

FROM THE YUCATAN TO EUROPE: MEMOIRS OF MY STUDY ABROAD

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FROM THE YUCATAN TO EUROPE: MEMOIRS OF MY STUDY ABROAD

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors Committee of

Texas State University-San Marcos

In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements

For Graduation in the Mitte Honors Program

By

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San Marcos, Texas

March 2006

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, to my professor, mentor, boss, and friend, Dr. Christopher Frost, for being so patient with me on this project and truly allowing me the freedom to reach outside my normally scientific profession of psychology and complete the project my way. And to the incomparable Diann McCabe – advocate of passionate creating writing and true reason why I chose to write my thesis as memoirs.

I cannot fully express my gratitude to my family for giving me the chance to study abroad by offering their full support, both emotionally and financially. Mom, you've always given me unconditional love and I find courage in everything you do. Thank you for showing me how to be a strong and independent woman. Without your example I may have never have gone out on my own and experienced the world. Dad, you've shown me that no matter what happens you'll always be there for me and I cannot thank you enough for that. To my brother, you played your own unique role in my all of my development since we returned to finish school together. Good times and bad, I wouldn't change any of it. Thank you for everything.

For their generous assistance in shaping my experiences while abroad, I would like to thank all of the students and professors who participated in the 2004 Yucatan, 2005 Paris, and 2005 Oxford study abroad programs. Every one of you played a crucial role in my overall development and change. Thanks to all my friends, old and new, for providing such awesome experiences. Without our interactions I would have no thesis to write.

My gratitude also goes out to the Texas State University Mitte Honors Program. Thank you for all of the opportunities and challenges you've provided.

For Grandpa...I'm sorry I never got a chance to say goodbye.

We'll always have Paris...

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INTRODUCTION

When researching the subject 'study abroad,' there is an overall general conclusion that an individual can really benefit from studying abroad (Groth, 2002; Macey, 2004; Moore, 2000). One can find volumes of books and articles about how studying abroad increases your chances of getting a job, or increases the probability of acceptance into graduate school. Many of these books discuss the value of the multicultural aspect of studying abroad, but at the same time leave out the source where one can obtain evidence of this value (Groth, 2002; Macey, 2004). The references simply refer to the way other individuals will view a person who studied abroad. For example, a person conducting a job interview will view the recent graduate who has studied abroad in a more favorable fashion in comparison to someone who has not. This argument is made on the foundation that studying abroad gives the participant a multicultural perspective of the world (Kitsantas, 2004). These guides and references do not provide any reason to study abroad for the individual who is looking for outcomes beyond external recognition from future employers and colleagues, that is, from persons who are intrinsically invested in the experience. I believe there are other better reasons to study abroad, and they should be made evident.

Interest in traveling abroad can also be seen through the development of more study abroad programs by community colleges and universities (Romano, 2002). As more programs are developing, more attention is being placed on the experiential education available in studying abroad. Traditional study abroad programs focused on language development through a semester or year in another country; however, more programs have evolved into more extensive and general opportunities for experiential learning in all academic disciplines (Hopkins, 1999). Study abroad programs are beginning to develop a number of goals, including the appreciation of diversity, understanding one's own and other cultures, encouragement of international relationships, development of educational and professional opportunities, and access to resources

or methods of research not available inside a campus classroom (McCabe, 1994; Hopkins, 1999). In the past the majority of focus on studying abroad was either on language or on bettering international relations (Bochner, 1979; Coelho, 1962). Although there is some research done on the changes and improvements occurring currently in study abroad programs, there is still a lack of information or examples on how or why studying abroad can help a person achieve these goals.

Studying abroad has always been considered a beneficial act. In the past, people have used study abroad mostly to increase their chances of getting a job, however times have changed and more people are beginning wonder what are the personal benefits of studying abroad. In order to better assess the study abroad experience, I believe we need to document the experiences that happen to the individual person while abroad. I believe we can increase interest in studying abroad by providing access to some of the real phenomena a persona might experience.

In the field of psychology, the phenomenological method is used as a way to examine experience as it occurs. Edmund Husserl was the founder of modern phenomenology (Wertz, 2005; Johnstone, 2005). Phenomenology is the study of phenomena. In this context, phenomena are taken as events or experiences studied for themselves. Husserl believed that phenomenology could be used to create an objective link between the inner, subjective world, and the outer, physical world. He believed that our knowledge of ourselves and of the world must begin with an examination of human consciousness (Johnstone, 2005). Phenomenology called for a new kind of seeing, a new way of exploring consciousness.

Phenomenology concentrates on the study of phenomena as experienced by the individual. As a methodology, it is open to whatever may be significant to understanding the phenomena. (Meyer, 2005; Wertz, 2005) The subject experiencing a phenomenon is required to

attend to it exactly as it appears in consciousness, without prejudice or bias. A phenomenological approach characteristically emphasizes experiences as perceived by an individual and how a phenomenon reveals itself to the experiencing person in all its specificity (Meyer, 2005). In order to explore the numerous questions raised for myself after studying abroad I decided to use the phenomenological method, because it seeks to discover that which is given in experience. Phenomenology encourages the subject to report what is naturally there, the content, impressions, meanings, and so on. Acting myself as the subject, I have reported on my experiences of travel and study abroad in a series of memoirs. Following the phenomenological model, I will use these memoirs in an effort to analyze and answer my original questions.

In the summer of 2003 I returned to Texas State University to complete my bachelors degree in psychology. After hearing another student discussing their experiences of studying abroad, I decided to study abroad. In May 2004 I attended my first study abroad program in the Yucatan. When I returned from the program, I declared the experience as life altering. I was eager to share my newfound fondness of study abroad and was constantly encouraging everyone I knew to study abroad. On many different occasions I was asked to explain how I had changed and what exactly were the benefits of studying abroad. I found myself having a hard time answering these questions. In an effort to explore these issues further, I decided to spend the following summer traveling and studying abroad.

In May 2005 I studied abroad in Paris, which I followed with independent travel, and then another study abroad program in Oxford, July 2005. After returning home in August 2005, it was easy for me to say that all of the study abroad programs I participated in had a major impact on my life. I felt that each program affected me in a variety of ways, both personally and

professionally. As an undergraduate student majoring in psychology, this raises a number of questions.

One of the most important questions I have involves figuring out which parts of my study abroad experiences were formative. Each study abroad program involved a different setting, culture, program length, distance of travel, number of participants, proximity among participants, different subjects available to study, and sometimes, different languages. There were different people, different places, and different events. In addition, the experiences on each program were different in every way.

To begin, each study abroad program involved a different setting. Each program location was conducive to the material being taught; I studied film in Paris, Mayan culture in the Yucatan, and British education in Oxford. Studying these specific topics at a location conducive to that topic provided a level of experiential education that seems unattainable inside of the classroom. The experience of being in each location was so strong that I have to pose the following question: Would I have attained as good of a grasp on the subject material had I taken these courses at my home university? Certain texts I read while studying abroad had a strong impact on me emotionally; would they have had the same affect on me if I had read them at home or inside the classroom? While studying abroad I faced many hurdles that I would not have had to face had I been at home in the United States. Were the challenges faced during study abroad are comparable to any faced inside the university classroom? If I had taken the same courses at home instead of while studying abroad, would they have had the same affect on me personally?

Every study abroad program I participated in varied in length and in the number of participants. Knowing these facts, I must question whether the length of the program matters on overall personal change. Is there a noticeable difference between attending a two-week and a

four-week program? Also, because of the differences in the length of each program, the amount of time I spent with the other participants on each program varied. The proximity of the participants also varied between each program. What affect does the proximity of the study abroad participants have on their interactions between one another and on their perceptions of one another? How does this proximity affect each person individually? Study abroad participants are put into situations where nearly everyone around them is a stranger. Spending time with unfamiliar people can create a lot of stress, especially in a foreign country. Sometimes however, a stranger can actually provide comfort through kindness. How does the kindness of strangers affect a person's outlook on the world? Likewise, how does the cruelty of some strangers affect a person's outlook of the world?

Studying abroad involves traveling to another country and provides the participant access to another culture. Although it is possible to study about other countries and cultures at one's home university system, can an individual truly grasp the cultural differences inside the classroom? Does traveling to a country make it easier to learn a foreign language or understand foreign cultures and concepts? In addition, many people experience culture shock when traveling to another country, and they sometimes experience return culture shock after coming home. Is it possible for culture shock to open the eyes for self-reflection and an awareness of one's own culture? Can learning about another culture broaden an individual's perception of the world and themselves? Is it possible for the opposite effect to occur? Can experiencing another culture cause an individual to become more pessimistic and less worldly?

It is also necessary to question what kind of overall impact study abroad can have on the individual, and whether or not the person studying abroad needs to have the "eyes to see" prior to departure. I declared personal change through study abroad, however I chose to study abroad in

search of this change. Can the act of studying abroad provoke change without the individual seeking that change through his or her own personal actions? Can studying abroad help an individual gain the “eyes to see” through experience? While studying abroad I noticed that certain events and challenges evoked strong emotional responses from some people and not from others. Why are some people able to maintain their composure when faced with challenge and others are not? Can these challenges and the fact that an individual is removed from their comfort zone while abroad, assist with personal change? Does overcoming certain obstacles while studying abroad create a sense of independence and if so what are some examples? In order to answer many of these questions I’ve chosen to reflect upon my own study abroad experiences.

Memoirs Abroad

THE YUCATAN

I had decided to study abroad in order to travel and study outside of the United States. The reason I chose to study abroad in Mexico was because of the location in relation to Texas. In addition, the price of the program was the most economical. Mexico in general is a very economical place to travel to. Most everything is inexpensive and the US dollar is worth so much more than the Mexican peso. I have no idea what I thought Mexico was going to be like. I had done very little research on the area; in fact, I never even looked at a map of the Yucatan before leaving the US. What I did have was a mental image of two pictures provided to me by my program director. The pictures included one shot of an ocean side cliff, beneath which lay endless beach jutting up to some of the bluest water I have ever seen, and the other picture was a gorgeous shot of a Mayan ruin. Above the pictures in bold face type was the following statement: These are your classrooms!

I found Mexico to be a very interesting place that is viewed differently by many people. Growing up in my family household, we were not allowed to go to Mexico. Because of this, I always thought of Mexico as a forbidden place. I considered it a place where dangerous people lived and bad things could happen. This was the feeling instilled in me by my parents. Because of this feeling, and the partying I had done in Mexico after moving out of my parent's home, I imagined Mexico as a slummy, bar infested, drug-ridden country. I had no idea how beautiful I would find the country to be.

The only time I ever remember myself thinking about the beauty of Mexico was in its beaches. Resorts are always picturesque in brochures. Everything I had to go on in regards to Mexico was biased. I had no idea the cloud I had painted before my own eyes even existed. By the end of my three-week study abroad program, I had a completely different perspective of the country. I do not think people can understand or experience Mexico without going there

themselves. There is so much beauty and so much ugliness it is difficult to describe what your thinking when you are there experiencing it.

