2009

When a Door Closes, a Curtain Opens

Jill Eisenberg

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger

Part of the Nonfiction Commons

Recommended Citation
Eisenberg, Jill (2009) "When a Door Closes, a Curtain Opens," The Messenger: Vol. 2009: Iss. 1, Article 42.
Available at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2009/iss1/42

This Non-fiction is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Messenger by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.
I used to need doors. In fact, I respected doors and all they stood for as symbols of privacy and the power of deciding who comes through that door and when—but in my home stay in Nanjing, China last fall, all I had was a curtain. This faded, flower-print bed sheet was what transformed my room into the family room and home office, and separated my room from my Chinese grandmother’s room.

When I arrived in Nanjing last August to meet the people who would be my family for the next several months, I had already mentally prepared myself to bid farewell to western-style toilets and laundry machines. I was not, however, prepared for giving up other western luxuries, like personal space, that I had assumed were standard, practiced and respected by all cultures. I did not even think about doors, or all my arrogant cultural assumptions about privacy.

In a country of 1.3 billion people, there is little physical space—a lasting lesson I quickly experienced my first time on the subway system during rush hour. Urban families in China typically live in small, high-rise apartments with children and grandparents. In contrast, the culture of suburbia that is so uniquely American has encouraged most Americans to take for granted the idea that each individual is entitled to personal space, both physical and psychological—a real or mental place to escape, meditate, and reflect.

In China, and in my family’s all-purpose room, I learned to reevaluate my beliefs that I had assumed to be absolute. My family, and that curtain, taught me that privacy is not a right, but a privilege. Unlike in my American dorm room, it was disrespectful and inappropriate to draw the curtain across “my” room, switch off the lights, submerge into a book, and retreat with my iPod’s headphones. Watching a TV drama after dinner, brushing teeth, and studying were all group activities and invaluable opportunities for family bonding.

My experience in the home stay also taught me that the family unit, not the individual, is fundamental to Chinese culture. By the end of the term, I did not feel like a guest in the house, but a family member. Over the few months in Nanjing, my Chinese mother and grandmother gave, and expected me to take, more responsibility around the apartment. I may have “lost” my privacy, but I gained their trust.

The family-centric atmosphere also gave me the opportunity to play with my eight-year-old Chinese sister before her mother came home from work and while her grandmother prepared dinner. During those couple of hours each evening with just the two of us, my little sister taught me the Chinese versions of “Rock, Paper, Scissors” and the story of the Ugly Duckling. She also let me into her imaginary world where she could turn my bag of hairclips into a royal family that fights hairbrush monsters.

Although I am back to using a door in America, I will never forget seeing my sister’s toes peaking out from under the sun-bleached yellow curtain in our invented hide-and-seek games.