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## Study Abroad as Synecdoche

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## Study Abroad As Synecdoche

A few years ago in London, three of our students were playing pool at a local pub with a jovial Irishman, who turned out to be wanted by the police and heavily doped up at the time. During their playful banter, one student called their new friend a name we would regard as an inoffensive locker-room pleasantry. This name, however, happens to be very insulting in the United Kingdom and spurred their companion to wield his pool cue as a cudgel and pound all three of the students until they fled. We heard a knock at the door and opened to find three bloody faces.

After we heard the story and let them wash off the gore, my wife examined each in turn while I summoned the police. She lifted one fellow's hair and practically peered into his brains, so we called an ambulance to take him and one of the others to the hospital. In the meantime they needed ice to bring down the swelling. Unfortunately, we were in a country that believes that ice is a sign of American decadence, so all we could find in the freezer to apply to these wounds were packages of frozen peas. We gave our reports to the police, who went to investigate at the wrong pub, certain that we had given them the wrong name. The culprit was eventually caught, and two of the students were asked to identify him, not at the police station but rather at the foot of an escalator at an underground station, where their assailant would be one of hundreds going down.

This, in a nutshell, is study abroad. Our students travel to a distant land where they are likely to misread signals and be party to miscommunication, which will rattle them, usually not physically as in this case but psychologically and even morally. The first couple of weeks especially can feel like a barrage of unexpected blows as they are still learning that England is not simply America with an accent, that different customs are not there for decorative effect, and that you cannot count on what you have assumed to be normal and universal.

When I was about to make my first trip to Europe at age fifteen, my sixteen-year-old cousin asked me, "Why would you want to go to Greece?" I did not know how to respond to such a question. It was the most exciting prospect of my life so far, but I did not have a ready answer for someone who was mystified by this desire. Now I could give a metaphorical answer, "To be battered." Actually, I am glad I did not say that at the time. I am talking about a good battering. A month in Europe shook me up and unsettled me — and I go back as often as possible.

After a successful semester abroad, students emerge substantially stirred as well as shaken, though they might not yet know how to articulate the effect those months in a foreign country have had on them. Four years of college, I maintain, should affect them similarly, and I would like to point out a few ways in which what students gain from a study abroad program reflects in an intensified manner what they get out of their whole college experience. In these respects, study abroad represents the essence of college. I begin with some observations about the relationship between student and professor that lies at the heart of academic life.

## INFLUENCES

Directors of study abroad programs learn early that the students become part of our everyday lives far more vigorously than back home. As directors we play a variety of roles: administrator, teacher, academic advisor, personal advisor, tour guide, cultural guru, mediator, parental substitute, and friend. I would see students in class, at our home, on buses, at art galleries and cathedrals, at the theater, at restaurants, and at their homes. I would see them at various levels of politeness, cooperativeness, sobriety, uninhibitedness, curiosity, adventurousness, homesickness, cluelessness, and excitement. Back home the students are part of their professors' lives during the seventy minutes of class two or three times a week, maybe a lab once a week, sometimes in the office, and on occasion at the dining hall, but usually not at the same table. Abroad, directors lead students on journeys, get them to cultural events, and take them to historical sites. They also get a sense of what the faculty residents in the dorms experience since they are on call every moment of the day, get involved in personal problems, talk through personality conflicts, dole out advice as quickly and often as vacuously as Dr. Phil, and, on the plus side, develop pleasurable and even long-lasting relationships that go beyond the classroom.

First-time directors could easily get overwhelmed not only by the many responsibilities they are taking on but also by the sheer amount of time they spend with students. It feels like a substantially different job from what we have back home. Yet I contend that it is essentially the same job, just magnified. That might not be true of a professor at a large state school or major research university, whose association with undergraduates might well be limited to classroom appearances, often in large classes where there is little or no genuine interaction. But at small liberal arts colleges such as ours, my idea of a good professor is one whose relationship with students resembles, in miniature, that between study abroad directors and their wards.

We might not all intend to be anything more than conduits of information when we decide to join the faculty. We know a lot and we are happy we can make a living passing our knowledge on to others and spending much of our time learning more so

that we can pass on even more knowledge. The students are lucky to have people with such a dazzling wealth of erudition to tap into, and we are willing for a modest stipend to sprinkle them with organized bits of our intellect, and that is about it. We are not camp counselors after all, we are professors, and we are at the front of the classroom because we have gone to great effort to learn things the students do not yet know. To many of us, then, it comes as a surprise when we realize that students are looking to us for more than the information we can dole out.