Valladolid was the first destination of my study abroad program. It is a very small town, a true representation of old Mexico. One of the first things a small group of us did once we set ourselves up in our rooms was set out to find dinner. I have always been a picky eater. My parents always joked around about how I somehow survived off bread and potatoes. Needless to say I had already considered the potential difficulties that lay before me with food. There were, however, a few key Mexican dishes I knew I could not go wrong with – or so I thought. Our first night abroad, I was quickly proven wrong. We found a cute restaurant only three doors down from our hotel and I ordered the cheese quesadillas, as did four or five other people. When the first order of quesadillas arrived everyone agreed to share and dug in—it was disgusting. Turns out the cheeses in the US used on quesadillas are not the same cheeses used in Mexico.

I find it pretty hard to remember Valladolid. This is probably because it was the first place we visited and we stayed there the shortest amount of time. It seemed like everyone was full of anxiety and awkwardness. The first morning I remember watching a young man from our group slip and fall on the tile floor in the hotel lobby. All I could think about was how embarrassed he must have been, and I had nothing but sympathy for him at that very moment. Hardly any time had passed since our arrival in Mexico and we were all still very unfamiliar with one another. Had we been good friends perhaps we could have laughed it off together.

I think in Valladolid I was scared. Aside from kindergarten and first grade in New Mexico, I had never studied Spanish. My vocabulary and comprehension were very limited – involving mainly the bathroom and the library. All of this was completely outside of my comfort zone. The only thing around that allowed me any comfort at all was my brother. I used him for

his Spanish speaking abilities, and as a sort of bodyguard. In addition, it had been over seven years since I had taken a course with my brother. We had signed up for the same course on religion while in Mexico, and I was looking forward to sharing the experience with him.

I took two courses while studying abroad in Mexico: *Mayan History and Society*, and *Religion, Science, and the Quest for Meaning*. Studying the Maya's exposed me to a population of people and a culture I had never spent a second of my life considering. Participating in a course on religion and science forced me to open up and listen to others opinions and thoughts on the matter while considering my own. Taking this course in Mexico, where religion is fundamental for most of the population, provided an environment loaded with experiences well suited to the subject matter. In addition to the ample environment, the dynamics created by the differences in religious beliefs by students participating in this course were phenomenal. I believe these courses, particularly the latter, had an impact on much of my experience while in Mexico.

There were thirty-nine students and three professors who participated in the Mexico study abroad program. I had class with almost everyone on the trip, however there was around twelve total in our religion course. Even though only twelve total were enrolled in the course it seemed like everyone on the trip was participating outside of classroom time in discussions on the subject matter. There was one young man on the program who was so religiously devoted to Jesus Christ that he carried a bible with him everywhere he went. I thoroughly enjoyed striking up conversation with this man in regards to religion and why, in his experience, his perspective from one religious tradition must be the universal answer. Every reason he gave me seemed to have some sort of flaw, or lack of validity, yet he still continued to press on his quest in showing me the 'way.' There were several hard-core atheists, several proclaimed agnostics, and there

were many claims of practiced religion, varying from Pentecostal to Buddhism. With so much diversity amongst the group I was exposed to many sides of religion and science I had never before seen.

Until I stepped foot on Chichen Itza, I had never experienced anything I would classify as a 'religious' or 'mystical' experience. Chichen Itza is one of the most controversial sites of the Mayans; it was abandoned back in 1250 but no one has uncovered the reason why. The Castle of Kukulcan is the central pyramid of Chichen Itza; it rises 30 meters above the earth. One can climb the 91 stairs to the top from any side of the pyramid. It is speculated that the Mayans built the pyramid to have 364 total stairs and 1 platform to have a final value of 365, thus representing the number of days in one calendar year. The view from the top of the pyramid is spectacular in that you can see all of Chichen Itza and beyond for miles. Without hesitation I ascended the great pyramid. After I reached the top of the pyramid I sat upon a stone under one of the platform archways. Being a self-proclaimed religious cynic, it is with absolute reserve and doubt that I tell of feeling something here that was unbelievable. As if the weight of the world were upon my shoulders, I began to weep. I did not just cry, I sobbed uncontrollably. I wept, and wept, and wept. Several times I tried to gain my composure but the tears would not stop. Wondering whether or not this bizarre occurrence was taking place because of my fear of heights, I decided to climb down the pyramid. When I reached the ground the tears continued. I could barely see through my sweat and tear filled eyes. I took refuge under a nearby tree. I sat on the roots of the tree and leaned my back against it for support. I thought I might pass out; I thought I might be dying; I thought we should not be there, and I wanted it all to stop. I sat in that one spot for what felt like half the day and turned out to be about forty-five minutes. During that time I have no idea where my mind was or what it was thinking, but I knew I felt sadness – perhaps for the

Mayan people. I know it sounds ridiculous to some (myself included), but “the cosmos” spoke to me that day, and it was amazing. I wondered if I created this experience for myself because of the religion course we were taking, or if I truly experienced something unexplainable. Perhaps it was nothing, but I believe it was something. It was something unlike anything else I had ever experienced before; something I would come very similar to experiencing a year later at Auschwitz. This event changed my outlook on everything to do with religion and science; as it turns out, the experience was only the beginning of many mystical events to come.

We had stopped at Chichen Itza en route to Merida, an extremely bustling city. The sidewalks were only two feet wide and always packed. I felt like a linebacker every time I left the hotel, slamming shoulders with every person I passed. There were numerous shops and restaurants lining the streets. The city was very old and had a lot of history behind it; it was easy to feel. La Mision de Fray Diego, our hotel in Merida felt like walking into the television world of Melrose Place. In the center of the hotel was a courtyard surrounding a swimming pool. All of the hotel doors opened to the outside looking into the courtyard. Bright and dark green vines covered the walls inside of the courtyard. The entire hotel was decorated by a wide variety of plants. There were several different kinds of palms, ferns, crotons, hibiscus, bougainvillea, dieffenbachia, and I counted at least two different kinds of orchids. There was so much vegetation inside the hotel it almost created its own level of humidity. I remember the feeling of astonishment that came over me when I first walked in. The mix of color amongst the plants was almost overwhelming. The atmosphere created by La Mision de Fray Diego opened my eyes to the diversity of plants thriving throughout the Yucatan. I immediately began to notice how much of Mexico’s beauty is captured inside of its plant life.

I traveled all over the city of Merida on my own. I quickly learned that most of Mexico is decorated by vegetative beauty. Inside the center of every city we visited were the most beautiful parks, covered in benches and lovers chairs, surrounded by hanging baskets, trees, vines, and more. At times I felt like I was really living in the 'tropical paradise' that so many people dream of. While I was staying in Merida I was sent on a sort of treasure hunt for my Mayan History course, except that the treasure I sought consisted of places, not objects. There was no guidebook, or map to assist in finding each location. With no knowledge of Spanish, this proved to be quite the task, but in the end it was very rewarding. The first place I found was Museo de la Cuidad. This museum is loaded with information regarding Merida's history and was an excellent place to begin my exploration of the city. La Casa de Montejo was the second place I visited and turned out to be the oldest structure in Merida. It was constructed in 1543 from stones of the temples in the main plaza of the Maya city Tiho. The detailed architecture of La Casa de Montejo is mind-boggling, even the inside of the building, including the ceiling, is blanketed by some of the most magnificent murals I have ever seen. After visiting a few more locations such as, Archivo General, The Governors Palace, and La Catedral de San Ildefonso, it was apparent that many of the important buildings in Mexico are all ornately decorated by detailed architecture and elaborate artwork. I noticed that most of the artwork in each building was religious in nature; even the Governors Palace was decorated by religious murals. In addition, I noticed that inside La Catedral de San Ildefonso there is a Mexican flag hanging. It had never occurred to me that Mexico does not maintain a separation of church and state before this time. After I made this connection I began to pay more attention to the religious nature of nearly everything happening inside the Yucatan. I continued on my search of the city and was amazed by the Convent of the Immaculate Conception. The Convent was built in 1546 and is still unbelievably operable.

Service was taking place when I found the Convent, so I quietly slipped in until the end of the service (which I might add was delivered completely in Spanish yet was one of the most beautiful services I have ever attended). Following the Convent I visited the Church of Jesus. This church is the most breathtaking church I have ever laid eyes on. Established at the end of the 17th century, the baroque style used in the interior is immaculate. The church was so dressed up, it even had chandeliers that looked like real crystal. It was at the Church of Jesus that I learned “INRI” means King of Jews, and for the first time in my life and started to realize how ignorant I am when it comes to religions and their history. I found myself staring at a statue of INRI that was surrounded by three larger statues and I wanted more than anything to know who each person was supposed to be. After my visit to the Church of Jesus I started asking more questions to those students who were practicing different religions, and I was surprised to find that many of them were just as ignorant as myself on the subject matter. Ironically I closed my search of the city with the Arch of the Dragons, the original gate to the city of Merida. I was excited to see the Arch because I expected it to be elaborately decorated in dragons, however I was disappointed by a bland yellow three pointed archway with one plain statue in the center. After complaining about the arch’s blandness I was informed that it was called the Arch of the Dragons because the soldiers who would have guarded the gate were called dragoons, armored foot soldiers. In addition, the symbol of the regiment was probably the dragon. By the time I located and researched all the places sought, I felt like I had received a lifetime of Mexican history in a few days, and I had conquered the entire city. For the first time since arriving in Mexico, I had a serious sense of accomplishment.

Towards the end of our stay in Merida, I had another numinous experience. We were reading Simone Weil in my religion course. I had never before heard of Weil and was instantly

intrigued after reading only a bit of her life story. She became an instant hit as a topic for discussion. About three quarters of the way through the book, I started reading Weil with my newfound sorority friend. We were sitting in my room reading and discussing the text. We had just finished reading about Weil's death and were discussing whether or not she had committed suicide when the television suddenly turned on. The television was closed up inside an armoire. We could see through the crack that there was no clear channel on, instead there was static roaring from the speakers and black and white fuzz racing across the television screen. We both froze and stared at each other. Then as if cued by a director, we both jumped up to look for the remote control. I was hoping one of us had accidentally pressed the power button. What we found was the remote sitting on top of the television, also closed up in the armoire. We turned the television off, left the armoire open and sat back down silently. It was at least fifteen minutes before we spoke again. We talked about the vibes in the room, the television, Weil, and what it all meant. We felt touched, privileged, and spoken to. We finished reading the book right then. We talked for hours about Weil and our own lives in retrospect. She made us both want to be better people and we were going to try to take our mystical television experience and use it to remember that there might be something watching and listening.

Perhaps there is some spiritual connection between Mexico and myself that I am unaware of. I do not think I am the only one who felt it though. On the bus ride to Dzilbulchultun I was feeling very strange again. I looked over at my brother sitting next to me. We were both wearing sunglasses. I could tell he was feeling it too. Then I saw it, there was a tear coming down his cheek. Suddenly I began to cry as well. We sat there quietly and cried together. Then when we got off the bus we gave each other a hug. It was for our brother – everything at that moment I felt was for him. Neither one of us really understood why at that time we chose to breakdown, but it

happened. We found out later from our mother that our brother was arrested and sent to prison that day; he is now serving a twenty-year sentence.

My family has been dealing with the troubles caused by this brother for nearly eight years. Until our stop in Dzilbulchultun, I had never considered what it must have been like for him. While we were there, we learned about how the Mayans had been conquered by the Spanish. We learned that the Mayans had to give up their own religion and were forced to adapt to a new type of society. Hearing all of this made me think about my own life and how ultimately I had experienced very little suffering. And then I started thinking about my brother and how he must have suffered for the past eight years. It was here, at that moment, that I started to forgive him.

