

Had somebody told me when I graduated from high school that within the next four years I would travel far and wide within the United States and abroad, become fluent in a second language and begin to tackle a third, study abroad, witness the beginnings of a revolution while in a foreign country, survive organic chemistry, pass the MCAT, and actually get into medical school, I probably would have laughed. But hey, c'est la vie. That's life.

"You transplanted a vine from Egypt... it took root and filled the land." And did it ever! In hindsight, my time at Augie is more or less divided into two parts: Before Egypt, and After Egypt. The real journey, however, began a few months before that. During the summer of 2010, I spent two weeks in Latvia with my grandmother and other assorted relatives visiting family friends. In the evenings at the hotel, my grandma would reminisce about growing up in Riga, Latvia's capital city. She spoke of the terror of the Soviet Occupation, fleeing the country when World War 2 broke out, living in a refugee camp in Germany before coming to America after the war, and then returning to Latvia to visit after the Soviet Union collapsed. As I listened, I felt so spoiled, so naïve--and rightly so. It really hit home one afternoon, when I was wandering around the town with my friend Kristine. We walked past a tiny house and she paused. "That's where we lived when I was small," she said, pointing to two windows of a room at the top of the house. "I don't really remember it, because I was young and I didn't know any better, but those were difficult times." And that's when it hit me. I found myself face-to-face with the uncomfortable realization that although by American standards I'm far from rich, in the global picture, I'm loaded. Here people I knew personally had lived in poverty

while the greatest hardship in my life had been when The Gap discontinued my favorite style of jeans! Like they say, there are real problems, and then there are Rich World Problems.

With this awareness still burning in my mind five months later, I boarded a plane to Cairo with the rest of the Augustana Band. From hearing the call to prayer five times a day to attempting to repeat basic phrases in poorly-pronounced Arabic to seeing the Pyramids of Giza in the skyline, we were in a whole new world. Of all the events and epiphanies of that month, one in particular has stuck with me. After visiting mosques, having frank discussions with our guides about Islam, and growing accustomed to hearing the call to prayer and having the weekend be Friday and Saturday instead of Saturday and Sunday, I realized that I wasn't afraid. Not that I had been--not outright, at least. But, having grown up in the West, the only things I'd heard about Islam in my daily life were negative. It was remarkable to understand--and not just conceptually--but really *see* that Islam is indeed a religion of peace, mercy, and charity. It was liberating.

The hardest thing about travelling, in my opinion, is coming back--coming back to the same places, trying to reintegrate into the same routines, facing the same prejudices and misconceptions, knowing that the only thing that's changed is you. At one point during our last few days in Egypt, when revolution was in the air and all eyes were on Cairo, a few of my friends and I turned on the news. As we watched the BBC coverage of the action in Tahrir Square from the comfort of a luxury resort, far removed from any hint of danger, one of my friends sighed and said, "You know, they'll never believe us when we tell them that we were fine." He was right. If I had a

nickel for every time somebody approached me in public, said they'd seen me on the news, and gone on to make uninformed, prejudiced remarks about Islam, or the Middle East, or the situation in Egypt, I'd have my student loans paid off! It's taken a while, but I've come to terms with the fact that there are some things that other people will simply never get because they haven't experienced them firsthand.

Also difficult is accepting that, upon return, you might never fit back in like you used to. One evening during our last weekend in Egypt, between games of UNO, finding out about flight delays, and checking out the latest on the BBC, I got to talking with Khalid, one of our guides. He asked how I felt about going home, and I didn't know what to say. It was strange to think of returning to the Land of the Ice and Snow. For as eager as I was to get back to Sioux Falls and see everyone and chatch up, I knew I would leave a piece of my heart in Egypt, a place that, 21 days previously, had seemed like a whole new world and now was no longer so foreign. This was even harder when I returned from studying in Paris last August. Having spent weeks learning to blend into a different culture, speaking a different language, and living a different way of life, I found that I couldn't go back to being American overnight--nor did I want to. Home didn't feel so much like home anymore. I've come to realize that although I carry a passport with the Great Seal of the United States embossed on the cover, listing South Dakota as my place of birth, for me, "home" has taken on a much broader meaning. Sioux Falls, Minneapolis, Omaha, Riga, Cairo, Cesis, Chicago, Nuremburg, Alexandria, Paris--wherever I have friends, I'm home.

This is why we travel. Because in all, life isn't about politics, or about governments, or about religions or money. It's about friendship. It's about acceptance. It's about kindness and compassion and love. It's about people. Because for better or for worse, we're all still people. It's about turning off the TV and tearing down the walls. Keeping our eyes open to similarities, our minds open to differences, and our hearts open to each other. Understanding what you can, respecting what you can't, and letting every moment make you grow as a human being. In the end, we're not our governments or our religions or our bank statements. It's about going exploring, facing fear head on, and making home wherever you are.

In a few weeks' time, I'll be graduating. As to where this series of adventures will lead me next, I have no idea. In the words of the Irish rock band U2, "I have run, I have crawled, I have scaled these city walls, only to be with you. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

No, despite it all, I still haven't found what I'm looking for. But given the way things have been going so far, I almost hope I never do.