I remember being rather daunted as it slowly dawned on me that many of these young people were expecting me to serve as a sort of guide and, in some cases, even a companion in their development — and not only in their intellectual development but sometimes in the cultivation of their moral sense and in the search for an understanding of their identities. Now that is just too much responsibility, yet in effect professors at our breed of college, even if they do not interact with students outside of class, greatly influence their lives more deeply than they might suspect when preparing lectures on the French Revolution or setting up organic chemistry labs.

In my second year here, I was astounded one day when a student in my mythology course the semester before came by the office to thank me for what I had done for him. Now, I barely knew this fellow. He rarely spoke up in class, and I never saw him or talked with him outside of class. All I knew was that he learned from me the names and attributes of many fictional Greek characters, he read a lot of good stories and several classic works of Greek literature, and he listened to my interpretations and analyses. He took the tests and wrote adequate papers and was now more literate and knowledgeable than a few months before. I knew his name at the time but right now I cannot even picture him.

So what was he doing in my office? What he got out of the class, apparently, was more than an acquaintance with classical mythology and literature. Or rather, through this acquaintance he had the opportunity to take a good hard look at himself and his own life, where he was now and where he thought he was going. He cited the *Odyssey* as the most influential book of the semester, the story of a middle-aged man forced to take a good hard look at himself and his life, where he was now and where he thought he was going. So when I had suggested that, if we dare, we too can undergo the sort of self-exploration the hero of the *Odyssey* puts himself through, this guy took me seriously and a couple of months later felt the urge to let me know that this book affected his life at a reasonably profound level. Imagine my surprise. All I thought I was doing was displaying my own high-brow education and passing some morsels on to the students. Now all of a sudden my course had pushed someone a little further toward self-discovery, or at least toward recognizing self-discovery as a worthy activity. What if others had a similar reaction, even if they could not articulate it like this guy

or did not realize it yet? I was not much older than the students and some of them were looking to me for guidance in life? I was having a hard enough time trying to figure myself out.

But this realization should not have taken me by surprise. Most of us professors have not only fallen in love with our subjects but have been so deeply moved by them that our lives have been shaped, enriched, even transformed by our studies. Literature keeps me entertained, elicits curiosity, gets me riled, and introduces me to many locations, time periods, mentalities, and philosophies beyond my own little world. It takes me on explorations of the human condition, the nature of the divine, the complexities of what looks simple, and the quandaries that have long pestered the most creative and thoughtful minds. My aesthetic faculties have been sharpened by the way authors use language, and I have come to recognize my aesthetic sense itself as one of the blessings of life. The devotion of much of my waking life to literature and languages has in large part molded my personality, transfigured my sensibilities, and determined my relations with others, and I could not have developed the way I have without the teachers who guided my studies, tutored my judgments, served as models, and shared their passions.

In my courses I want to infuse some of this wealth and wonder into the young people before me. Not all of them want it; many turn out to be impervious; many are not aware at the time, maybe never will be, that their minds have been stirred; most perhaps cannot express coherently just how they have been changed or enlightened. Yet in well-run classes, especially when there is some sort of interaction with students, the professors' passion for the subject and their ability to give the students a glimpse of how it can enrich their lives will reach most of them at some level. No one can assess just how much a professor has benefited a student in the long-term or even at the time. We cannot measure spiritual, moral, aesthetic, or intellectual development. But that is what we are here for. We are valuable to the extent that our courses have coaxed our students to think, feel, care, understand, perceive, question, be curious, be enlightened, and be bothered.

The classroom is the principal locus of this influence, though some of us make a point of seeing students as a group or individually in other venues: office chats, trips to the Guthrie, meals, gatherings at the house, malts after a movie. A few students might see us as mentors or have much in common with us, so we will spend some social time with them and pursue our mutual interests. The classroom persona gives way to the whole person, and our involvement with students outside class can become rewarding on both sides.