Our excursion to Izamal was very different from the other excursions. Although Izamal had some remaining Mayan ruins, the main feature of the excursion was seeing the great church. Many years before our visit, the Pope had visited this church. It was very obvious this church was held in high regard and was well cared for in lieu of the rest of the city. The church was a very bland yellow color – what I imagine the color of the wallpaper would be in Charlotte Perkins's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Placed in the center of town, it was the main attraction of the town. We rode around the town in horse drawn carriages looking at lumps of Mayan ruins. It was an extremely hot day. I felt so bad for the horses pulling the carriages. The entire time I wanted to get out of the carriage and walk. By the time our tour was over, my legs were stuck together from sweat. I was happy to get back on board the bus to leave for lunch.

After we left Izamal we went to a small town for lunch. The restaurant that was chosen had nothing on the menu that I would eat. My brother and I left and went walking to look for something else. What we found was a small shop that was much like a convenience store. The

place was fully loaded with every sweet treat possibly imaginable. I purchased a coca-cola and some cookies. What I should have purchased was some water. It was unbearably hot walking. My socks were soaked through to the point where my shoes seemed to be sweating. My stomach was starting to hurt. My hunger had transformed into cramps and everything around me was beginning to go blurry. We made it back to the restaurant and joined a part of our group on the sidewalk across the street from the front door. There was no shade. The roads were barely paved. The wind was on vacation. It felt like I was breathing dirt. I heard someone speak to me: "You don't look so good." Then came blackness.

I woke up sitting on the sidewalk with my back against a dingy broken down mud wall. It felt like there were a thousand faces staring at me. Water was being poured into my mouth and onto my head. I was so hot I just wanted to pass back out. Several people and my brother helped me stand up and then my brother helped me back to the bus. It felt like I was walking in the blazing heat of Africa from the beginning to the end of the Nile. Once I got back on the bus I curled up in a ball and tried to think of something else. I could hear people whispering all sorts of things around me:

"She could die ya know;" "I knew this guy once;" "She'll be fine;" "Keep giving her fluids, she's just dehydrated."

I tried to tune everyone out and think about snow and Gatorade. Ironically as if my thoughts were spoken out loud, someone was trying to give me some PowerAde. I gladly took it and quaffed it. Eventually everyone had boarded the bus and we were on our way to Mayapan. Before we arrived I had managed to sit up and was seeing clearly once again. My stomach, however, was still extremely unhappy, and I could feel the need to use the bathroom rising.

When we arrived at Mayapan I exited the bus and headed for the toilets with another girl who was also suffering a stomach ailment. We spent a short amount of time there in the two-toilet shack just outside Mayapan's entrance before we mustered up the strength to go inside. The group had already gone ahead. We did not venture very far into the site before we picked a ruin and sat down to enjoy the view. I really enjoyed the time we spent sitting there watching our group from afar, taking pleasure in the remote location of Mayapan. With only myself and one other person to share this experience with, it felt very personal. Mayapan had not been rebuilt; everything was exactly as the Mayans had left it – and it was beautiful. There were no tourist booths and no screaming children running around. It was simply nature, the Mayan spirit, and us. The shade spot we chose to sit in had kept the rock at such a cool temperature that this excruciatingly hot day had suddenly become beautiful. I felt so at peace and so happy to be alive. Even though it had been a rough day, and I left dehydrated and hungry, I was completely fulfilled.

The final resting point for our program was on the beautiful island of Isla Mujeres. Isla Mujeres was paradise. I had never stayed so close to the ocean before. I could walk onto my hotel balcony and the ocean was less than fifty feet away. I could hear every crash of every wave. I could smell the salt water on my pillow. Before Isla I had no idea what it meant to sit back and relax while hanging between two trees. I had never known the gently sway a hammock makes when the trees to which it is tied are blown by the ocean breeze. I am a mountain girl who enjoys winter sports; I had never imagined the beach could be so gorgeous and the ocean water so blue and clear. This was a place for reflection. This was a place I could begin to let my soul pour out.

We conducted class everyday on the beach. Although it was a half a mile walk to get there, it was worth it every time. Although Isla had a touristy feel about it, one could still see the

obvious poverty throughout the island. There were homes that amounted barely to shack standards, piles of garbage, stray dogs and more. And yet despite the impoverished look of some places, the island was still beautiful in its own way. The buildings were all painted different colors; some pink, some blue, some green, and some not painted at all. The lack of conformity in buildings and colors throughout the island gave it an eclectic, friendly feel.

I spent a countless number of hours wandering Isla, reading for class, hanging in the hammocks, sitting on the 'meditation rock' in the ocean, staring at the stars, and writing in my journal. At home, it seems very difficult to step away from the hustle and bustle of my normal life; but here, I more than managed to do so. I managed to write about things I had not even thought about in years. I went to the Internet café and emailed friends I had not spoken to in years. I spent an exorbitant amount of time questioning my supposed beliefs, my life, and my future plans. I am not sure if I ever even came up with any answers.

One of my most memorable moments on the island of Isla involved doing almost nothing. One morning I sat on the balcony with my brother and watched the most beautiful sunrise I have ever seen. There was a thin line of clouds across the horizon of the ocean that allowed the sun to continuously peek out from and duck behind creating a sunrise that lasted nearly an hour. The sun cascaded so many brilliant colors of orange, red, yellow, and gold, it was like watching a volcano exploding in the sky. We sat there in complete silence embracing the moment. I enjoyed my time so much in Isla, the last day of the program arrived without my knowing it. It was the first time I realized I had to go home. I was sad to be leaving all my new friends. Although we had embarked on this journey as strangers, through all the trials and tribulations we had all become very good friends. It had never occurred to me how close we'd all grown in those three weeks.

It is funny what we take for granted without realizing it. We take so many things for granted, people and places, but we also take the simple details of daily life for granted. The hotel we stayed at in Isla had no air conditioning. When we first arrived in Isla I remember freaking out over this minor detail. It is extremely hot in Mexico at the end of May. I already felt like I was going to melt every day, so when we arrived in Isla, I wondered how would I possibly survive without air-conditioning. After the first day in Isla I do not think the thought ever crossed my mind again. It is not that the days got any cooler, it is that the ocean creates an unbelievable breeze, so strong it will make you forget you ever knew what air-conditioning was. In fact, I do not even remember sweating in Isla.

Alas, I cannot say the same about Paris.

PARIS

What most people do not know about me – though generally not surprised to learn – is that when I first entered college I was a theater major. My interest in theater was fairly superficial in that I did not know anything about being in theater – I simply thought I could make a fortune at acting. After taking one course in theater I was quickly deterred from that path. What I found out many years later after taking an Honors course on film is that my interest in theater had not been totally off the mark. Instead, I found that I have an interest in the technical aspect of film and television, and I became interested in everything to do with film “behind the scenes.” For this reason, I chose to study in Paris. There is no better place in the world to study film than in Paris. In addition to my love for film, I was extremely excited to be able to practice my French speaking skills. Although I had not studied French in many years, I spent over six years of my youth studying the subject in school. The entire time I studied French, I dreamed of the day I would be able to travel to Paris—a dream that was finally coming true.

My preparations for Paris were much more extensive than those made for Mexico. Most people know that the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre are located in Paris; however, I wanted to know more than this before arriving there. I purchased several books and maps on the city and started to familiarize myself with the area. I also got several old French textbooks and started practicing my French skills. Despite all my planning, I was completely unprepared for the massive size of the city and the difficulties to be faced while submersed in a foreign language and culture.

My arrival in Paris was memorable by itself. I am allergic to mushrooms; I learned this at a very young age and have never had a problem avoiding them before. Three bites into my airplane dinner and I knew I was eating mushrooms. After informing the flight attendant (who was every bit rude) and retrieving a large puke bag, I sat in my chair for the remaining six hours

of the flight sweating profusely, jumping up every thirty minutes or so to run to the bathroom in preparation to vomit. I was able to withstand puking until the plane actually touched down in Paris. The rumbling of the plane on the runway was just enough stimulation to trigger the regurgitation muscles and there was no holding back. After two noisy sessions of vomiting, I cleaned my mouth and prepared to exit the plane. The French couple that had sat next to me smiled and said, "Welcome to Paris." I asked them if they could tell me how to say throw-up in French. They replied, "Vomir." In my first few seconds in Paris, I had already learned a new french word. Although it is a word I would sooner like to forget, I know I never will.

The girl who was going to be my roommate in Paris had suffered through the entire plane ride sitting right next to me. I am not sure if I felt worse for her or myself. She was so gracious though, I could not have asked for better treatment. After we exited the plane and retrieved our luggage I was feeling much better, but still very disoriented. Navigating our way through the airport seemed excessively difficult to me; I was completely lost following my roommate's lead. If she had not been there showing me the way, I am not sure I would have made it to our hotel. In the process of looking for our train, the RER, we ran into another of our group members. We had been on the same flight as him, but we had failed to see him on board. Together the three of us boarded the train and headed towards south Paris to our hotel.

We had to transfer off the RER at some point in time onto a regular metro. I remember being very confused at this point. We were following signs that were one hundred percent in French. I am not sure if I could have understood English at this point, much less French. I had no idea where we were supposed to be going; much less, how either one of the two people I was with knew where we were going either. We walked underground, up and down stairs, and onto a platform where we waited for the metro. We boarded the metro and rode for at least another half

an hour until we got off at the Glaciere stop. Once we came out of the metro doors we started looking around for signs to try to figure out our location. Without being asked, a very nice French woman asked us if we needed assistance, and we asked her if she knew where the FIAP hotel was located. She explained it was very simple, and we were on our way with only two corners to turn to arrive at our destination.

After all the walking and hauling of luggage I was hot, stinky, and tired. I was desperate for a shower and a nap. My roommate and I checked into our room and could not find the shower. After looking for a communal shower on almost every floor, we finally went downstairs and asked the man at the reception desk. He told us to open the bathroom door and then close it. The shower was hidden when the bathroom door was open. So my roommate and I decided that, because she takes longer showers, she would go first. So I sat there on my cot sized bed staring at the ceiling waiting for my turn to shower. I could not believe how hot our room was. There was no air-conditioning, and the window would only open a crack. I could not believe the windows were designed like that.

I tried to remember being in Mexico without air-conditioning, but I could not remember it being that hot. I was not sure if taking a shower was even going to be worth it, I was just going to sweat the second I got out of it. I knew after a little while I would grow accustomed to the temperature and existing without the AC, but at that very moment I just wanted to be naked. I have never had a roommate. I have never had to share a room, other than with someone with whom I was romantically involved. This was the first time in my life that, in my own room, I was unable to take off all my clothes and enjoy being naked. So I lay there, sweating and waiting. I knew if nothing else the feeling of water pouring on my skin would feel great.

Taking a shower in a foreign country is almost always an educating experience. In the FIAP hotel in Paris you had to press down a knob in order to turn the water on. It sounded simple to me when my roommate explained it, but what I did not realize is that you had to hold the button down the entire time to keep the water on. At one point in time my roommate and I even tried to rig the knob with a hair scrunchie. Eventually I learned to simply face away from the water and lean my back against the knob. In the beginning I showered a lot in Paris, it was my only relief from the heat. Eventually I got used to sweating. Following the first week I adjusted to the incessant heat and found myself cold in any building that maintained air-conditioning, particularly the cinema.

