

Experience Became My Education By Peter Flores

The process of learning can be accomplished through various methods. Although these methods essentially produce the same result, each has a different effect and can be more compelling than the other. For many including myself, learning undoubtedly comes about through experience. In this manner, a child understands the hazards of fire as a result of touching a flame for himself/herself. Similarly, a young man realizes through actual experience the heartache after his first crush does not return his affection. Without the knowledge that adults comprehend over their lifetime, youngsters depend upon their own experiences to guide their learning. While books, illustrations, and conversations provide the same information, experience creates a deeper impact because of the personal involvement with the subject. The feelings after smelling the ocean breeze or drinking your first glass of wine are all expressed in books, plays, and song. However, the actual experience evokes a far greater form of learning that surpasses all others.

As an honors student that excelled in humanities, I believed that I had amassed a greater education than my father. Reading Shakespearean sonnets and dissecting the art of Monet and Van Gogh, I assumed that my conception of love propelled me into adulthood, preparing me for true love. During my senior year in high school, my father warned me about the potential risks in having a girlfriend at such a young age. Being the “hot-shot teenager,” I ignored his warnings and pursued a companion without hesitation. However, the literature of Shakespeare or the colors of Monet could not prepare me for the feelings of devastation and helplessness after rejection. Regardless of Shakespeare’s insight, his words forever remained on the page and were his own, not mine. My father understood the limitations of books because he too experienced adolescent love and heartbreak. While books, paintings, and other devices inform spectators of the outside world, experience creates memories which words on the page cannot.

Over the past three years, I have traveled to Europe, volunteered in food shelters, had romantic relationships, and attempted to experience those words I read not long ago. In doing so, I have experienced heartbreak, disappointment, joy, stress, love, and happiness; all emotions that have more significance in my learning process than those described in a travel book or novel. After reading countless books, taking dozens of classes, and conversing with others, I realized that learning can never be accomplished as a member of the third party. By remaining idle and being bombarded by information, there remains a barrier separating the spectator from engaging in learning directly without interference from a third party. Just as a child learns to not touch a fire, youngsters and adults must comprehend the effect of direct learning through experience.

In my visit to New York last fall, I visited the site where the previous World Trade Center towers had stood. The sight of the fallen rubble, multiple American flags, and the pictures of lost family members on the fences evoked feelings of sadness and remorse for all those present including me. Without these two buildings, the hectic atmosphere that normally pervaded New York City disappeared. For two hours, I sat on a bench and watched hundreds of visitors pass by. During that time, I threw away any previous notions that I had about the 9/11 attacks and filled my memory with those two hours. My experience at the World Trade Center last summer was how I remembered the aftermath of 9/11 rather than through the pictures that I had seen on television or the words read from newspaper articles. Experience became my education.

The power of experience supersedes all other forms of learning simply due to the personal connection involved. This attachment allows spectators to become actors in the play and, as a result, comprehend the matter directly. Experience provokes people to engage rather than remain still.