Not all of us feel comfortable with interaction outside class, but study abroad directors have no choice. We do teach a course abroad, and all that I said about courses back

home applies, so that form of educational influence is a part of the operation. In addition, we spend a lot of our time with the students outside of class. Our involvement beyond the classroom mingles the academic with the social, and sometimes it is hard to distinguish since a significant part of the education is becoming well-acquainted with the society, culture, geography, and natural attractions of the foreign setting. My educational obligation lies not only in teaching my course but also in providing the students with ample opportunities to explore their new city and country, and that involves both creating a personal bond with them and making a visible and genuine display of my own love of London and England. We would make several trips to the theater together. We would visit Roman ruins in Bath, the site of a Victorian industrial village in Yorkshire, Cambridge University, Parliament, Windsor Castle, and Canterbury Cathedral. We would also have birthday cakes and Thanksgiving dinner together, and a few of us or the whole group would go to a restaurant for dinner or tea. My children and I have played soccer with students, my wife and I have accompanied Jane Austen fans to her house in Hampshire, and one group joined my whole family at the Prince Charles Theatre for audience participation fun at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Personal problems that I would never enter into back home became my business abroad, and I could share in the excitement of discoveries and achievements that I would know nothing of here.

The distinction is blurred between lofty professor and regular human, between London expert and fellow partaker in the wonders of England, between authority figure and companion. Even if we want to, we cannot cultivate this dual relationship with our students to nearly this extent on the home campuses, and most of us are more comfortable maintaining an entirely academic association with our students. Even so, at colleges like ours, an academic relationship at its best will involve more than a student taking notes on what a professor says in class. There will be an interchange of personalities, a cooperation in exploring ideas and concepts, and a sense that the one guiding is on the same quest as the one following, just somewhat farther down that path. Students will best profit from the intellect and talents of their professors when they see clearly how this knowledge and wisdom have made all the difference in the professors' lives and when they sense that they themselves are more than just bodies in the classroom. A good liberal arts education demands a personal as well as intellectual connection between professors and students. The variety of professional and personal bonds that necessarily arise in a study abroad program is an intensified version of that relationship.

An interesting by-product of the constant companionship on study abroad programs is the rare opportunity for directors to observe the bearing courses have on how students run their lives. Few professors except faculty residents see much of their students in the off-hours. Even those who actively cultivate social or cultural occasions

outside of class do so just a few times a semester. We do not want to intrude on students' private lives, and we certainly do not want them intruding on ours. When the border between the personal and the professional gets fuzzy, as it tends to on a study abroad program, when we see each other at all times of day, and when relations among the students can easily become our affair, directors often get the chance to see behaviors, decisions, and activities normally out of our range of vision at the home campuses. We like to think that our courses are somehow having an impact on their daily lives and mentalities. We have the idea that the cumulative acquisition of concepts, critical capabilities, aesthetic judgment, cultural awareness, historical perspective, and specific skills will steer them toward choices and actions that reflect their education.

Occasionally we might hear something gratifying that indicates that our tutelage has made a difference: a career choice, a conversation with grandparents about the Cold War, a sophisticated review of a movie shown only at the Lagoon, a decision to join the Peace Corps, excitement over a scientific breakthrough. But for the most part we do not know a whole lot about what they are doing with their time.

Study abroad directors know a lot more, for better or for worse. Let us first look at the worse. Directors teach senior seminar, a course on moral reasoning designed specifically to get students to think seriously about how to live a good and moral life. More than most courses, this is one we intend to affect their everyday lives and decisions in the short- as well as long-term. Fortunately for those of us who teach senior seminar at home, most of what goes on in our students' lives lies hidden from us, so we are left to imagine gleefully that their moral education and their class-time professions of principles translate into wholly virtuous lives outside of class. We rest easy that all of our graduates are sent into the world with a first-rate ethical sense and will stand apart from the unscrupulous crowd. Perhaps that is the case. But when we participate in their lives at the time they are taking the senior seminar, we might sometimes notice a disjunction between what seems in class to be a clear stance and what actually shows up in practice.

The topic of my senior seminar is always deception and manipulation — not that I practice it myself, at least not that anyone knows. We spend class time discussing the principles by which we might decide when lying or misleading can be justified and when it is morally acceptable to control others' lives without their knowing about it. We talk about the major ethical schools of thought and work out how they would help us approach the tricky situations we read about. We bandy about terms like deontological and utilitarian and consequentialist. We all castigate totally selfish acts. We sometimes forgive those whose lies and deception work for the good of another person, sometimes not. We leave each class feeling overwhelmed by our own goodness and moral rectitude.

