Transcript: Podcast Pondering. ‘The visa did not make me American: Part Two’

*A lesson in Cultural Differences: Politics and Identity.*

“Well hello again, Leah here, presenting the final installment of podcast pondering regarding her Study USA experiences. Without further ado, allow me to present ‘the visa did not make me American: Part Two’, where I’ll cover differences encountered in political/national and religious aspects of life.

National identity and patriotism. It’s alive and kicking in America. It was both interesting and surreal for me I suppose, as an observer, because Americans will criticise their government, whether state or federal, criticise a policy – especially foreign policy, I noted - rant about certain political parties or politicians. Younger Americans, or at least my friendship circle and their families would often put themselves down, saying things such as, ‘well then, that’s why Americans are a country of fat people’ or ‘sorry, I know we’re considered as being dumb around the rest of the world’. I found that intriguing actually. But the funny thing is, there is this really, very real and strong deep-rooted sense of pride, of identity, of patriotism, of loyalty to their country that is instilled in them and I just think it is really nice to see that. Because where I am from, well. Everyone knows with Northern Ireland - we cannot decide on whether we are the North of Ireland, or Northern Ireland. We disagree on whether we are Irish or Northern Irish or British, and, I mean, we fight about that. Community disagreements, sectarianism, de-segregated education, it’s really quite the party here. I just think it comes down to America and its history, its background. I mean, I have friends who are children of immigrants, who themselves are immigrants - there was a real mix at Coe which I was honoured to witness and participate in – a rich ethnic, cultural diversity that is simply par for the course to be sure in America, and certainly not something I would be used to or that you would really see in Northern Ireland. Students who were white, Asian, who were black, Indigenous, Hispanic, people who were bi-racial or people who did not identify with labels. Students from all around the world, everyone was there at Coe, or so it seemed. Everyone from different backgrounds and walks of life, yet they all had one thing in common: that they all considered themselves American and were so proud to do so. Whether they were only just establishing roots there or their families had been residing in America since the Founding Fathers, you know – that to me is really unique. Like I said, myself, I’m from a place where we cannot even agree on our identity, let alone rally around it. You know, I think Northern Ireland could learn a lot from that, actually. Learn from it, and perhaps we could actually find peace together. I do think it comes down to integrated education, like America has, but that is another story.

Attitude to sickness and days off? Well, over here when we catch a cold or take ill, we will take a day off work or school, have an appointment to visit our GP and generally feel sorry for ourselves and have a duvet day to recuperate. In America, that’s not what happens. I think it stems from the fact that the US healthcare system is extortionate and as a student already crippled with student loans to attend colleges- you cannot afford to fall ill. I had friends who would drag themselves into class and work and sports practice when they were ill, I mean with ‘flu-like symptoms. They felt awful, but they couldn’t afford to lose that day’s wages or class notes, or to go and buy medication. So I also admire that, and again I think Northern Ireland could learn from that maybe – not in terms of healthcare and insurance, but being determined and driven enough to keep on going.

Religion and its reference in day to day life: as someone who invokes religion into daily conversation, you know - 'oh, for the love of Saint Peter' / 'when did our fridge re-fill itself? There's more food there than when Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes' - I soon discovered that due to the separation of church and state doctrine, my marvellous Biblical wit was sadly not always understood or acknowledged. I mean, one of my roommate’s friends had a Biblical name, and I always made references to said character’s role in the Bible, yet they never understood me.

The concept of competitiveness was really evident to me when I watched political attack ads during the run up to the mid-term elections. It is so different compared to politics here. You can bully, mock and practically verge on slanderous remarks in America. It was interesting for myself as a political addict to see all this for myself, and it made for interesting comparisons whenever I read the US newspapers’ coverage of the UK general election and compared it to the newspaper clippings my mother would post over to me. It was fascinating to see the different mentalities play out.

News and reporting also struck me as different. Over here, we focus more on the news being delivered than the reporter, yet in America it seems to be the reverse: it seems to be more about the personality of the reporter and less of the news. I’ll not name particular news channels, and then resort to doing a Brian Williams and miraculously forgetting I did so.

And we’ll move on.

Other little areas to quickly highlight: well, I can confirm that the stories regarding American dancing in clubs is true. Less dancing and more Ms Cyrus twerking to be sure. So, no. Not for me, thank you very much. Americans did not appear to be quite into the bar scene as we are here, in that there was always loud music and/or karaoke in bars there, whereas we like to chat and socialise.

Country and Western music dominates the radiowaves in the Midwest, but as a girl raised on Dr Hook and the Medicine Show, early Shania Twain and Dolly Parton among others by her father, this was perfectly acceptable to me.

Ah, yes. I will never understand why toilet cubicle doors – or, in American, ‘bathroom stall doors’ are so short and condensed. I can’t really explain it properly, but you can see everyone’s legs and that just felt wrong. Please sort that out, America. It felt wrong.

Well, to conclude: I’m going to adopt the phrase that is repeated by everyone in America after they leave shops, or as they call them, ‘stores’ after buying your – well, whatever it is that you were buying: ‘have a nice day’ and thank you for listening.

That was Part Two of my Cultural Shock Podcast – you can go and listen to part one, or you know, repeat part two again and maybe you will understand America more than what I ever will. The irony being that I was there for the year. I’m joking of course. Thank you, and goodbye.