One of the few similarities between the cinemas in Paris and movie theaters in America is that both always seem over-air-conditioned. Aside from this flaw, I found the cinemas in Paris to be quaint, peaceful, and yet full of passion. Going to the cinema in Paris is an experience like no other. In any *arrondissement* in Paris, one can find a plethora of cinemas offering just about any type of film. Once inside a theater a person will easily realize how different the atmosphere inside each cinema can be. After spending a month in Paris, where I saturated myself with the viewing pleasure of its film ecstasy, I find it easy to understand why Parisians have a love affair with film.

The majority of my two-week study abroad program in Paris was spent inside of the Forum des Halles, a multi-screen theater that also included individual viewing rooms with thousands of film titles to choose from. Realizing how much time I was destined to spend inside the theater, I learned quickly to appreciate the distinct fervor found inside the French cinema. The only disappointment I found myself experiencing inside cinema was that most of the films we were viewing were delivered in French, without English subtitles. Although I was able to

understand at least half of what was being communicated in each film, it was extremely frustrating and hard to get used to. I found myself constantly writing words down that I wanted to look up, until finally I started carrying my dictionary with me and trying to look it up on the spot. This effort proved futile because I would spend so much time looking up the words that I would miss much of the movie that may have helped explain to me what the word meant out of context. I remember thinking about the few people who were on our trip that spoke absolutely no French and how horrible it must have been for them to sit through an entire movie understanding none of the dialogue. By the end of the program I comprehended at least seventy-five percent of each film, and only then did I realize how much was “lost in translation.” Although at times it was frustrating not being able to understand everything, it felt like a good way to actually try to learn the language.

While I was studying in Paris, France was voting on the new European Union constitution. All over Paris there were signs that said ‘Oui’ or ‘Non.’ My program director grew up in France and spent many years in Paris. She explained to us that the debate was over whether or not to accept the new constitution. Most European union countries were in favor of the new constitution; however, there were many in France who were opposed to it. According to my program director many of the individuals who opposed the constitution were in fear of change, and therefore would vote ‘non,’ without even reading the new constitution. This would prove to be my first lesson ever in French politics.

My program director explained many things to me that I had never heard before. If France were to vote ‘no’ against the new constitution, the president of France, Jacques Chirac, would be removed from office. Basically a vote against the constitution would be a vote against Jacques Chirac. In essence a no vote would mean that Chirac doesn’t have the support of his

people and a new prime minister would need to be elected. France was extremely split in votes and the final outcome could not even be predicted. Unfortunately for Chirac the vote turned out to be against accepting the new constitution. There were celebrations all over the city of Paris when the 'non' vote came in. In the end, France would not be the only country to vote against the new constitution and therefore they would not be outcast. Ultimately Chirac would be able to keep his position. I was experiencing history in the making.

I have never enjoyed history as a subject in school. Because of this I never paid very much attention and in return know very little about American history, much less history of the world. The older I find myself, the more I find myself wishing that I knew more. My trip to Paris would prove to be one of the best history lessons of my life. Two of the students on the program were studying World War II and its relation to film in Paris. Because of this the entire class was exposed to many films on WWII in Paris, and the class was privy to two tours on the WWII topic. Although it was not my own chosen topic to study, it turned out to be my favorite and the most beneficial personally.

I had no idea the true devastation that had occurred for so much of the world due to the effects of Hitler and WWII. My class went on a tour of the WWII monuments at Pere Lachaise cemetery, one of the most famous cemeteries in Paris – home of many legends like Jim Morrison and Chopin. During this tour there was a French guide who took us and another small group of people through the cemetery while our program director translated the dialogue into English. Many of the monuments were representative of the numerous concentration camps where French-Jews and many others spent their last days. Numerous monuments were very graphic statues, including many statues of skeleton-like humans. The goal of the monuments was to display the suffering and the physical sickness endured by the thousands of prisoners. The

monuments were obviously created to make an impact on those who came to see them, and for me they did just this. I listened to our guide discuss the numerous ways the prisoners were tortured in the concentration camps and learned about the grotesque number of people who lost their lives. I learned about the ways in which the French Jews were originally arrested, and the ways they were betrayed by their own police and government. I felt so overwhelmed by all the information I was obtaining; it felt like I was having a mystical experience.

At the end of the tour, we learned that the other members of the group were actually several activists who were trying to rejuvenate the interest and education of what happened to the French-Jews during WWII. This group of people was excited to see a group of young Americans in Paris learning about French-Jews and WWII. One of the women from that group had actually been in a concentration camp and had lost all of her family members to other camps. I could not believe I was so privileged to meet this woman. I think we made her day by showing her that there were people in the world that still care—her family did not die in vain. After this encounter I felt the need to be alone. It seemed like too much for me to handle; I had to find a place I could cry. With almost everyone from my program present, I found it very difficult to find a place to be alone. I ended up walking around the cemetery weaving in and out of tombstones, quietly weeping as I poured over everything I had just experienced. Eventually I ran into my roommate, and we headed back to the FIAP together. I felt different after that moment, but I felt no change in my roommate. I do not know how anyone could listen to everything we had just heard and not be emotionally affected by it, yet my roommate acted as if she were made of stone. In fact, we never discussed any part of the event—she only wanted to discuss her lack of energy after walking around the cemetery.

In addition to the tour of the cemetery, the program director arranged for a tour of Musee Jean Moulin. This was a museum/exhibit about the famous French General Jean Moulin. This was actually the last tour of the Paris program, and only three other students and I attended. It was at this museum that I learned about the horrible relations that existed between France's General Charles de Gaulle and the United State's President Eisenhower. I learned that Jean Moulin was a famous French General who was able to step in and better the relations between France and the United States. Moulin formed better relations with Eisenhower and proved to be an essential part of the liberation of France. Before stepping into this museum I had never even heard of Jean Moulin. In addition to many displays and artifacts, we watched a film produced by the museum. This film was displayed in a theater room unlike any other I have ever seen. The walls in the room were curved, which enabled the film to be displayed on what was equivalent to three movie screens. In essence we were watching three films. The film footage shown was dramatic and spared no one. The film was an eclectic display of still photos and war footage—some of which I do not believe would be allowed to be seen in the United States. Because there was so much going on in each screen, the film played over and over again, giving the viewers time to witness what was being shown on each screen. I sat there and watched until I could no longer digest any more. I found myself wondering how could there have been such suffering in the world? How could any living being allow such an event to take place—who were these awful people willing to commit such acts of violence against the human species? I left Musee Jean Moulin with the same sad feeling I left Pere Lachaise cemetery. Unfortunately this time I was unable to find any solitude as I was stuck with my roommate who for the thousandth time wanted to go shopping. We were like two totally different species when it came to our decisions

on 'what to do' with our free time. The one thing we were able to easily agree on however was music.

The first night the group went out, we headed to the Latin Quarter to a place called Caveau Huchette. It seemed everyone in our program enjoyed listening to music, especially if live onstage. We found the name Caveau Huchette inside the Pariscope (a French guide to film and music) and decided to go and check out this Parisian jazz club. What we stumbled upon was like stepping back in time. Caveau in French translates to cave, which is exactly what the club was. After entering the front door and traveling down a winding set of stairs' one enters into a cave. Inside the cave there were tables and chairs spread throughout, a stage, and small dance floor in front of the stage. When we entered, the jazz band was already playing, and there were several couples that were dancing like they had just stepped out of the swing era. It was so amazing watching those people dance while listening to the jazz pump through my ears. This was the first time I had ever listened to live jazz, and it turns out I am a huge fan.

After our visit to Caveau Huchette, we were all pumped up about jazz music. Our program director arranged for all of us to meet up at Sunside Café to attend another jazz band that turned out to be even better. I was so engrossed in the music that I was able to tune out everything else around me. It felt like I was there on stage with the band. I could feel their passion behind the instruments; I could feel the life inside of the music. The band was playing Piazzola, and it was sensational.

Jazz and Paris seem to go hand in hand. After visiting both these jazz clubs, I realized it is easy to find jazz playing in Paris. Sometimes it's as simple as walking down the street. I once ran into a three-man band jamming on the street corner next to Notre Dame. I found this side of Paris to be majestic. I have always been a music lover, and I spent an overwhelming amount of

time in my youth attending numerous concerts. As mainstream music has progressed towards pop and rap, I have found myself listening to music less and less. After my exposure to jazz in Paris, my interest in music was rejuvenated. I found myself once again embracing live music and subsequently I visited several jazz clubs during the remainder of my trip through Europe.

There were only ten students, a program director, and the director's assistant participating in the Paris program. Disappointingly, the program director spent very little time with us. Outside of morning class time, the student tours, and a few films, we only met up with the program director one time. Part of the greatness of attending this particular Paris program was the idea of going to Paris with a program director that grew up there. I imagined her taking us to places that only those who had lived in Paris would know. This expectation was not, however, part of the program. The program director was not around for the first weekend, and she took herself and the program assistant to Brittany for the second weekend. I know when I was in Paris I felt somewhat disappointed by the program director's absence; however, I was forced to discover Paris on my own which may have stimulated a more intense learning experience. In the end I was unable to depend on the program directors knowledge of the city and had to learn everything on my own. The fact that there were other people there with me who also knew little to nothing about the city made it all a little more exciting.

The fact that we were a small group of students made it easy for us to bond with one another. It is easy to find comfort, even with someone you've only known for a little while, when you are in a foreign country. The first weekend we were there, only nine of us were present, which in the end proved to be unfavorable for the missing student. The nine of us who were present spent the entire weekend getting to know one another while traveling around the city. It's not that we all sat around sharing personal stories about ourselves, instead we spent time just

hanging out and letting the days unfold before us. We visited many of the famous monuments and museums throughout the city, ate delicious food and pastries, and drank the finest of wines. We walked everywhere, rode the metro, and tried to discover everything we could in the limited time we had.

We spent nearly every minute of each day with one another. In the beginning, it all seemed great fun, as if we were living some MTV “Real World” fantasy. We had all been removed from our comfort zones and forced to spend all of our time with people who were merely strangers. What I quickly learned is that I am a very private person who needs a certain amount of space to maintain sanity. I found myself stuck in situations that I would have imagined myself experiencing at age 20 but that at 26 felt too old to be happening. What should have dawned on me is that almost everyone on the trip was experiencing this trip at age 20. I ended up finding solace in the one other person who was my age. I now call this girl my ‘soul sister.’ My soul sister ended up spending a lot of her time looking after her roommate, so the actual amount of time we spent together was very limited. Usually we would only hang out together with the group; however, there were a couple of instances where we were able to sneak away and enjoy some wine together, sharing our life stories. We ended up getting matching tattoos before leaving Paris, and every minute we were able to share in Paris is perfectly engrained in my memory.

BETWEEN STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

Following the Paris study abroad program, I traveled independently for six weeks. During my independent travel, I quickly learned to value knowing French as a second language. There were many instances where I could not find anyone who spoke English, but there were plenty of people who spoke French. I learned how truly small the world is by running into several people I know from the United States, even as far from home as Poland. I made many new acquaintances with individuals living all around the world. I saw many fantastic places such as, Warsaw, Prague, several small towns in the Czech Republic, and much of Germany. Overall I had an unbelievable time gallivanting around Europe trying to discover anything and everything before me.