At the home campuses, I can imagine my senior seminar students making careful and well-reasoned moral decisions all week long. “No, I can’t falsely flatter my roommate so that he’ll help me with my physics homework. That runs counter to the Kantian ethic that forbids using a human being as a means to an end.” “What, call in sick even though I feel fine? You forget, as a nonconsequentialist I have to consider not the advantageousness of the outcome but rather the rightness of the act itself.” With senior seminars responsible for thoughtful reasoning like this, the world is indeed a better place.

Abroad, when the senior seminar teacher and students have a lot of together time, another picture might emerge. I have noticed that this principle has many followers: “If it works to your advantage and you won’t get caught, do it.” So, to name a few real-life instances, if your underground pass has expired and you do not have money for one today, sneak through the turnstile with a friend. If your flat’s phone, which is supposed to receive calls only, happens to be accidentally capable of making calls, dial freely to the United States and hope you will be away by the time the bill arrives. If the program buys you a ticket to a play you do not want to go to, it is okay to sell it. If you get drunk on an overnight excursion and happen to wander far in the wrong direction, steal a child’s bike from someone’s yard and then abandon it near the hotel. In general, ignore rules that do not work for your advantage and hope no one notices. On my semesters abroad I have become aware that we are naïve if we think that everything we teach, even in a course like senior seminar, has an immediate effect on the way students live their lives, and we just have to hope for eventual influence.

On the positive side, the courses abroad introduce students to various aspects of the culture in which they now live, so much of their normal daily activity would qualify as supplementary homework. Visits to art galleries, theaters, museums, cathedrals, historical buildings, and parks; walks around different neighborhoods; trips to other cities with or without the group; attendance at jazz clubs, book-signings, and premieres; even chats in pubs with the locals — most of what they do besides class and formal assignments is related, in the case of London, to their academic program in British culture, British music, British film, European art, and British drama. On programs in which students live with local families, just staying at home contributes immeasurably to their education. The academic, the touristy, and the social blend to form a semester in which daily life becomes an extension of formal coursework, a magnification of the influence we would like our courses back home to have on students’ activities and habits. Directors have the gratification of seeing firsthand students’ engagement in the culture they are learning about.



## REVELATIONS

It is a reasonable expectation that the academic curriculum will ultimately affect students' lives, even to a profound degree. I would now like to consider three major achievements that we hope will arise from the college experience as a whole and that we can see in bold print on study abroad programs. These desired outcomes will emerge from professors, classes, and homework, and also from four years of living away from home among others also entering adulthood. To arrive at these achievements students must learn facts, concepts, and skills that I feel no need to dwell on here. Well-educated students have learned a vast amount of information which, even if it is not all retained, is instrumental in teaching them how to analyze, develop arguments orally and in writing, evaluate with a critical eye, appreciate and perhaps create works of art, solve puzzles, and view the world through a variety of lenses. To the extent that the instructors abroad teach facts, concepts, and skills as those back home do, the courses themselves have the same function and end. My focus here is on three major revelations that a good liberal arts education will promote and that a semester abroad promotes in concentrated fashion. I begin with two moral concepts that appear simple and self-evident but which I have found to be exceptionally hard for people to assimilate into their everyday lives even if they have no trouble understanding them intellectually.

### Grocery Carts

The first revelation is the recognition that there are other people besides oneself. This sounds like an easy one. We all see other people. The trick is behaving as though you realize that you are not the only person in the world, and that is a trick that takes quite a bit of sensitivity and self-awareness to master. A college degree is certainly neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for attaining this self-awareness, but I maintain that a liberal arts education should have as one of its desired outcomes a clear recognition that we each live among other people who also have rights, desires, and pain. My favorite definition of virtue comes in an essay on moral philosophy by novelist Iris Murdoch: "Virtue is not essentially or immediately concerned with choosing between actions or rules or reasons.... It is concerned with really apprehending that other people exist" ("The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," 1959).

