

“East meets west” is a popular phrase here in San Marino. Coming from the southern-most border of California I was more culturally oriented towards “south meets west,” so living here in San Marino has been a wonderful, new experience of immersion in the Chinese culture for me.

One thing I most appreciate about this community is the effort of so many who try to adopt, accommodate, respect and learn from the diversity that is a gift from living here. One cultural delight we experience at San Marino Community Church is the making of new friends we meet through our Conversational English classes. Taught by church volunteers two days a week, we have about eighty people who gather here. Up and down the hallways we can hear adult-age students practicing at beginner, intermediate and advanced paces. Their efforts to learn the English language create a positive energy, and their presence touch the whole staff with humor, pathos, joy and good will.

Recently I had a conversation with one of our students about the upcoming Thanksgiving Worship Service we hold specifically for their program. In the service each student will share some prepared expression of gratitude as well as make a significant contribution to the church’s designated food bank. The students sing, pray, participate and hear a brief sermon that focuses on gratitude and the changing affect it can have on one’s life (*it’s hard to be petty, hateful, jealous, hostile, etc. when you are grateful for the life you have.*) My friend shared with me that for many in the program, Thanksgiving is their favorite American holiday. Mine too. The Thanksgiving holiday has the most potential, I think, to bridge the gap that seems to be expanding between some people day by day in this country. This holiday is literally an opportunity to bring those who are usually distant closer. Thanksgiving reminds us that we are blessed beyond measure when we gather at a meal and enjoy one another’s company. The ethnicity of our meal doesn’t matter (*I grew up in the desert so we would barbeque at Thanksgiving, then make tamales in the afternoon!*). What really matters is that we have gathered to connect, be grateful and remember that help comes in unexpected ways through the most unexpected neighbors. A gathering of family and friends, in whatever variety or configuration, is a gift – it cannot be taken for granted.

The traditional values of the Chinese culture are harmony, benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, honesty, loyalty and filial piety. While no one person embodies all of these values, they are a meaningful guide of how to be with one another. Perhaps, as we gather this Thanksgiving, we can all embrace the very best of who we are and the values we hold. My friends from the east point out that, though Americans may celebrate this specific holiday of Thanksgiving, gratitude is a universal antidote for many things that cause suffering. Perhaps we can remind ourselves this year that talking is good and listening is better, and that listening *with love and understanding* is the best.