During the time I traveled around Poland, I visited two concentration camps, Auschwitz and Birkenau, which are also perfectly engrained in my memory. I am not sure what I was expecting to see at Auschwitz and Birkenau. I do not think anyone can prepare himself or herself for what they are going to see, unless they have already visited a concentration camp. After learning so much about WWII while in Paris, I was anxious to see for myself what a concentration looked like. What I saw repulsed me. Auschwitz and Birkenau are only twenty minutes apart, yet are like two completely different worlds. Birkenau was a labor concentration camp, while Auschwitz was set up to conduct experiment involving crimes against humanity. The first feeling I had when I arrived at Auschwitz was very similar to the feeling I had while at Chichen Itza. I do not know if it is the commercialized feeling of the camp, or if it is simply the fact of knowing that thousands of people lost their lives there, but my gut was telling me we should not be there. Initially it seemed like there were a lot of children visiting the concentration camps, and it felt very inappropriate. I tried to separate myself from the masses in order to have a more peaceful visit.

I did not pay for a guided tour; I simply purchased a guidebook and ventured out on my own. The buildings and grounds at Auschwitz were very well kept. Inside each building were different exhibits displaying the cruel and unusual methods used by Hitler's regime. In one building there was over two tons of women's hair. There was an even worse exhibit, which displayed evidence of war crimes. The one thing I remember the most, a memory that continued to haunt me long after I left Poland, were the pictures of the prisoners still displayed on the walls of the buildings inside of Auschwitz. There were thousands of pictures. I knew I was staring at many faces of people that spent the last days of their lives right there, in that concentration camp. After several hours at Auschwitz I could barely speak. I found a set of stairs on the edge of the camp's perimeter and sat down for some reflection time. Realizing the evening was approaching, I headed on to Birkenau.

Arriving in Birkenau I knew I had not seen anything yet. In comparison, Auschwitz seemed like a vacation resort. Birkenau was basically a slave labor camp. The prisoners were housed in barn like shacks, and they were forced to work in the fields behind them. There was a railroad track that ran straight down the middle of the camp, separating the camp into two sides. At the end of the rail road track was the location of two gas chambers. Although most of the buildings at both camps had been preserved, the gas chambers had deservedly been demolished. A memorial wall had been placed at the end of the tracks to honor those who had lost their lives. As I approached this area I noticed a small Jewish group standing, looking down at the demolished chambers. One man held his head in his hand for what seemed like an eternity. I could not imagine being Jewish and having to live knowing that simply being Jewish brought millions of people to their death. After walking over all of Birkenau, I could not take it any more; I started to cry.

I do not think anyone can possibly imagine what it would be like to live in a concentration camp without having been there. After seeing Auschwitz and Birkenau, I believe I would rather die than suffer in a concentration camp. I cannot imagine what it would have been like to go on everyday, knowing it might well be my last. I cannot imagine how there could have been anyone willing to work in the concentration camp. How could someone have convinced himself it was okay to sit in the guard tower and shoot anyone who passed over a certain line? I spit on every guard tower I saw, and then I stopped. I thought about how I was simply feeding into another kind of hate. I felt so twisted inside. My anger towards those who created such a place was increasing, and yet I knew it would have had to have been anger and hate that created such a place. I am now overly grateful for having the opportunity to visit such an emotionally draining historical place.

Of all my independent travel, I feel most affected by my visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau. Although I had read about concentration camps and seen several films involving concentration camps, I believe there is no comparable history lesson to 'seeing it for oneself.' After making this visit suddenly each destination I chose to visit thereon carried new meanings and new adventures. I made it a point to learn as much about each country and city I stayed in from that point forth. I ended up learning that I am very ignorant when it comes to world history, but I learned a lot during my travels and am passionate to continue learning more.

OXFORD

Arriving in London after 6 weeks of independent travel was like taking that first breath after swimming the length of a pool underwater. I never imagined I would consider the English language beautiful, but seeing all the signs around the London airport in English was refreshing. It was easy to navigate my way to the adjacent bus station and purchase my bus ticket to Oxford.

It was hot in England when I arrived, and I had to wait outside with about a thousand other people who were all crowded around waiting for different buses. I found and boarded the bus to Oxford and went to the very back of the bus where all the seats were empty. I was able to sleep lying across the back three seats for nearly two hours, until I heard the bus stop and realized more people were getting on the bus. The remaining hour of the bus ride, I chatted with a British couple that sat next to me. Although I had a map, I did not know which direction we were coming in from, so I had no idea how I was going to St. Hilda's College. I paid close attention as the bus was pulling in to Oxford, and realized the sooner I got off the bus the better. I got off at the first available stop, High Street, and I told the bus driver that although I had originally said I wanted off at the main bus station, I really needed to get off at this stop. After he gave me a lecture about giving him the appropriate stop name so he can put my luggage in the appropriate storage compartment, he opened the other compartment and heaved my luggage at me. I apologized to him and continued down the sidewalk towards what I hoped was the direction of St. Hilda's.

I had to walk a short while before I knew I was headed in the right direction. The map I had of Oxford was very small, but there were several key places on the map I had already passed. Unfortunately, however, St. Hilda's was practically off the map. I only wandered back and fourth two or three times before I asked a woman walking by if she knew where the college was. Unfortunately she did not. I went to the botanical gardens and asked the woman working in the

window, and she pointed me in the opposite direction; I knew she was wrong. As I was about to give up, I asked one more woman and she pointed me down a road I had not tried. I followed her directions and finally found the extremely well hidden St. Hilda's College.

Once inside the lobby a very friendly member of the College's staff greeted me and volunteered to take me to my room. I gave her my information and she located my room key. She informed me I had a very nice double room, with not only my own bathroom but also a balcony. I was sharing a room with another girl who was not studying on the program, but instead serving as an assistant to the program director. She was not going to arrive until almost two weeks into the program. I was thrilled about our room, and as soon as I took a shower and unloaded my stuff, I headed out to find other members of the program. Unlike the other study abroad programs I had attended, I actually knew several people who were participating in this program. Within hours I had found and hugged almost everyone I knew from back in the states. Two of my really good girl friends ended up sharing the room next to mine. Our balconies were joined, so we spent a lot of time going back and forth between the two rooms.

The first weekend in Oxford I spent an exorbitant amount of time with these girls. We covered most of the city, visiting some of the most magnificent places I have ever seen. The atmosphere that surrounds all of Oxford is one of prestige and history. There is deep-seated history in almost every facet of the city, and we found something new to see with each journey we took. We had a great time shopping (for the first time I was purchasing souvenirs) and sight seeing. There was one thing, however, that we had a difficult time finding, and that was good food.

British food really lived up to its stereotype of being bland. Everyone on the study abroad program had paid in advance for breakfast everyday, and lunch and dinner on the weekdays. The

pound is worth so much more than the dollar, it was important to me to have this many meals prepaid, and at a group rate. Although I was excited to not have to pay for that many meals out of my own pocket, the cafeteria food was horrible. I found myself looking forward to the weekends so that I could find a restaurant and purchase whatever I wanted to eat. Somehow though, even the food I ate outside of the cafeteria was tasteless. The only thing we could find that had any flavor were spicy chicken wings, and I can only eat so much of one type of food before I begin to tire of it. I ended up purchasing groceries and making much of my weekend food on my own or with my girl friends from next door. If nothing else I knew I was saving money this way.

I had now been gone from home for over two months. My family was extremely supportive the whole time I was gone, and I was tired of emailing them to ask them for money. It was important to me after I arrived in Oxford to not have to ask for any more help. It is not that I felt like I had spent my money frivolously (other than in the beginning in Paris), but I had gone over my budget. I was determined to have a good time with the funds I had left. With a scheduled excursion to Stonehenge, the Isle of Wight, and back to Paris, I had plenty of things left to look forward to.

Classes were held almost every day of the week. There were forty-five students in the program, five Texas State professors, four Oxford professors, and over fifteen different subjects available to study. Part of the reason I chose to study abroad in Oxford was to continue my studies abroad in an effort to help complete my thesis, and I also signed up to study independently on the British education system. The same course I had taken in Mexico, *Religion, Science, and the Quest for Meaning* was one of the courses being offered, and I chose to sit in on this class every day without credit. I was really excited to be allowed the chance to take this course again only this time with no pressure from assignments. There were also several books

added to and dropped from the reading list for the course. I enjoyed reading these new texts during my spare time.

One of the texts that had been added to the list was Elie Wiesel's *Night*. I had actually started reading this book while in Poland and finished reading it in Germany. Elie Wiesel experienced firsthand the horror of the Nazi regime and describes his experience in such a way that I could almost feel the terror. When I read about the time Wiesel had spent in Auschwitz and Birkenau, I could not stop crying. Having seen myself the unbelievable conditions of both locations, I wanted to share with others what I had seen, and I wanted to hear what others had to say about the effect of Wiesel's words on them. What happened in class during the day we discussed Wiesel was shocking to me. As I entered the classroom that morning, several people were already discussing the text. A young, rather mouthy, student started talking about the work as if it were meaningless and emotionless. In fact she proclaimed it had been a waste of her time. I was crushed. Totally flabbergasted, I couldn't say anything; instead, I sat there staring at the floor trying to choke down my tears. Normally in class I am an extremely obnoxious talkative person, and I always have to get my two cents in. This day I am not sure I said two words. The whole time I could not believe how insensitive this girl had been. It turns out that this would not be the only time this student would shock me.

I really enjoyed being able to listen to new opinions on many of the things I had already discussed with my classmates back in Mexico. I had left Mexico over a year ago with many questions still unanswered, and if anything, had only compiled more questions since that time. Rediscussing Simone Weil and the Tao was the highlight of my class time there. I could never tire of talking about Weil's unbelievable story, and the Tao had intrigued my interest in a way no other book ever has. The first day we discussed the Tao, the same student who shocked me by

denouncing Wiesel's work, declared the Tao was bullshit. I could not believe my ears. This time, however, I was at least willing to allow her, her opinion. The Tao is almost like religion, and having once shunned all religion, I had to entertain her opinion on the matter. In addition, there was a part of the Tao that was bothering me. I had chosen to travel in search of change, and there is a section of the Tao that discussed travel as "unnecessary." I wanted to figure out if this meant I was going about my self-discovery the wrong way. This bothered me, and I wanted to explore the topic further. After discussing this topic with the class and receiving mixed messages from everyone, I decided not to analyze the travel issue any further, as that would go against the Tao. I decided in the end that I did not have to agree with all parts of the Tao. After all, I have been against blind faith my whole life, why would I start practicing it now?

Although I signed up to study independently in Oxford, I also tried to pay attention to all the activities taking place in the other courses, and I tried to participate in as many as possible. I attended a group tour given by a young British professor that was amazing. This young professor had spent the majority of his life in Oxford, had studied there, and was now a lecturer there. He knew so much about Oxford that it proved to be a very memorable experience. Because of this tour, I ended up inside of many buildings I would have never been able to afford to see.