One of the keys to understanding much of human behavior is the realization that most of us act as though we are the only people worthy of consideration. Personal and political relationships are characterized largely by what we might call self-interest but what is more accurately a failure to acknowledge that others have a self that ought to be taken into account. I call this behavior the grocery cart syndrome. Virtually every

time I go to any grocery store, there comes a point when I am marching down the aisle and my way is blocked by one person, whose grocery cart is on one side of the aisle while the shopper is bending next to it on the other side spending forever determining which brand of baked beans to buy. It does not occur to these people that you can stand behind or in front of your grocery cart and let other shoppers have free passage through the aisle. No, they take up both sides and block traffic, oblivious that they are inconveniencing anyone. Such occasions are the closest I come to swearing at strangers, and I mean foul language. I suspect that most of these people have little malevolence in their hearts. For all I know, they bake cookies for the neighborhood children, donate to the Salvation Army, bring predigested meals to the aged, or teach lepers to waltz. But at that moment they are acting as though they are the only ones in the store. They are not exactly malicious in making me wait for them to unblock the aisle. For them at that moment I just do not exist. No one else exists.

We can understand a great deal about human relations by seeing the grocery cart syndrome at work at every turn, and the most self-aware of us become conscious of the great extent we ourselves regularly stand next to our grocery carts as though no one else is worthy of consideration. Among the concepts we should gain from our education is this awareness of how people tend to behave and some sense of why it is important to combat this instinct in ourselves.

A study abroad experience should raise this awareness in students dramatically even if the courses themselves do not deal directly with this notion of virtue. One by-product of living for a semester as a member of a small and well-defined group is that students quickly learn that their individual needs and wants are often subservient to the good of the group. I make it clear from the first orientation meeting that my interest is preserving the welfare of the group as a whole, and the corollary is that I will not support any individual's behavior if that means the group suffers. Learning how to live with others besides family is part of a residential college student's development, and in various settings students have opportunities to figure out that part of individual responsibility is taking into account how one's own decisions and actions have an impact on other people. Abroad the groups are smaller and the time together far greater than at home. In London they take all their classes, go on road trips, sit at the theater, tour galleries and government buildings, have meals, and live with each other. When they do something in their free time, their companions will almost certainly be others in our group. Regular college life encourages students to realize when they are blocking the aisles, and they cannot go through a study abroad program without having it etched into their brains that they live among other people who must be considered.

If we extend this solipsistic impulse to the cultural sphere, we could assert that a college education ought to foster the recognition that America is not the only country.

It is very difficult for Americans to overcome the ingrained assumption that the world revolves around our country, and I worry that, for all our efforts at promoting cultural awareness in and out of the classroom, few students who have spent little or no time outside the United States seriously believe that other countries have any real claim to our consideration. It is too bad that not everyone can be American, and we feel sorry for people without our good fortune, but it is not our fault they do not speak proper English or watch football, so we will just pretend they are not even there. We do not necessarily intend to take this attitude, and for most it is an unconscious reflex. I am always amused when, two or three weeks into the semester, I take our students to Shakespeare's birthplace, where they are asked to sign the visitors' book. Practically all students write out their addresses as they always have: Eden Prairie, MN; Waterloo, IA; Denver, CO. What do they suppose a Brit will think upon seeing MN, IA, or CO, no country mentioned, just a city and a two-letter abbreviation? They do not suppose anything. They are not thinking or assuming — they just have not yet shaken the mentality that America is the center of the world. It often takes a while for study abroad students to accept their new country as something other than a fairytale world, but by the end of the semester even the most naïve and parochial of them have broadened their tiny visions of the world to accommodate cultures other than their own.

### **Birthday Presents**

Another common feature of human interaction is something I call the birthday present syndrome, which stands in the way of the second important concept that a good education will bring home, an extension of the first: There are other people, and they are not the same as I am. Again, this is not startling even to the most self-absorbed, yet a good portion of attitudes, actions, statements, and behavior can be attributed to our strong instinct to refuse to believe it. Moreover, if I have learned to accept that people are different from me, which is in fact far more difficult than merely intellectually recognizing differences, I still have a ways to go to overcome the insistence that, while others are different from me, they should not be and they are defective to the extent that they do not share my tastes, judgments, opinions, inclinations, customs, interests, and goals. It is a rare person who lives and thinks according to the principle that other people are different and that is just fine.

The first time I picked out a birthday present myself for someone else, I was about twelve. I bought my little brother a book of rules of card games. I loved cards and had a fascination with the rules of games. My brother did not. I read my gift cover to cover. He did not really take a look at it. We have the tendency to buy gifts that we ourselves like and ascribe the same taste or desire to the recipients, and if they do not appreciate it as much as we would, that is their problem and they should learn to acquire proper

preferences. If nothing else, my gifts have an educational value and people should appreciate my efforts to reform their untutored judgment. The birthday present syndrome is a kind of bastardization of the Golden Rule. "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." Okay, if I were to receive a birthday present today, I would love to get a book of rules of card games. I have committed a profoundly Christian act by getting people what I would like to have.

