Anne von Fallois looks back on her Fulbright year and discusses the way in which it still impacts her life today.

Political scientist Anne von Fallois spent the 1991/92 academic year on a Fulbright scholarship in Washington, D.C. After many years working in the Office of the German Federal President, she serves today as the Kienbaum Group’s ambassador to the capital, a liaison with policymakers, scientists, associations, and foundations. She lives with her husband and two children in Berlin.

It’s been quite some time since you were a Fulbright scholar at George Washington University. What still sticks out in your mind about the experience? I remember a lively university with approachable professors — and my amazing roommate, with whom I’m still in touch. The 90s were an exciting time to have a Chinese-American background. It was the age of hyphenated heritages. There are many of the museums were free.

As a headhuntenor, how do you see the current job market in Germany? How important is having an international education or doing an exchange? International experiences are important in and of themselves, and not just in relation to the job market. We live in a world where the other side of the globe is just a click away. But there’s a big difference between being friends with someone on Facebook and sharing a fridge.

Actual experiences can’t be replaced by virtual reality. We should be doing our utmost to open up new living and working environments for young people to foster skills that are desirable in the workplace, like speaking multiple languages and having first-hand experience of another culture. What I also look for in applicants is whether they’re capable of getting out of their comfort zone, whether they can empathize with people who are different. These are soft skills that can be built up by spending a year abroad.

What would you want to pass on to young Fulbrighters? Really see yourselves as Fulbrighters! Being a Fulbright scholar means going abroad with the support of an organization that has a mission. It means a lot more than simply studying in another country. Fulbrighters should see themselves as public diplomats in transatlantic relations. These days, that’s a difficult but very important role.

You’re talking about the current political climate. What issue do you find particularly pressing? Nothing less than the question of how we can unite as a society. How do we deal with the challenges we face — the effects of which are making themselves felt in our elections. How do we strengthen our democracy? How do we become engaged participants in it?

Is this rift in society something you feel personally? In private spheres, I’m seeing how forms of communication that should be bringing us together are becoming increasingly strained. It’s not just that online debates quickly go on the offensive, but even small-talk often veers into terse territory. It’s happening on both micro and macro levels. I don’t think we can just put it down to having new means of communication. It also has something to do with us not establishing communication rules.

Can you see it playing out in a career context, too? Hierarchies in the working world are disappearing, or at least it seems that way. People sit in open plan offices and address each other casually. As a result, communication has become more obtrusive. I frequently ask myself: How are we talking to each other? Are we talking past each other? We have to start investing time in either resolving our differences or accepting them. And that takes practice.

Accepting differences — do you see this as a key skill in today’s world? Absolutely! Think about all those young people going abroad. They’ll meet people there who don’t share their world views, but will have to find a way to deal with that constructively. Further down the line, they’ll face similar situations in their careers. When I’m looking to fill a leadership position, I look for people who’ve been shaped by a wealth of diverse experiences and can inspire others. They’re the people who’ve consistently looked beyond their own horizons in their careers and have shown that they’re committed to things bigger than themselves. I see that as a crucial skill. I look for it in my employees, my interns and even my kids.