This young professor was extremely clever in his ability to gain free admittance into several different churches, libraries, and colleges. The ratio between the British pound the American dollar is nearly two to one; needless to say, almost everything in England seemed overly expensive. It meant a lot to me to be able to tour inside of Christ Church College without having to pay for admission. The young professor would simply position our group of students near some other group of people that were about to enter the building we were wishing to see, and as that group started their entrance we would simply file in next to or behind them. It was

really quite brilliant. I had already attempted to gain access to Christ Church College and had been refused without pay. I was extremely excited about seeing several places easily recognizable as having been in the Harry Potter films. The young professor even pointed out several not so easy to spot places that appeared in the films. What fascinated me the most about this college was the grand eating hall. I recognized it from the Potter films immediately. The difference from the films was that, in real life, there were giant portraits of many of the famous men who attended Oxford University covering the walls. I felt like I was standing in the presence of royalty. I have never seen anything like this in my entire life. I wanted to sit in one of the chairs at the giant dining table, just to see what it would feel like to be so honored. I wondered if the eating hall was really set up and used like this by its students during the regular semester. For the first time I was realizing that my fantasy in Oxford was someone else's reality. I wondered if I would ever have a chance to attend such a prestigious university. Then it dawned on me that I *was* attending school at Oxford, and no one could ever take it away from me. It did not matter to me that I was on a study abroad program, I was there doing it, studying at Oxford, and it felt good.

A lot of the students on the program chose to study abroad at Oxford because of the prestige behind the name. It was no surprise to those participating that being able to list Oxford on their resume would be a good thing. Our group also had the benefit of attending several distinguished guest speakers throughout the program. We had the privilege of listening to scientist and self proclaimed atheist Richard Dawkins, and we were able to drill him with questions at the end of his talk. I was impressed with the way Dawkins handled himself throughout the session; however, I was unimpressed with most of his answers to our questions. One of the Texas State professors was also able to arrange a visit by Walter Hooper, former

secretary of renowned author C.S. Lewis. Of all the speakers, I felt most honored to have listened to Hooper speak about C.S. Lewis. It was easy to tell that Hooper's fondness for Lewis was authentic, and I hoped that someday someone would speak of me in such high regard. The distinguished speakers lecture events were some of the few times that the majority of the students attending the program were together in the same location.

In this respect Oxford was unlike either of the other two programs I had attended. All forty-five students at Oxford were housed in dormitories spread out around St. Hilda's college. Some students were housed in a dormitory as far as fifteen minutes away from the main building, where classes were held. Because all of the students were scattered about, I felt a lack of unity among the group. I noticed that smaller more intimate groups had formed, and ill feelings between some of the groups were quick to arise. I tried to maintain a neutral balance among all the groups and believe I was successful in doing so.

I met and got to know several new people during the trip to Stonehenge and the Isle of Wight. I even ended up hanging out with one of my new friends almost every evening for the remainder of the trip. I will always enjoy reminiscing over the way we met on the bus going to Stonehenge, and everything that occurred thereafter. Stonehenge was the first excursion of the study abroad program; not everyone, but the majority of the group participated. If any place in the world has touched me intensely, the same way Chichen Itza and Auschwitz had, it is Stonehenge. Inside of all the mystical beauty of Stonehenge, I felt a certain amount of suffering. I also had the same feeling I felt while sobbing in Chichen Itza, that we should not be there. Stonehenge felt like it must have been a very sacred place to the people who built it, and I do not believe we will ever understand the true meaning behind the stones. Although our guide did offer

several different theories about the placements of the stones, there is no way to be certain exactly what they were used for.

We were so lucky to have received a private tour of Stonehenge. We arrived there just before sunrise and were met by our guide, an extremely boisterous English woman. After splitting our group into two smaller groups, she headed off to the stones with the first group. Those of us in the second group headed in the opposite direction down a dirt road towards several ancient burial mounds. The morning was chilly, and the countryside seemed to be covered in a blanket of gray. It felt like a truly “English morning.” I had chosen to be in the second group, hoping that by the time our group toured of the stones the sun would be coming up. After wandering around the mounds, we headed back towards the bus to wait for our tour.

Even having seen plenty of pictures of Stonehenge, I was still extremely ill prepared for the magnitude of the stones. Because we had a private guide, we were receiving the up-close, private tour. We were even allowed to touch the stones. While we were standing in the middle of the stones listening to our guide, a young man tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to turn around. Just as I had expected would happen, the sun began to rise. I was so happy I had chosen to wait for the second. We stood there staring at the beautiful sunrise. It seemed more than majestic the way the sun was peeking through the stones. It was obvious that whoever had put the stones there placed each one with careful precision. The stones had been as strategically placed as each one that collectively gave rise to the Mayan ruins I had visited in Mexico.

After the guide was finished telling us the history behind Stonehenge, we were allowed to roam around the stones for a short period of time. The guide had brought a bunch of dowsing rods with her and showed us a certain area of Stonehenge where the rods turn together when balancing them apart with both hands. We all took the rods and walked in and out of this spot

watching the rods turn together and then apart. This part really fascinated me, but I was skeptical because the rods were metal. If there were a magnetic pull at that point on earth then it would only make sense for the rods to turn together; however, if the rods were wood the magnetic pull should not have the same effect. I asked the guide about this and she assured me that if the rods were wooden they would still act the same way. Being the cynic that I am I'm not sure whether or not I believe her. I hope one day I am able to return to Stonehenge and test the theory.

Once our tour of Stonehenge was finished everyone returned to the bus and we headed to Salisbury to have lunch. We were only going to spend a couple of hours there before we were heading on to the Isle of Wight. When we arrived in Salisbury I was a little confused and a little concerned that it was still very early (before ten o'clock), and there were a lot of us heading out to look for food. We ended up finding a darling café and enjoyed a hot breakfast. The café was located in front of a beautiful church that we decided to walk around and look at afterwards.

There were many beautiful buildings to look at in Salisbury. Having already visited Salisbury, one of my friends insisted that we make our way to St. Paul's Cathedral. I have seen many magnificent churches because of all the traveling I have done, but nothing compared to the intensity of St. Paul's Cathedral. The main steeple of St. Paul's extends extremely high into the sky; I believe I read somewhere that it is the tallest steeple in the world. We attempted to take a picture of the entire church; however, we could not fit the church and the steeple in the lens of any of our three cameras. As we were circling around the church we ran into several other members from our program heading back to the bus and we decided to join them.

We returned to the bus and ended up waiting for several professors who had lost track of time while viewing the Magna Carta inside St. Paul's Cathedral. Once everyone was accounted for back on the bus, we left, heading for the Isle of Wight. Before we arrived at the Isle of Wight

everyone had been given the option of sleeping in a tent or a cabin. My Oxford neighbors and I had decided the three of us would share the cost of a cabin. Several other groups of people also purchased cabins, and then the remainder of the group ended up staying in a community tent. When we arrived at our ocean side location everyone was a little shocked. The community tent was basically a giant white tarp formed into a tent, while our cabins were fully equipped with beds, a television, and a bathroom. Needless to say I was happy that I had chosen to share a cabin.

The ride to our campsite was anything but pleasant. The Isle of Wight is an island, so it is only reachable by ferry. Knowing that I get motion sickness, and especially seasickness, I once again had to face that battle. Isla Mujeres in Mexico was also only reachable by ferry; however, the ferries we rode were so small I was allowed to stand on the outside of the ferry. Standing outside in the fresh air was usually enough to get me from one piece of land to the other. The ferry to the Isle of Wight was extremely large, and there was nowhere outside to stand or sit. I was stuck inside. I knew I would have to try to meditate my way across the big blue sea, and this is exactly what I did.

I have never considered myself a religious person, and I had never even considered myself a spiritual person, until I started traveling. There has been several times during my travels that I found myself meditating. Although I have attempted meditation at home I have never had the same level of success that I have achieved while traveling. After making it through the ferry journey by meditating, I felt very relaxed upon arrival to the island.

The bus we rode from the ferry dock to the campsite was completely full and had no air conditioning. The sun was beaming through the windows so it was excruciatingly hot. I was drenched in sweat by the time we arrived at our site. When we arrived I knew the ferry and the

bus ride had been worth it. Our campsite was perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean. We were in an extremely remote location surrounded by cliffs, beach, and forest in every direction. The majority of our group headed straight to the ocean to cool off. I ended up walking with some new friends to the nearest town in order to purchase some drinks and other provisions.

The nearest town turned out to be a forty-five minute walk. During this time we passed by numerous country cottages, farmhouses, and we ended up walking into what felt like a century old village. Many of the houses and stores still had thatched roofs. The stores were marked by tiny hand made wooden signs, and it was nearly impossible to locate a general store or market. We wandered into the first open building and decided to ask someone inside. The person inside told us we had walked right past the store two doors down.

We went two doors down and walked into the smallest grocery store I have ever seen. What amazed me about the store is that even though it was tiny it seemed to have everything one would need to live. The people working at the store were really friendly and helped us find everything we needed. After gathering our supplies we returned back to our campsite. We had been gone about three hours. We arrived to find many people from our group already drunk; several of them were completely wasted. Not wanting to be associated with the drunken crowd, I ended up spending the rest of the evening hanging out with my new friends and my cabin roommates. As the night progressed we found ourselves sitting in the grass on a cliff's edge with ten or so more people. The night was a quiet intimate night of getting to know one another.

That was the only night I spent on the Isle of Wight. Many people from our program stayed a second night, but I decided I would rather return to Oxford. It is not that I didn't find the Isle of Wight beautiful; in fact, I've never seen anything like it. Other than in paintings or photographs, I had never seen an ocean side cliff. In real life I would have to say I found it a

little more frightening than attractive. The sharp rocky cliffs and uninvitingly cold water were enough to keep me away from the beach floor. In order to gain access to the beach part of the Isle of Wight, one has to make their way down the side of the cliff. Then once you are on the beach, there is only about fifty feet of sand from the cliffs edge to the water. Having previously been spoiled by Mexican beaches, I did not find the Isle of Wight to be much of a beach. However, I did find the Isle of Wight to be an overall very impressive island.

I spent nearly six hours of the next morning walking around the island by myself. I woke up early enough to watch the sunrise while sitting in a bench perched at the top of a cliff. I walked over to the edge of the forest and watched two cows sitting on opposite hills make cow noises at each other. Then I stumbled upon the land of the bunnies. It felt like a scene from the book, *Watership Down*. Everywhere I turned there were bunny rabbits jumping behind bushes and burrowing into their holes. It was awesome. I sat at the corner of a small stream that eventually poured into the ocean and enjoyed the nature that surrounded me. Everything felt so untouched and peaceful. It was by far the best morning I had while staying in England. On the Isle of Wight, for the first time, I felt a connection with my native country.

I was born in the small city of Lakenheath, England. My father was in the air force and was stationed there for four years. I was born only six weeks before my family left England and returned to the United States. Aside from the first six weeks of my life, this trip was my first stay in the country where I was born. I had always dreamed of the day I would step foot on English soil. I had already been in England for over a week and had not been touched in any way. The Isle of Wight turned things around for me. I found myself falling in love with the country.

Once I finished wandering around the island I returned for breakfast with my friends at the campsite. After breakfast the small group of us that had spent time together the night before

left to return back to Oxford. I found the ferry ride back much easier to handle, and before I knew it we were back on the main land. Unlike the journey to the Isle, there was no chartered bus to take us home. We had to make our way to the train station and purchase tickets back to Oxford. I had already been through the experience of purchasing train tickets many times in many different languages, one would think purchasing tickets in English and getting on the appropriate train would be a synch. Purchasing the tickets was easy, but I misheard the teller when he announced the departure time. What I heard the teller say was 12:50 but what he actually said was 12:15. Unfortunately I was not the only one who heard 12:50.