Once you are conscious of this syndrome, you will see it in everyone else's behavior all the time. Those who are tired, hungry, thirsty, or bored tend to assume that their companions are the same. We have all endured others foisting their tastes in music, literature, film, and fashion on us, certain that they are enriching our lives. People often assume that what is normal in their own houses is normal in yours and do not realize they are odd in leaving the TV on all day or eating supper at eight o'clock. And foreigners, well, they are just hopeless. Why can't they be Americans like everyone else? Basically, other people can be so annoying in thinking that we should be like them, whereas in fact they, of course, should be like us. It takes a great amount of self-awareness and sensitivity to get to the point of recognizing our own tendency to ascribe our state of mind, preferences, and habits to others and to assert at some level of consciousness that others are imperfect human beings insofar as they do not share our mentality.

We are all capable, however, of getting closer to this enlightened stage, and a good liberal arts education ought to push us toward it. A large number of our courses work toward such a revelation, especially in the areas of history, literature, sociology, psychology, political science, and philosophy. Our students are barraged with theoretical systems and with real and fictional examples from a variety of disciplines that reinforce the recognition that not everyone is or necessarily should be just like us, individually or as Minnesotans or as Americans. They might not all take that lesson with them to every interaction, but we are doing our job if their education coaxes them to allow for and even appreciate differences.

Here is where a semester abroad by nature has a tremendous impact. To live as a foreigner must, even for the most obtuse and egocentric, nudge us toward the realization that there is more than one way to live a proper life and that we might not ourselves be the measure of all things. Any complacency in the universality of our own way of life eventually succumbs to the daily onslaught of dissimilarities deemed normal by the locals. Even in a country so close to our own historically and culturally as England, students encounter from the outset customs, attitudes, and assumptions that they eventually realize cannot be dismissed out of hand as inherently wrong.

Students who spend a semester in countries in which English is not the native language confront more dramatically and immediately the fact that what is bizarre to

them is normal to others. To students here French is a kind of quaint puzzle they work on in the classroom on 1-3-5 days, the topic of exercises and assignments, a frustration at times because of the silly peculiarities, maybe something to bring out to impress someone on a date — generally a break from regular life. Suddenly on the French Riviera, this strange way of talking is a means of communication between real people, for whom verb endings, grammatical gender, and the uvular “r” are not difficulties to overcome but normal parts of daily life. Throw in the three-hour lunches and a casual attitude toward clothing on the beach and you are a long way from St. Joseph. After a few weeks, you get the idea that this is not just a stage play for your amusement. By the second half of the semester you cannot escape the insight that people are getting along just fine living in a fashion alien to what you once considered normal and universal.

The courses abroad and the formal excursions reinforce this revelation and perhaps give the students some theoretical coat hooks on which to hang their observations of differences. But perhaps the greatest force toward overcoming the birthday present syndrome is the sheer daily interaction with foreigners in a place where the students themselves are the foreigners.

### Mysterious Strangers

Related to what is in large part a moral development, recognizing and appreciating difference, is my last point about the connection between a liberal arts education and study abroad, and this is a largely psychological development that we see especially clearly in students who have spent a semester in another country, a maturation and an invigorated sense of self that arises from spending time away from the familiar. The effect is all the greater if the unfamiliar is, for a time anyway, uncomfortable and disconcerting. Assimilating a new environment is, in itself, invaluable to our education and vital to one important goal of education, self-discovery. It might not be apparent to most college students, but one of the principal activities of educated people is trying to figure themselves out. In fact, I would count this proclivity as a litmus test. Those who are complacent about their understanding of what makes themselves tick or who are just not interested fall under the category of philistines, no matter what their formal education. Those who feel occasional surprise at themselves, recognize the complexities of their self-contradictory impulses, stay curious about their motivations and personality quirks, and remain somewhat dissatisfied with their current state of knowledge — these are the people I respect as vibrant, enlightened, and alive. A major objective in a liberal arts education, perhaps the paramount objective, is guiding students toward this refusal of complacency. They should feel a life-long itch to work toward an understanding of themselves and their relationships with others.

