Two important goals of the YFU program are expressed below by a former American student on the program:

“It’s amazing how one can change in such a relatively short period of time! I changed my outlook on life, finding and accepting my own identity, while learning to love and appreciate people of a totally different culture.”

To experience this growth in knowledge of yourself as well as appreciation for others, you will need to learn about the host culture and be aware of how you can enter the host culture. This newsletter describes the process of moving from just surviving in a foreign environment to fitting in and finding a meaningful place there. This process is one of awareness – not simply gaining factual information about your host country.

ARRIVING INTO A NEW PLACE

Once you arrive in a foreign place, the first thing is to find people to care for you and to communicate in some way with them. This applies to visitors and exchange students, but you have the advantage of having someone there expecting you -- your host family.

Your host family will take you into their home, not just to be a guest, but to be a host family member. It will take some time for you to feel like a family member, but it is possible. Your initial warmth in asking questions and learning their routines will help your host family to see that you care about becoming part of the family.

To a certain extent, these things happen almost automatically out of need. In the beginning, you may feel like everything is “happening” to you and that you have very little control, which is basically true. You will probably be thinking mostly of yourself; you need to do that until you feel a little more comfortable. As one YFU student put it:

“I was completely vulnerable for the first few weeks – or so I felt because I was without any familiarity or knowledge of anyone. I couldn’t rely on any of my usual tactics of talking to express myself or to smooth a difficult situation because I wasn’t yet familiar enough with the language to communicate well verbally.”

SORTING OUT MEANING

After the initial stage of arriving you may begin to affect your environment more. You will consciously and unconsciously begin to look outside of yourself and your immediate concerns. You will start to observe what is going on and try and figure out what things mean.

What you see and how you interpret the meaning will be colored by your own interests and culture. What you choose to observe depends on what you are interested in. For example, several students walking down the same street may notice completely different things: someone interested in fashion might notice what different people are wearing; another person might be more intrigued with models of cars, a third person might have his attention drawn to the types of advertising he sees.

Your observations and attempts to understand meanings will also be influenced by what you already know, or think you know. Because people in your host country are stereotyped as being terrible drivers, you might look for reckless drivers. Or maybe because teenage drinking is against the law in your home country you might interpret teenagers drinking beer at a cafe in your host country as defying authority.

It is perhaps easiest to draw wrong conclusions if you are not aware that you are continually observing and trying to understand what you see. Hopefully you will consciously think about what you are seeing and realize that your evaluations of those observations must be tentative until you have actually gathered sufficient information to establish if they are true or false. Another YFU student advises:

“YFU doesn’t have its name for nothing. The word ‘understanding’ should be uppermost in your mind. Your mind itself must be open: open to absorb, to learn, to grow, to try to understand.”

ESTABLISHING A ROLE

Establishing your role within the host family and culture is the bridge from being a mere visitor to really being able to enter the host culture. This is the key to being a successful exchange student, for without it, a student is never deeply touched or changed by the overseas living experience.

The choice of either remaining a visitor or belonging is up to you. The choice is either adjusting to and accepting values within the host culture which might challenge your own values, or rejecting the host culture.

“I immersed myself fully into a completely different and strange language, customs and philosophies,” stated one exchange student. “I had to trust my host family fully without knowing too much about them.”

If you also make that choice, you will be joining thousands of other exchange students that have enjoyed the self-satisfaction that comes from that complete immersion in something new and different. And you can look forward to a deeper awareness of yourself and others by opening yourself up to the experience.
DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE OF YOURSELF

One of the greatest rewards of the exchange experience is the understanding you will gain of your own culture. Without having other beliefs, actions, roles, and values as a contrast, it is very difficult to realize exactly what your own values are. Until you see someone act in a way that you perceive as “wrong,” you may have never realized there was an alternative way to do something. You may think something is “wrong” because your culture taught you that way. Suddenly you realize that there are various alternatives in most situations; the choice a person makes is the one that his or her culture deems acceptable.

You will probably find hundreds of examples of these differences while living in another country, some more important than others. But all of them will shape the picture you have of your own culture and of the beliefs and values it has taught you.

In becoming aware that your reaction to new situations, values and beliefs comes from your own cultural background, hopefully you will gradually be able to separate your judgments from your observations. You will be able to say, for example, “my host culture gives more importance to X than we do,” rather than, “they have weird ideas about X.”

You will also learn that it is much easier to change your ideas than it is to change habits and emotions. For example, you may be able to say that your host country people stand closer to each other when talking, but still find it very difficult to change your own habits so you, too, can feel comfortable standing so close to anyone.

Another interesting thing happens during this stage of awareness. You will probably find that you can look to yourself to understand why you may feel a certain way instead of blaming others. That means, when you’re confronted with a situation that is confusing or frustrating, you may be able to figure it out yourself instead of letting it get the best of you. One student said, “It was really quite a revelation when I suddenly realized it was ME, and what was within me, that made many situations awkward. Then I stopped blaming my problems on my host culture and began to really understand what I was experiencing.”

DEVELOPING AWARENESS OF NEEDED SKILLS

In order to function well in another culture, you will need to learn some new skills. It may take you some time to figure out exactly what skills you need to develop as some are much more difficult and subtle than others, but it is important to keep searching for and practicing these new skills.

There may be some obvious physical skills that you will need to develop. For example, if your host culture uses their silverware differently or uses chopsticks, you may have to retrain some muscles to master their manner of eating. You may need to learn how to sit comfortably on the floor for long periods of time. There are also intellectual skills you will need. Improving your language ability is one of them. Learning about your host country, the structure of your family, and how to use their transportation and monetary systems are others.

Perhaps the most subtle of all the skills you will need to learn will be the emotional ones. If you tend to be a very physically active person, you may find it difficult to learn to sit and talk for long periods of time with your family or classmates. You may find that your idea of privacy is not possible where you live; it might be necessary to learn how to accept “mental” privacy in place of “physical” privacy. You will need to learn to hear and discuss criticisms of the USA and your culture without being defensive.

The list of skills you may want to develop will go on and on as you fit more into your host family. And learning them will be necessary to effectively adjust to and actively participate in the life of your host culture.

DEVELOPING A SENSE OF BELONGING

This final stage does not mean forgetting that you are an American and becoming Japanese, German, or Chilean. It is maintaining the awareness of yourself as American while at the same time being able to enjoy and participate in the culture of your host country. At this stage you will have developed a real appreciation for the life and culture of your hosts, maybe even accepting some of their values into your own system or at least being able to empathize with their way of life.

This is perhaps best summed up by other YFU students:

“It would be ridiculous for anyone to say that they had had a complete reversal of all their beliefs and values because of their international exchange experience. However, my values and beliefs were contrasted to others, and after the experience I could better evaluate what I believed in.”

“I believe understanding is the key ingredient in the exchange process. My trip opened my eyes wider and gave me a chance to understand.”

“While preparing to leave for my host country I constantly heard that my exchange experience would be one of a lifetime. It would be something that would affect me for the rest of my life. I could not imagine it at the time, but I am grateful that it was just that, and more.”