When 12:50 rolled around and there was no train we all started to panic. One of the young men with us ran over to a ticket window and found out what had happened. There was, however, another train we could take at 1:15. In the end our mistake didn't cost us too much extra time, but I was tickled inside over the situation. I could not believe that in a country where communication is done in English, it would be here that I missed my first train abroad. I had been certain that I was going to make a mistake while traveling, but I had figured it would have happened in a foreign country where I did not speak the language. I guess one cannot predict where things are going to go wrong, you just have to expect that at some point they will.

We made it back to Oxford by early evening, and I spent the rest of the night sending emails, reading, and writing in my journal. I kept a detailed journal throughout all my travels and continue to look back and reflect on the times I spent abroad. I enjoyed the rest of the weekend roaming around the parks and rivers of Oxford, alone. Even though I had been thousands of miles away from home for months, I was still desperate to find time to spend by myself. I never imagined I would be so anxious to get away from everything familiar. I think I mostly felt this way while I was in Oxford, because there were so many people there that were familiar to me.

My roommate in Oxford arrived a few days after we returned from the Isle of Wight. It was a relief to have her, because she served as the program director's assistant and was able to fix a lot of the problems we had encountered during the first week of the program. She handled retrieving videos and equipment for the classrooms, and she made sure the guest speakers were well cared for. In addition, after days of arguing, she even managed to get Internet hooked up in one room in each dormitory (including our room). The entire program seemed to run a little smoother once she was there.

After she arrived we decided to spend her first weekend in London; the following weekend would be dedicated to Paris. We were not going to stay the night in London; we would take the train there early in the morning and return each night. The Thursday before this planned weekend, there was an attempted terrorist attack in London. Several men had attempted to detonate bombs on the underground tube system. This was the second attack in two weeks on London's underground tube system.

The first terrorist attack in London occurred three days before I flew out of Germany. In the first attack several suicide bombers boarded different lines of the underground tubes and detonated their bombs. In addition to killing themselves, they successfully killed around fifty innocent people. The London tube system was completely shut down, and London was on high alert for many weeks to come. Although I was nervous leaving Germany to fly into London so soon after the attacks, I knew I was flying into Stansted Airport, which is on the northern outskirts of the city. I knew I was going directly from the airport to Oxford via bus, and I knew the idea of falling victim to a terrorist attack was not that realistic. Although the first attacks were successful, the bombers who attempted the second attack on the London tubes were unsuccessful in detonating their devices. Because of the attack our program director requested that we not go

to London on Friday. We waited until things in London settled down and went on Saturday; the program director came with us. When we went to London, we decided to avoid the underground tube system completely, instead relying on London's black cabs to travel through the city.

Even though I had flown into and out of London, I had yet to actually visit the city, until this excursion. We arrived via train and took a black cab from the station to Leicester Square. The cab driver ended up running into bumper-to-bumper traffic, and he started telling us that he was not sure what was going on. We looked over to the right and there was some sort of march happening. There were hundreds of people marching up the street, they were chanting and yelling, but we could not tell what they were rallying for. The cab driver quickly changed directions and told us we should avoid any of the rallies we saw; he said that they were always bad news. As we drove into London it felt like we were driving into New York City, only one hundred years older. The cab driver dropped us off just outside of Leicester Square, where we purchased tickets to the theater. I joined others in deciding to see *Les Miserables*. The play was not scheduled to start for a few hours, so we made plans to meet beforehand for lunch. After we made our plans I headed over to Trafalgar Square with my roommate and several other girls.

When we arrived at Trafalgar Square, we quickly realized the march we had seen from the cab had ended in a rally in the square. There were signs covering the giant lion statues and music blaring. Someone was shouting into a mega phone and people were wearing black shirts with pink crosses painted in the middle. It was some sort of Jesus rally. Keeping in mind what the cab driver had told us, and noting that the police were everywhere, we decided to go inside the National Gallery Museum. I spent the next couple of hours being wowed by the paintings of two of my favorite famous artists, Vincent Van Gogh and Leonardo da Vinci. If there were ever times during my travel that I felt truly blessed, it was always during the times I stood before

magnificent works of art. I ended up seeing only a small portion of the museum – time seemed to pass so quickly. It was time to return for lunch in Leicester Square.

Of all the lunches I shared with friends while abroad, none compare with our picnic in Leicester Square. Instead of eating in an overpriced restaurant, we had packed our lunches and brought them with us. We sat inside the square eating our sandwiches and sharing chips and cookies. The entire time we were able to joke around, observe other people in and around the square, and in sum, just had a great time experiencing the moment. We watched the glockenspiel on the outside of the Swiss center ring at two o'clock and after headed over to the theater to watch our plays. *Les Miserables* was amazing. I did not know the story behind the play before entering. I did not even realize it was a musical; in fact, had I realized that beforehand, I probably would have picked a different play. I'm not a huge fan of the musical, but after seeing *Les Mis*, my attitude towards musicals has changed. Had I never been abroad with friends and strangers, I may never have exposed myself to this play. The story was beautiful and the singers were amazing. Altogether it was better than any Broadway performance that I have ever experienced. I laughed and cried and left the theater in a brilliant mood.

Following the performance we decided to cap off the evening with a visit to Covent Gardens. Here we saw all sorts of street vendors, shops, places to eat, human statues, musicians, and everyone else trying to make a pound. Our group ended up splitting into two, and I enjoyed a more private light dinner with my fiery red headed friend, and our program director. After dinner we found some heavenly chocolate ice cream for dessert, and then we decided to head back to the train station. After several minutes of being in the cab, the cab driver suddenly pulled over and said something before jumping out of the car. The four of us in the cab were all looking at each other like, what do we do?! Nobody had comprehended what the cab driver had said, but

looking out the window we could now see him running back to the cab with something in his hands. As he approached the cab I could see it was his hubcap.

When the cab driver sat back down in his chair he turned around and said, “Sorry, my wheel-trim fell off.” We all instantly started laughing. Wheel-trim! It was the funniest British term we all had heard yet. Then the driver proceeded to tell us that he did not have enough time to “whack it on with a hammer,” before he had left that morning. He put the hubcap in the seat next to him and completed the drive to the train station. We arrived at the station with only minutes to spare for the next train. We had to run to catch it, and it ended up being the local slow train. What should have been a fifty-minute train ride turned into two and a half hours. By the time we arrived back home it was dark, we were tired, and we all retired to our dormitories for the evening.

Although I had enjoyed having my dormitory room to myself in the beginning of the Oxford trip, I really enjoyed having someone close to talk to each night. I spent a countless number of hours talking and laughing with my Oxford roommate. She had spent the earlier part of her summer traveling in the United States, so she shared her stories with me, and I shared my traveling stories of the summer with her. I knew we were going to spend the next weekend in Paris, so I was certain to tell her about everything wonderful in Paris. I knew she was just as excited as I was about going, so we booked our airfare one hour apart in order to arrive in the city together. Our Oxford neighbors and one other girl were going to come along with us. I could not wait to return to Paris.

I cannot say enough good things about Paris. It felt like I had to convince everyone to go there, but once they were there, they understood why. The magical feeling one gets when standing in Paris is unlike any other I have ever experienced. Paris made me feel like a million

dollars. Even though I knew I was in no way the best dressed, or best looking - whatever I was wearing or however I looked, I knew I looked good. Everyone in Paris is beautiful. Everything in Paris is beautiful. Of all the places in the world that I could recommend everyone visit before they die, it would be Paris.

The flight from London to Paris was horrible. It seemed like everything leaving from London Heathrow Airport was being canceled or delayed, and my flight was one of them. The only problem this posed for me was the fact that I was supposed to be meeting my roommate one hour after I was scheduled to land. Thirty minutes beyond that, we were to meet another group of guys on a different flight. After we were all together, we were going to travel to Gare du Nord train station and pick up the other three girls from our group. I was the only one who had ever been to Paris and the only one who spoke any French. I was extremely worried that I would be so delayed waiting for all the flights that I would miss the trains arrival and half our group would be left hanging. Fortunately all the flights, and even the train, ended up being delayed, and I was able to meet everybody and make our way to the hotel. It turned out that there had been several tornadoes in London that grounded nearly all the airplanes, and there had been another terrorist bombing at one of the train stations, and it had delayed all the trains going through the area. Not meaning to celebrate in anyone's misfortune, I was glad things had worked out the way they had.

I will always remember my return to Paris. I had a lot of apprehension about returning to the city, mainly because I had spent so much time bragging about its greatness to those I had convinced to spend this weekend there. I feared it would not be as great as I remembered it being. Once I got back into the city, all my fears melted away. The city was just as magnificent as I remembered it being. It felt so good to be able to navigate easily through the city, as if I lived there. Considering the fact that we only had three days to spend, it felt good to be able to

take everyone to some of the best places in Paris. There were several places I was not able to fit into the schedule, but I believe everyone had a fabulous time at the places we did visit – especially in the Montmartre district.

During my study abroad program in Paris, we spent an entire day with a guide touring the Montmartre district. I knew I had to take the girls from Oxford there. I fell in love with this section of the city, and so did everyone who traveled there with me from the Oxford program. In the Montmartre district you can stand at the highest point of Paris, right in front of the Sacre Coeur; a massive Byzantine style church built in the late 1800s. Throughout the district, there is an artisan area, tons of cheap shopping, several market areas, and lots of street vendors. I felt my hearts content when one of the girls leaned over and said: “This is why I came to Paris, now I’m happy.”

Somehow five of us girls had managed to separate ourselves from the rest of the Oxford pack and had such a wonderful intimate time exploring Paris together. The first night we went clubbing with a couple of Frenchmen we had befriended, and they ended up dubbing us, the “Spice Girls,” because like the spice Girls, there were five of us – “so different, yet very good friends.” The reason they chose this name was because like the Spice Girls, there were five of us and we were “all so different, yet very good friends.” In the end some of us were better friends than others, but I will always have that memory of the great times I shared as a “Spice Girl” in Paris.

I spent the final day in Paris hanging with my Oxford roommate. We were scheduled to take the same flight back to Oxford and had intentionally taken a late night flight so that we would have extra time in Paris. We did not realize what a huge mistake that would turn out to be. We had all wanted to celebrate our final night in Paris, so we had spent an extraordinary amount

of time drinking that last night. Needless to say, we were suffering from heavy hangovers. The check out time for the hotel was at the ridiculous hour of 9:00am. At 9:15 we were sitting in the hotel lobby nursing headaches and nausea. The entire time I just kept thinking about how badly I wanted to be back in the comfort of my Oxford dorm room.

We spent the majority of the day lying around the Luxembourg Gardens. It was bitter cold that day, and we were without appropriate attire. For some reason we both had remembered our umbrellas, so we tried to use them to shield ourselves from the freezing wind. I am sure if I could have stepped back and taken a look at the two of us, we probably looked like fools. At the time however, we did not care. After a certain amount of time we were unable to handle the temperature so we headed to the airport where we waited for a ridiculous number of hours.

There really is no worse place to spend a lot of time than an airport. Having already spent so much time over the summer in flight, I was not happy to once again be camped out at Charles de Gaulle airport. This time it was much worse, because I had been unable to cure my hangover. By the time we made it back to Oxford, midnight had passed, and so had my sanity. It is amazing how comfortable a tiny dormitory bed can become when you are exhausted. As soon as we returned I crawled in my bed and went to sleep. Even with the teenage brats screaming all night in the courtyard outside our balcony, I slept eight hours straight. It was refreshing to return to Oxford.