In describing what I mean by this enlightening encounter with the unfamiliar, I am now going to characterize college in such a way that study abroad will naturally come to mind as a concentrated version of the four-year experience. Think of both at the same time, one of them fortified with vitamins and minerals.

I once taught a symposium I called “The Mysterious Stranger” and assigned a year’s worth of novels, short stories, and plays that have as the common premise an apparently stable community or family thrown into disarray by the arrival of an outsider, a mysterious stranger who upsets what everyone else has taken to be normal and natural. The basic pattern can be seen plainly in a book I did not assign but we have all read, *The Cat in the Hat* (well, someone has to make the Dr. Seuss references). We see a normal bourgeois family home with extremely bored bourgeois children who conjure up some excitement, an enchanting but amoral playmate who throws over their inhibitions and magically engages them in playful activities their parents would not countenance. The Dionysian Cat in the Hat shakes up their lives — whether for better or for worse is open to interpretation. Sometimes the mysterious stranger exposes evils or at least bad habits the community members have grown so accustomed to that they simply cannot recognize them as offensive or problematic.

In Gogol’s classic comedy, *The Inspector General*, the arrival of a huckster, who goes along with everyone’s mistaken assumption that he is a government inspector in disguise, brings out the greed, lust for power, and basic dishonesty in virtually all of the townspeople. Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*, a naïve young man who harbors no resentment, falsity, or ulterior motives to his goodness, functions as a photographic negative to the pettiness, social insincerity, hatred, lust, and rapacity that his sudden presence brings to the fore in Russian society. The Ekdal family in Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck* is getting along quite happily until an old friend returns to town and, with a firm conviction in his moral enterprise, exposes the illusions that have kept this family afloat all these years, without which they crumble.

The mysterious strangers serve to disrupt the apparent harmony of normal people, sometimes to their detriment, often to the healthy but unwelcome enlightenment of some. The ends of these works are generally a lot messier than the beginnings, and it is because of this mess that characters, or at least the readers, can see the true nature of the people and the society that false harmony and blind allegiance to the status quo have hidden. I contend that it is a principal function of college professors and in fact of the whole college experience to perform the role of the mysterious stranger, to be a disruptive influence in the lives of our students, to unsettle them and create a mess. Whatever they are comfortable with I would like them to feel some discomfort about; whatever is in their minds normal and natural I would like them to consider to be less than universal, perhaps peculiar to their own circle, and quite possibly wrong; if they

are absolutely certain of something, I want them to see that not everyone shares their certainty and not without good reason.

This disruption is not itself the goal, of course, but rather a necessary means to the sort of critical analysis of themselves, their culture, their habits, and their relation to the world that educated people practice. In Platonic terms, having opinions, even right opinions, without knowledge will keep you under the sway of those influences that determine your opinions. Only by developing the habit of questioning assumptions, by learning how to distinguish the valid from the specious, and by understanding the reasons you hold a certain position can you feel the freedom from the tyranny of dominating forces, the liberation that comes with a true liberal arts education. Even if students reassemble the mess we have made of their notions and beliefs into much the same structure they started with, it is the disassembly and challenge of learning how the pieces fit together that make a world of difference. Learning how to go about this practice throughout their lives constitutes the education.

Our academic curriculum serves the role of a series of mysterious strangers since much of what we ask our students to do in class and in their assignments is to confront the unfamiliar and to break out of the constrictive shells they have built around themselves, especially during high school. As I was about to enter college, I was pretty sure I had the world figured out, and I am convinced that this is the typical attitude of high school seniors: I do not need and I certainly do not want you to do anything but reconfirm my beliefs, values, and vision of the world. It is our job as professors, among other things, to batter down that wall of complacency and let in the complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty people instinctively resent and reject.

Philosophical and theological controversies first come to mind as goads toward acknowledging and eventually embracing the uncomfortable and unfamiliar, but we will also find a strong element of the mysterious stranger in most courses in literature, history, psychology, sociology, political science, and economics, and many in the hard sciences. Even something as innocuous as a beginning language course pushes this agenda by driving home the realization that there are some actual humans for whom English is bizarre and strange words normal. What used to be obvious to our students becomes, we hope, problematic or at least complex: Capitalism might have some glitches after all. My notion of freedom and free will has been pretty naïve. I'm going to have to think harder about my objections to illegal immigrants. Poets might not actually be as boring as I always thought. Maybe God isn't a Republican — maybe not even an American.

