“Diversity: the state of being diverse; variety.” (merriam-webster dictionary) “So this is what diversity means,” I thought. I remember sitting in my third grade classroom listening to our teacher speak about what it meant to have a “diverse society.” She asked us to refer back to our pocket size dictionary safely tucked away in the dark confines of our desk. I recall reading that definition and listening to my instructor insist that America was a “melting-pot” of people from “diverse” backgrounds. I looked around the room to try and apply my newly acquired knowledge to the classroom filled with my peers, but the only skin color I saw was a pale white; the only language I heard softly chattering was English. Once I pondered this a bit longer, I decided that my teacher must have meant hair and eye color; for that was the only variety among the 25 children seated around me.

I grew up in a town filled with the belief that the world is painted in black and white. Regardless of the context, the majority of Coldwater Michigan looked at actions; sexual orientations, religious beliefs and a person’s skin color in two shades. Although I would like to think that my family and I go against the grain in our small town, I am afraid to say, that some of this prejudice has inevitably wiggled it’s way into my thoughts without my conscious recognition. This being said, I firmly believe that recognizing your imperfections is the only to make a change.

As one might have inferred from my third grade memory, Coldwater Michigan is not very diverse in any way, shape or form. Therefore, one can imagine the shock I experienced when I took my first step on Michigan State’s campus. I looked around and saw a plethora of colors surrounding me. At that moment, I was reminded of Dorothy first opening her eyes in the land of Oz. Much like this fictional character from The Wizard of Oz, everything in my vision was a beautiful, vibrant color and seemed new and exciting. However, instead of outlandish costumes, the people, my new peers that walked around me, were different ethnicities had various backgrounds, and even spoke languages I had never even heard of! Up until this moment, my shallow understanding of diversity was dictated by what I read in books and the stereotypes illustrated and perpetuated on TV. I’m not claiming that I understood all there was to know about the differences present on campus, but **seeing** variety definitely changed my perspective on what it meant to be “different.”

In my first year on campus, my innocent view of the world and Michigan State slowly faded away. I now knew that true diversity was not the color of your hair or the hue of your eyes, but rather your ethnic makeup, native language, and unique personal identity. However, despite my superficial knowledge of the definition of diversity, I still had never interacted with anyone really different then myself. It saddened me that there was so much opportunity on this campus but no one took advantage of it. Each group of people: Black, White, Chinese, Hispanic, etc., stuck to the familiar and interacted only with the genetically similar.

A time came my sophomore year when I wanted to make a change. I yearned to completely immerse myself in another culture, to embrace the differences around me. Therefore, I packed my bags and boarded a plane to Beijing, China. When I landed, I didn’t know what to expect, apart from an abundance of rice. But what I found through my trip was much more than a delicious starch. I walked the streets of China and realized that I stuck out a like a sore thumb with my pale skin and dirty blonde hair. China was an amazing culture, a glorious country and just about as different from the United States as I could possibly imagine. How ever outstanding my trip had been, I recognized that China was the complete opposite of diversity. Each person I encountered had similar religious beliefs, governmental beliefs, sexual orientation, hair color, eye color, etc. But when I came back to the United States, I had an appreciation for the Chinese culture that I never had before. This exposure to difference helped me embrace a piece of the “variety” I had learned so much about.

While at MSU, I have had the opportunity to travel the world, and see people and places that I could have only imagined. I have also been given the chance to interact with those that I might never have given a second glace before coming to East Lansing. These experiences and interactions have helped me to not only comprehend “diversity,” but **live** diversity. If someone were to ask me 10 years ago, what I thought diversity meant, I would have recited the textbook definition that I had learned so religiously. However, now, if someone asked me the same question, I would tell them of the temples and religious figures I prayed to in China, the underprivileged children I taught in while visiting Fiji, the relaxed attitude of an Australian and all of the amazing people I met at Michigan State and on the road. I would explain to the inquiring person, that diversity emphasizes the uniqueness of each individual and embraces the varying backgrounds of all. Whereas once, I might have categorized people, places and things into two categories; black and white, now I see every drop of color that goes into a million shades of grey.