

# Essay of 2018 Ethiopian Heritage Scholarship Award Winner – Veronica Abebe

**Essay: Discuss the life experience that has most dramatically affected your attitude.**

Not quite sure if I was dreaming, I stepped out of the airport and gazed in awe at the buildings that towered over me. It was unbearably hot and I had to squint against the glare of the sun, but I didn't care. All I could see were the people rushing up and down the streets and the buildings - the ones that gleamed in the sun and seemed to touch the sky. I didn't understand much at the time, but I knew with complete certainty that everything was about to change.

That was six years ago, yet it still feels like yesterday. Looking back, I can remember how fearful I was that living in the U.S. would alter me. I was terrified at the thought of becoming like the kids who return as foreigners to the Ethiopia they left just a few years before, unable to speak the language or understand the culture, their appearances the only remnant of their past selves. I vowed to never let that happen to me; Ethiopia was such a big part of my identity that I couldn't even begin to imagine who I would be without it.

Admittedly, I forgot my fears in the beginning, absorbed as I was with America, but as my younger sister began to forget how to speak Amharic, she inadvertently set a fire underneath me. I longed to find a balance in my life, one in which I could learn to appreciate both cultures and not lose sight of my identity.

I can't say what event triggered my transformation, or if there was such a defined event. All I know is that gradually, I began to see that "different" didn't have to have such a negative connotation. Yes, I was in the U.S., but no one was asking me to give up anything in return, least of all my identity as an Ethiopian. While meeting new people and discovering other cultures, I began to see myself as *lucky* - lucky for my experiences in this melting pot of cultures.

Eventually, I settled into a happy medium. I haven't forgotten Amharic or the Ethiopian culture, but I have also learned to appreciate the values Americans hold, too. Sometimes, I wonder if my eleven-year-old self would be happy with who I am today, and then I think, "*Why wouldn't she? I have and I am the best of both worlds.*"