Apart from the academic content of our courses, the very act of coming to college forces students into this sort of salutary discomfort. Moving out of the home, even if

home is less than an hour away, and into a dwelling with strangers who are also incipient adults in itself works wonders for shaking up their rigidities and closed-mindedness. To the extent that they now have greater latitude to make grown-up decisions and cannot avoid dealing closely with a wide variety of people, our students, especially that first semester, generally undergo a serious jolt in their mentalities that complements the confrontations with new and different ideas in their courses.

When we discuss heroes in my mythology course, I work the psychological angle and interpret heroic journeys as journeys into one's subconscious, and in this view a heroic story is about all of us, or about what we all could achieve if we dare. Going through the Black Sea, a labyrinth, the underworld, or a dark forest represents that fearful trip into the unknown world inside where you hope to defeat the monsters and temptations that threaten the comforts of your life and from where you will eventually emerge with a treasure that will bring order and happiness to your conscious world, a Golden Fleece, a goose that lays golden eggs, a clear sense of identity, an ability to love. In tales with this mythic structure, the hero starts and ends in the familiar world, whereas the life-changing actions take place far away. The journey out is vital but the hero cannot stay in this Neverland where the threats to order are confronted and overcome. It is a temporary residence, not the world we are meant to inhabit. We return to the conscious level, represented by Home Sweet Home, where we reap the benefits of the journey and live healthy, happy adult lives.

College, I suggest to my students, can be, if they let it, this Neverland or labyrinth where, separate from the everyday world, their adventures can lead them to encounter their demons and to obtain great treasures in their mental development. Not everyone is heroic in this sense: despite our best efforts, it is not uncommon for students to leave college without substantial development. They have to keep their eyes open and be receptive to challenges presented by the new and unfamiliar, and some just cannot work themselves toward the self-examination we are encouraging. But at least college affords one of the most favorable opportunities we have to reevaluate assumptions, to develop the habit of seeking out what we do not know, and to assimilate a diversity of influences in forming our characters. We leave the world of the familiar, spend four years in a realm separated in significant ways from regular life, and return to the world of employment and obligations armed with a substantially greater understanding of ourselves and of our place in a world where other people exist.

This model of separation, initiation, and return can apply even to the great majority of students who go to a college in their hometown or a short drive away. It is not the distance that matters essentially but rather the move onto a campus that will be the new center of the young person's world. In practice, however, distance must play some part insofar as the sort of development I am talking about is enhanced by difference



and unfamiliarity. Students have more opportunities to experience healthy discomfort if they have no easy access to the world they have always known.

Study abroad students throw themselves sensationally into the hands of mysterious strangers. From the moment they step off the plane, they confront the unfamiliar at every turn in the labyrinth, and for four months this new world will shake up their preconceptions, batter down their complacency, and send them back home with a deep-seated estrangement from the narrowness of vision they arrived with.

### A LESSON IN HUMILITY

I close with the testimony of one of our recent graduates, *summa cum laude*, who wrote me about her first night in London when, homesick and feeling out of her depth, she and a friend sat at a pub with two Italian tourists.

I was almost immediately struck by the realization that I knew almost nothing. Back home, I would have considered myself a pretty well-educated person, an exception to the general rule of American ignorance. After about two hours of conversing with our new friends about movies, history, politics, art, music, and books, I had a quick lesson in humility. The rate at which their expressive Italian eyes repetitively opened wide with astonishment at our apparent total lack of education was alarming — and the perfect way to begin a four-month adventure abroad. It gave us the appropriate *tabula rasa* for our semester abroad. I knew nothing — far less than I had always assumed that I knew — and I was ready to start absorbing as much as possible. (Elizabeth Dingmann '06)

Starting college should be a lesson in humility, and professors, in their roles as mentors, guides, and teachers, should, after they have broken down harmful strains of self-satisfaction and egoism, help their students absorb as much as possible. A semester abroad concentrates these roles and efforts, and the foreign setting can give a clearer and quicker view of achievement than we are normally afforded back home.

Study abroad is a kind of microscope that gives us an amplified vision of the full college experience. And I like what I see.

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### EDITOR'S NOTE

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