance on my part, regarding American culture, and on my American peers' part, regarding mine.

In fact, this was not the first immigration in my family's history. Both of my parents emigrated from Romania to Israel after World War II. The consequence was that sentences in our household sometimes started in one language (e.g., Romanian), were interjected with a phrase from a second (e.g., English), before finally being terminated in a third (e.g., Hebrew).

When I arrived to the United States (where I was later naturalized), I was "fluent" in only one word in English (the word "no"), inappropriately clothed (with respect to the fashion of the time), and culturally inept. Thus, I was cast out by many of my classmates as an outsider at first. Through hard work and determination, I strove to excel academically and initiated extracurricular involvement as I began to overcome the language barrier. With time, I believe my classmates also learned a lot about me and my previous country's culture.

Based on my experiences, I realized that the most effective way to rid oneself of ignorance of other nations (and to learn from them) is via complete immersion in the foreign culture. This is why I am so excited about the Fulbright program's general premise. How else can we gain each other's trust to the extent that we can collaborate on ideas and projects that will shape our future?

My experiences have left me with as many questions as answers. I now wonder which traits are innate to humans and which are cultural. For example, while a kiss signifies love in one country, it can serve as the equivalent of a handshake in another. Winking is considered rather impolite in some non-Western cultures. If such seemingly innate nonverbal forms of communication are interpreted differently, then certainly there must be many other differences that we can learn about.

As an individual who has seen two very different cultural worlds, I feel that I am in a position to better understand such cultural issues. It will be especially interesting for me to explore Canada, where I can see a culture that is not as different from America as that of my native land. Even though it has fewer cultural differences vis-à-vis the United States than more distant countries do, I have already witnessed several of them firsthand on a couple of trips to Canada, including a visit to the University of Toronto. It will be interesting to see how American and Canadian cultures retained some characteristics and yet differentiated in others as they split from their original British roots.

Every candidate faces many choices when writing an application essay. These next two essays were written by the same candidate, who did win the Fulbright and then took a deferral on his Ph.D. studies. The point is: You also can write a more or a less personal essay, a more or a less technical essay. This candidate's prudent choices resulted in success in two very different directions. Had he switched his essays, it's possible that neither would have been effective. You might try more than one approach to your essay before choosing the one you think will serve you best. You may have one background, but you have many stories to tell and many ways you can tell each story.