

# **Second Annual Virginia Governor's International Education Day**

**"Communicating Across Cultures: How A Conversation in Another Culture Changed My Life."**

**An Essay**

**Written By**

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Being the last in a family of eight, with three sisters and two brothers, I grew up knowing that it will be a while before I say, “I do” to a man. And that whenever that will be, it definitely was going to be perfect because my family would have learnt a lot from ‘experience’ what to do and what not to do. I also knew that I was not going to be lacking of people to be in the bridal train...hopefully, I will not have to disappoint some people.

This is so, because in my Country Nigeria, and particularly amongst the Igbo ethnic groups, marriage is by seniority. The eldest first and down the line to the youngest, except in a situation where the eldest is a male and his immediate younger is a female, and the age difference between them is about two years. In such a situation, it is acceptable for the female to marry before the male. This was particularly pleasing to me as I felt I had time to travel around the world on exploration (...needless to mention how that is to be financed, because I still do not know...).

Further, it was very interesting to learn that it was expected of men soon after a certain age to leave their father’s houses and fend for themselves, whereas the women were expected to live with their parents until they get married. Well, irrespective of the logic behind that, it was appealing to know that the culture is structured such that I move from ‘comfort’ to ‘comfort’. However, all these dreams or more like fantasies faded away when I came to the United States in August 2003, to further my studies.

I had a flat mate by name Amanda. She is from Iowa and is blonde. Initially, we kept our communications very formal. “Hi, how was your day? How are classes? It is raining; it is not raining...kind of conversation. Until September 18, 2003 (that should ring a bell...Isabel...the hurricane!). It was a heavy down pour, the streets were flooded and everyone was advised to stay in doors. There was not much to do. Our options were limited to sleeping (but it was still early...like 7pm), playing the radio (well we had to use battery and did not know how long the power outage would last) and finally, which turned out to be the way...start of a conversation about anything.

So being that Isabel was my first time experiencing a hurricane, I thought it would be a good start for a conversation that I hoped would get me by until it was time to retire for the night. It really did much more than that...it changed my life! First, we started talking about natural disasters experienced in our geographical areas. Then we talked about the economies (...I still wonder how that transition was made...disasters to economy) and economies ‘evolved’ to politics (‘Lou Dobbs Tonight’ of CNN could not have done a better analysis). By this time, the conversation was getting boring until by a ‘spark of magic’; the whole conversation took on a new light. We started talking about women, family, and all our emotions, cells and genes were reinvigorated.

Amanda had much to say about growing up as a woman in the United States. Her views about who a woman is were very different from mine. In her views, a woman was a pillar of strength, courage, dignity and yet, a source of comfort and peace. Well, before then, I really did not associate such descriptive words with a woman. Comfort maybe but not the ‘source of comfort’...that is beyond. My opinion then was that a woman was, was.....I really did not have an opinion about a woman. The truth was... I never gave a thought about it. After all in my culture, what better description is there of the life of a woman other than...be born, grow up learning to run a home from your mother, go to school, graduate, get married, run your home till you exit from earth.

As the conversation got deeper, I talked about my dream of wanting to travel around the world before I ‘settle down’ in marriage, which would be soon as the ‘cultural-biological clock’ has started ticking quickly. At this point, Amanda said, “The End”. I was very curious as to why she had to use those two words, and on pushing further, she let it all out. She started out by saying that the idea of traveling around was good, but that if getting married was to ‘settle down’ then, I did not have to waste the time and money traveling....just go settle down.

It was as if I had just pushed her ‘green button’ and she was on the go. Amanda got me ‘soul searching’ when she started asking me about what I wanted from life? What legacy I want to build? And what sands I want to leave my footprints on? I really could not answer those questions but one thing was certain, a fire was kindled in me. She talked about how I should not see marriage as the end of it all – my life as an individual, my dream, hopes and aspirations. And she ended ‘her speech’ by saying that if marriage becomes the path I tread, then, I should make the choice myself, and walk through the path of that ‘institution’ with all of me...whoa!

It was quiet except for the sound of rain and must have been like 1 am in the morning. There was energy in the room, and while I was absorbing those words, she laid back on the couch with a smile on her face. No other words were said that night and I had much to think about. I could not get much sleep as I pondered through those questions. Finally, I got to the point where all I could do, was throw up my hands in the air and bow. Not because I had all the answers but because I knew, I was never going to be the same.

More than a year later, Amanda has remained my flat mate and friend. But most importantly, my views of who I am, what I am here for and where I am going, has changed. As for the rest of my story...stay tuned to the Cable News Network (CNN).