Dear Julie:

Congratulations on your acceptance to study abroad next semester. I am excited for the adventures that await as you study and live in a new place for four months. As you prepare for this experience I would like to encourage you to think about a number of issues that should enhance your time off-campus.

Perhaps the best place to start is to ask, “ why study off-campus?” Students report a number of different reasons for packing their bags and leaving campus, including have an adventure, grow as a person, experience a new culture, see the wonders of the world, meet new people, get out of their campus bubble and/or have fun.

There are all kinds of resources to help ensure you that you can accomplish one or more of these goals. Bookstores groan under the weight of guidebooks that cover the sights and culture of more than 200 nations around the world. Yet, these resources often cater to tourists who are seeking entertainment, distraction, and escape and it is my hope that you can experience so much more.

In some ways the ease of travel today has created a paradox: The easier it becomes to travel widely, on the wings of supersonic jets and via the internet, the harder it is becomes to travel *wisely*. We are left with plenty of frequent flyer miles and passport stamps, but the gnawing suspicion grows that our travels lack something vital. As a result, T.S. Eliot was driven to ask of the modern age,

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?*

*Where is the knowledge that we have lost in information?*

Along with T. S. Elliot, shouldn’t we as Christians seek more from our journeys? Shouldn’t we also think about how our travels and our time abroad can move us away from being tourists to a more meaningful journey that helps us grow in our faith and engage those we meet in meaningful ways?

For hundreds of years, Christians have been answering this quest for more meaningful journeys through the idea of thinking about their journey as a pilgrimage. In fact, the idea of travel as pilgrimage can be a powerful metaphor for adding meaning to one’s travel. So I would like to challenge you to begin to think about your upcoming travel adventures as something more than just fulfilling credits or experiencing new things. I would like to challenge you to see your study abroad experience as something much more sacred.

While ancient in origin, I believe that pilgrimage is relevant today for many reasons. First, it moves us from certainty to dependence, it helps us discover God’s involvement in human history, it challenges and stimulates our faith, and it invigorates us to be like our Lord in thought, word, deed, and devotion. As one former student wrote in his blog:

*Living abroad has the ability to make you independent and dependent at the same time. I became independent in the sense that I chose to live abroad, a place that was “un-road-trip-able”, and unconnected from life in the U.S., independent in my thoughts, decisions, and self-reliant when I would run into a problem…similarly, living abroad has the ability to make you dependent. I became dependent on God the minute the plane took off.  I became dependent on God and had to trust that He would take care of all the things ahead of me. My host-family, my unbelievably crappy Spanish (when I arrived), my health. . . I had one choice, become dependent on Him.  That’s how I became independent and dependent at the same time.*

For this student (and I hope you as well), seeing the semester as a pilgrimage allowed his travels to become a spiritual journey, an outward demonstration of an upward calling to follow Christ, wherever the steps may lead. In this regard, pilgrimage is centered around one thing – progression. God does not call us to be static saints, even if we cannot move physically. We are constantly on the move spiritually, evolving in our understanding of God, and seeking him in all aspects of our life.

In addition, seeing our journey as a pilgrimage also pushes us away from the role of tourist to the role of pilgrim. Think about the mindset of the tourist as he/she ventures out. The tourist seeks:

* To see the world, while checking off a bucket list of experiences;
* To have others adapt to me, to accommodate my needs;
* To be entertained and made to feel comfortable in his or her travels;
* To answer the question: Am I getting my money’s worth? Is it worth it?
* To move from the center: Desires to escape his/her world in a search for the exotic. To escape one’s life situation and circumstance – What happens in Vegas…

In contrast, think about the mindset of the pilgrim as he/she ventures out. The pilgrim seeks:

* To transforms his or herself;
* To demonstrate humility as an essential virtue of his or her life;
* To answer the question: Am I worthy of this encounter? How can I be a blessing to others I meet and let others be a blessing to me?
* To move to the Center, towards the way of the cross, towards building a deeper relationship with God

Seeing your study abroad experience as a pilgrimage offers you the opportunity to ask not what you want while abroad but what God wants to teach you through the journey. The result is often life-changing.

Lastly, embarking on a pilgrimage reminds us of two things. First, that there are all kinds of hardships that we might encounter, but instead of resisting these hardships its best to embrace them and learn from them. Each inconvenience and disturbance teaches us something sacred about our faith, our God, and ourselves. Second, seeing ourselves as pilgrims helps us to understand the importance of “the other” in our journeys. A pilgrim often exists on the hospitality and graciousness of others we meet along the way. As pilgrims we must learn to engage those we meet with humility and genuine curiousity as we walk and grow together.

I hope I have given you something to think about as you prepare for your time off-campus. If you are interested in exploring the concept of pilgrimage more I would encourage you to check out one or more of the following resources:

George, C. (1984). *Sacred Travels: Recovering the ancient practice of pilgrimage*.

Cousineau, P. (1998). *The Art of Pilgrimage: A seeker’s guide to making travel sacred*..

Forest, J. (2007). *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a way of life.*

Congratulations again! I hope we can continue our dialogue over the next few weeks before you leave and once you have settled into your new environment.

Blessings,

Don

Questions for you:

1. Why are you interested in leaving your life here and traveling, studying, serving somewhere else?
2. What are your goals for your travels?
3. What would make your upcoming travels more of a pilgrimage?
4. How can you prepare for your upcoming experiences?