What I Learned When I Moved to America

It has been almost nine years since I moved to America and I thought it might be helpful for many people who live in the Middle East if I put together a list of things that I personally learned from the American people. On the other hand, it might be helpful for the American people to hear a Middle Eastern experience and perspective that contradicts what is usually seen in the mainstream media.

1. The Reality of the American Dream

Being an American citizen, resident or even working on your paperwork to move legally to this country, the reality is that nobody hands you anything as soon as you get out of the airplane. Yes, you can get a great house, a wonderful car and much more of all things that are branded as the “American Dream” but you have to earn it. Working really hard is one of the core values of American society, as well as sustaining a good work ethic that will help you maintain the lifestyle you are dreaming of. Whether you are an entrepreneur with business ideas, a college professor, a waiter or a barber, everyone can make a decent living that can support the desired reasonable lifestyle, but you have to earn it yourself. You can get where you want to be as long as you work hard, develop yourself, stay out of trouble and have a dream. The bottom line (and unlike what many might think) is that no one will hand you anything as nothing in this world is free.

2. This country is HUGE

Most Americans want to enjoy cool places and the beauty they see around them. I am not talking about Disney, Universal Studios, Hollywood or other places (although those are cool too). I am talking about the beautiful nature everywhere in this country including snow caps, rivers, mountains, deserts, forests, and oceans. Wherever you live or go visit, you will find a beautiful scene to look at, enjoy and admire.

You might think that the daily issues the Arab world is facing are really taking center stage of American life; the truth is that some Americans are not even aware where Syria is located! Think about your day-to-day people living in your own country (especially the poorer ones), are they even interested to hear what is happening beyond their own neighborhoods?

3. Government and politics versus regular people

The American people are (generally) very nice, welcoming and friendly people, but they can also make a comment that you might not like (aren’t all humans that way?). Whether you are waiting in line for a train, in a doctor’s office or in a grocery shop, you will find people randomly talking to you, commenting on something you are wearing, complimenting on how cute your kids are or even asking you where you come from. Thus, it is best to take out of your brain what you see on TV and hear in the news and treat the people for who they are. This, of course, applies both ways as the American people also need to take politics out of the equation and treat people for who they are. We all need to invest and enrich in our relationships with each other as humans.

4. Movies versus the reality

When I moved to the U.S., for some reason I thought that all I would see were people with tattoos on Harley Davidson motorcycles! This (of course) did not happen. While there are many great people who ride motorcycles (which is very cool by the way!), there are others who get involved in drugs, crimes and all sorts of things that we see in the movies. There are also millions of highly educated people, religious leaders, artists, singers and people with families and children that want to maintain a good life. You are free to choose your community but it will be your call and your choices that will define your experience and will add tremendously to who you are.

You will also find people who are highly tolerant and accepting, and others who are brainwashed by the media and do not have as much of a level of acceptance and tolerance. Although it is unfair at times, one should always be ready and prepared to have a conversation that might change a perspective or a misconception of one person forever.

5. East and West Coast versus the Midwest

The East and West coasts of the United States are very different than the states in the middle of the country. Immigrants tend to prefer the coasts for some reason. Thus, if you ever plan to move, you might want to consider one of the coasts as it will be very easy for you to find your favorite ethnic food, your mosque, temple or church or even get involved with your community. I personally have been involved with the Italian American Community, the Egyptian American Community, the Sikh Indian American community and many other communities. There is even an area in California that is commonly known as Little Arabia because of the many Arab businesses and restaurants opened in this area. Chinatown and Little Saigon serving other ethnic groups are also quite close. While all of these communities have the American values embedded in them, they are striving to maintain their heritage, culture, and identities in which I do not see anything wrong with that. In fact, I think it is really amazing how culturally diverse this country is, and people still get along. (most of the time!)

6. The real meaning of freedom

While you are free to wear, pray, worship, eat, look and behave the way you want, you are always expected to follow rules and obey the law. The application of the law is one of the things that I deeply respect about this country and in most cases (there are exceptions of course) it is applied to everybody whether you are a CEO of a major company or a small worker in a factory. Freedom does not mean to cut roads, burn cars, not stopping for a lawful order, but it means that you can take the mayor to court if he did something wrong to you and win your case.

7. Being American does not mean that you are a White person with blond hair and blue eyes

For some reason, the media has tricked us into believing that all Americans are white, thus when I came here I was kind of shocked to see people from different ethnicities and backgrounds that are Americans too. They all hold the same values of family, hard work and good citizenship. You will see even Chinese Americans serving at the Transportation Security Administration at airports, Sikh Americans serving in the Army while wearing their turbans and highly accomplished Egyptian Americans serving in the U.S. government. This is important for all of us to understand especially with America’s Demographic Transformation in the next few decades.

Before I moved to America, I do not recall that I ever used the words diversity and/or race in my life. In the Muslim countries (specifically) and the Middle East in general, you are never defined by the color of your skin and it is considered rude and actually a kind of a “sin” in some cultures/religions to do that. In any official paperwork, we are never asked about our race or skin color. Of course, the history and the demographics of these countries are very different compared to the United States but there we are all basically the same and we are ultimately defined by our education and social/family status, not at all with the color of our skin nor where are we originally from (Turkish descent for example..). When I went back for vacation a year ago and I used the word black (which I rarely use anyway) casually in one of my conversations, people were shocked.

Being American does not depend on how you look or where you originally came from but what you give to this country. The concept of diversity and race is a shared value in the American system.