The return to Paris had been wonderful, but stressful. For some reason I felt a certain amount of responsibility to the other students who were traveling there with me. It was great to no longer feel that back in Oxford. As of the final week in Oxford, I found myself ready to go home – the first time all summer. I found myself missing my family, and I started seeing woman that looked exactly like my mother. I started spending more time on the phone with her each

passing night. I spent most of my time that final week by myself and reserved the final weekend to hang out and say goodbye to everyone I had met. The last night we were there, there was a giant bon voyage party at Pub Oxford, and almost everyone attended.

That night it seemed like all grudges were dropped, all ill feelings were relinquished, and peace was made between groups that had clashed during the entire program. It was the best night of the entire Oxford program, and it was the last night. That night I ended up hitting it off with a handsome British man; I ended up leaving knowing only his name. It was a hard night to let go. Even though I was ready to go home, I wanted to stay frozen in that exact moment forever. I slept for only thirty minutes before I had to catch the bus to the airport in the morning. Although I was extremely tired, the summer of traveling could not have ended more perfectly.

I rode the bus to the airport where I soon found myself in a state of shock. I cried for nearly two hours. If someone had asked me what was wrong I would not have been able to tell them because I myself did not know. I am not sure if I was sad to be going home, or so happy to be going home, that I was crying. I believe it was a combination of both.

It took me over twenty-four hours to get home. My mother picked me up from the airport. It was so refreshing to see her. I had spoken with her plenty on the phone, but it was entirely different to see her. Not knowing how heavy it was, she offered to carry my backpack. When I saw her struggling to pick it up, for the first time, I thought about just how much weight I had carried with me all summer – literally, and figuratively. I could see the pride in my mom's eyes, and it made me proud. I had survived eighty-six days in Europe, on my own.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

I found it difficult to write about these study abroad and travel experiences, because I never run out of things to say. Deciding on what experiences were most important and most telling was the hardest decision for me to make. In order to avoid writing a thesis the size of a dictionary, I chose to talk about some events and people, while leaving others out completely. It's not that these events or persons were any less significant; after all, I never even mention my grandpa passed away while I was in Paris. Instead I had to eliminate some experiences in order to maintain focus on trying to answer specific questions.

After reliving my experiences through penning these memoirs, it is easy to see that almost any aspect of the experience could have been formative. The fact that each experience was different might, in and of itself, be important. If each experience had been the same, there would have been less room for personal growth and change. The differences in cultures, languages, settings, participants, proximity, and subjects studied were all crucial in shaping the texture of my overall experience.

No text that I have read in the classroom has had the same impact on me as texts that I read while studying abroad. Reading Elie Wiesel, after just visiting the concentration camps Auschwitz and Birkenau, made a lasting impact. Having seen firsthand the monstrous conditions of each, it was heartbreaking to read about Wiesel's torturous journey through these camps and others. I believe that the experience of visiting these camps made me want to not simply read, but to digest Wiesel's book and to understand his experiences. Inside the classroom, I have a hard time finding reasons to want to read, and assigned texts generally feel forced. This in my experience was not the case for any of the texts I was assigned on any of my study abroad programs. After studying abroad, I found that the more closely knowledge is aligned to life, the easier that knowledge is to gain.

I enjoyed reading my assigned text in *Mayan History and Society*, because I was able to relate the material from the text to the information we learned while taking excursions to the Mayan ruins. I was able to see first hand many of the customs and traditions mentioned in the text being carried on in the lives in progress. For example, in Valladolid I watched several old Mayan women making corn tortillas by hand, a tradition that is rarely carried out today. Inside the classroom at home, I would only have to read about or listen to someone else's story of watching this snippet of life.

In addition, the atmosphere I felt while studying in Mexico enhanced my interpretation of the readings assigned for my *Religion, Science, and the Quest for Meaning* course. The entire time we were discussing religion and science, we were also visiting great churches and pyramids. This same spiritual effect was provided during my Oxford study abroad program with our visits to Stonehenge, St. Paul's Cathedral, and the Isle of Wight. Each of these excursions provided a special place and time for self-reflection and discovery. I believe these places had a greater impact on my own change, because I was simultaneously reading the Tao and other texts relating to religion and spirituality. The class and texts had prepared me for experiential discovery, and I was able to embrace 'that feeling' during many of our excursions.

Studying abroad in Mexico, Paris, and Oxford brought me to areas of the world that I may have never have traveled to otherwise. In Mexico I experienced for the first time what it felt like to be "the foreigner," unable to speak the native language. And yet, I had a major feeling of accomplishment after surviving Spanish in Mexico. It was this sense of accomplishment that gave me the courage to embrace the numerous languages around Europe. I felt like I triumphed in Belgium when I used my French in order to get directions back to Paris. Invariably, I found each foreign language I attempted to speak easier to pick up in the country where it is the native

tongue. I do not believe this same level of practice is attainable inside the classroom. I believe that a situation where an individual faces a barrier of language, daily, is motivated in a way that is not possible inside a classroom. I think one of the best ways to learn a foreign language would be through complete submersion.

Language is not the only challenge of culture. Being submersed in another culture, away from the comforts of home, an individual will have to face many challenges beyond not knowing the language. Many times while abroad I found myself in uncomfortable situations that were uneasy to get out of. When an individual arrives at the location of their study abroad program, they are stuck with whatever and whomever is there participating. Most participants on study abroad programs are strangers. Unless someone chooses to drop all their classes and return home from the program, they do not have the freedom to leave a situation when it becomes intolerable or uncomfortable. In this manner, the length of the program and the number of participants on each program definitely can matter. My Paris study abroad program was only two weeks long and had the fewest number of participants. In this instance having a fewer number of program participants isolated several students and created a lot of drama. I believe the close proximity with so few participants in the Paris program, although good at forcing relations, created a sense of being trapped. With so few people we were forced to interact with one another regardless of our feelings, and if we chose not to interact with one another then in essence we were alone. This was an excellent learning lesson in tolerance and patience.

In Paris and Mexico, all of the participants were housed in the same hotel. One key difference between the Mexico and Paris programs was the greater number of participants on the Mexico program. The fact that there were more participants gave each person more choice in choosing with whom they were going to spend their time with. At the same time all of the

participants were close enough together that it gave them the ability to meet and interact with one another. In Oxford, the participants were spread out between dormitories and apartments. The lack of closeness with the large group in Oxford seemed to create disconnectedness among the entire group. In the end I found having close proximity with a large group of participants provided the most comfortable environment.

Although students are sometimes forced to interact with each other inside the classroom, it cannot be compared to the interaction between the participants of a study abroad program. I believe the key to the most beneficial interaction is the proximity between the participants and the amount of time spent on each program. A small amount of time can be good if an individual finds themselves on a program with other people with whom they are uncomfortable. Going into a short program one knows there is only a short amount of time until it ends. On the other hand, I found that the longer I spent in one place, the more comfortable I became. In this respect, I found that longer programs were better. In fact I would have chosen to lengthen each and every one of my programs. There is so much experience waiting to happen while abroad.

To truly embrace “culture” requires experience of that culture. After traveling different countries, I now believe there is no way to experience a culture the same way inside of a classroom. You can imagine, but there is no way to grasp it without the experience. The French take their time in with almost everything they do. In Paris when you sit down to eat, the entire meal can easily take two hours. The French feel no reason to rush; they enjoy living in the moment. Although I had previously read about this aspect of French culture, it was incomparable to actually experiencing it for myself.

Experiencing another country and culture can sometimes bring about culture shock. I believe I experienced at least a small amount of shock at each destination. In my experience, one

component of culture shock stems from fear. I do not believe that being a little scared is always a bad thing. If anything I believe this helped me keep my guard up and made myself less vulnerable as a female traveling alone. I also believe I experienced this culture shock because for the first time I was outside of my own culture looking back in. Sometimes culture shock stems from reflecting on one's own culture, or in gaining the "eyes to see." It can enable us to see our own blind spots, or the error of our ways. Other cultures broadened my perspective and increased my tolerance. I do believe the opposite can occur. Some take cultural experiences and use them to build on their pessimism and decrease their tolerance of others in the world.

I began self-reflection after traveling the first time. Traveling exposed me to many experiences I would have otherwise never had. I never would have begun traveling without first studying abroad. Before studying abroad, the idea of traveling outside of the United States was petrifying. Studying abroad gave me the knowledge and confidence to continue traveling and expanding my traveling experiences. The experiences I have had, have inspired personal changes, and have introduced me to many people that ended up changing my personal and professional decisions for the future. When I first decided to study abroad, I knew I wanted to change. Many have asked whether or not this desire gave me the "eyes to see" during my journeys, and thus increased my chances of experiencing some sort of change. I believe this was definitely the case. It is a personal choice to change, and although I consider change a necessary part of experience and education, some do not. In return, even though I believe it is important for a person to have the "eyes to see," I think it is possible for those who lack the eyes to have an experience that gives them the opportunity to change. Unfortunately I do not think it happens for everyone; however, I believe study abroad and traveling can provide the types of experiences that can provoke that change. For example, I had no interest in history before being exposed to

the devastation of WWII in Europe, yet after this experience I find myself more interested in history than my own major in psychology. In addition, because of the kindness of many foreign strangers, my overall attitude towards the rest of the world is much more embracing and compassionate since I began traveling.

When a person decides to travel, it is often difficult to pinpoint what triggers the decision. I know this because I have often tried to answer this question for myself. My instincts tell me that I chose to study abroad in order to travel in search of something different. I was searching for something better, or for some sort of change. I would also like to believe I chose to travel because of a genuine interest in encountering people outside of my own culture. What I have come to realize is that there is no one reason why I chose to travel and study abroad; there are many reasons. I have an interest in foreign cultures, a desire to flee my home, a flair for new surroundings and exciting new adventures, and an underlying need to discover something about myself. All of these factors and many more played a role in my decision to study abroad.

Whether or not the experiences I experienced while studying abroad is “common” for all students who chose to do so, can be explored by looking at attitudes maintained going into the program. This refers back to having the “eyes to see.” I believe my true desire to learn about myself and the world gave me the ability to dig deep during each journey. The reason why I say this is because I feel most affected by my study abroad trip in the Yucatan. The Yucatan was my first study abroad adventure, and I was searching hardest for answers on this program. It is no wonder then that I was more personally affected. Based on my experience a student's attitude going into a study abroad program, will definitely affect the ultimate outcome.

I was deeply affected by different aspects of each program and my life changed upon each return. After returning from my first journey abroad, my self-esteem was higher from all of

the accomplishments I had made, and I decided to sign up for my university's honors program. Making this professional connection has benefited me in a variety of ways. I've met a variety of intelligent people, been awarded numerous scholarships, and taken some of the most fascinating courses offered at my university. The honors program classes turned out to have an atmosphere inside the classroom that was the closest thing I could find in comparison to learning abroad.

My desire to learn and know about the world has significantly increased since studying abroad. The experiences I had on each program increased my compassion and understanding for others. My study abroad experiences opened my eyes for self-reflection and allowed me to see the kind of person I would like to become. These experiences broadened my narrow knowledge of the world and gave me the opportunity to personally change and grow, I believe for the better. Above all else, studying abroad taught me that learning is about experience, and the payoff from experience is eternal.

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