

Life of a Human

A Year in Germany

Curran Kelleher

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Chapter 1

August

1.1 This is a Blog

FRIDAY, AUGUST 10, 2007

A blog! My voice can be heard by those who choose to listen. Amazing! I am exposing myself to the ruthless swarm of humanity, and must watch what I say. So be it! I will let the world swallow me up, and enjoy it.

1.2 Ceasing to Exist

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 15, 2007

My journey is coming up quickly, 2 weeks until I leave for my year in Germany. It feels as though I am slowly ceasing to exist. There are only 2 more weeks of known things, then I will disappear into the void. Every day there is less to hang on to, it feels like soon there will be nothing. No work, no colleagues, no acquaintances, no dorm room, no familiar restaurants, no deadlines, no friends, no river, no refrigerator, no desk, no window, no door, no light, no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind. Then I will appear in a strange place and start life anew, like a child, wide open.

1.3 The Meaning of Life?

MONDAY, AUGUST 20, 2007

Here are some thoughts which have been on my mind lately, I thought I'd share them.

What if you died tomorrow? What was the worth of your life? What did you do which made your life more purposeful or worthwhile than a cloud which appeared then disappeared? When I look at my life, it is only a collection of little things - I caused and participated in many events which are in the scope of life and death infinitesimally small. I was a node in the causal web which links us all together - I was influenced by many people, and I influenced many people. I also experienced things moment by moment, but all of those experiences were temporary and are now lost forever.

One may ask, can the meaning of life be found in one's influence on other people? Well, other people are just like you, transient, and so are the memes (living ideas) you originate or propagate. Some may live longer than others, but all disappear eventually, given an infinite amount of time.

One may also pose the argument "well, every action one does changes the course of the entire future of the universe" and try to grab that as the source of meaning in life. This is a true statement, but it is also true for a cloud's actions, and likewise for every water molecule in that cloud, and for every atom everywhere. Here we must remember that free will is an illusion, that we are composed of atoms which are governed entirely by the same physical laws that govern the atoms which comprise the cloud, nothing more. We are layers upon layers of emergent properties, but fundamentally just atoms. Furthermore, when considering one's influence on the future of the universe, one must realize that all actions are equivalent, there are no "special" actions that are more or less influential than any other (locally and in the short term there are such actions, but not globally and in the long term). This we can learn from chaos theory [1].

Meaning arises only when something is given an interpretation in a given context. Sequences of characters have meaning in the context of language and the world and people, but are meaningless without that context. So when we ask ourselves the meaning of ourselves, what is our context? The context is made up, in our head, and can change.

So, it seems that everything we can hang on to, identify with, or look to as the meaning of life, is temporary and always changing. There is nothing permanent to fall back on. I, too, am like a cloud, and I, too, will disappear.

All that is left is the present, which we can always enjoy if we realize that all pain and pleasure is temporary, and we need not fixate on it. I hypothesize that this is all there is, and there is no meaning of life aside from what is right now. As disturbing as it is, I find no convincing evidence against it. What do you think? Your comments are welcome.

2 comments:

Frank said...

You must be able to type really fast. Just remember, as you hurtle graveward young man, to love and express your gratitude to the universe.

Love,

Your favorite and most grateful (to have you) uncle

Francois

Howie said...

Dear human,

1. Insignificance is relative. Just because we are all insignificant at some scale – say galactic size or time since the Big Bang – doesn't mean we aren't meaningful to tens, hundreds, or perhaps even millions or billions of our species (help cure cancer or aging or global warming...). It's like Xeno's Paradox; by changing the scale beyond the realistic bounds, you end up with a nonsensical conclusion. Dividing Achilles' time below

50 ms was nonsensical – next thing HE knows, he’s passing the tortoise. At the scale of the world we know, a year in Germany is a significant chunk of time to fill with many experiences; a person or a University or a company is important; there is real love and hate and gratitude and achievement. If there are life forms the size of planets that live billions of years, we are probably insignificant to them, but I don’t know of any; do you?

2. Just because we are emergent and chaotic doesn’t mean we aren’t almost infinitely more complex and interesting and capable than other chaotic phenomena like a growing sand pile. Your brain has more possible neuronal connections than there are atoms in the visible Universe (about 10^{11} neurons, each with about 10^2 connections potentially to any of the other 10^{11} – actual brain architecture is much more regular, but then I didn’t count connection strengths or all the chemistry and possible states within neurons. Clearly, thinking humans are qualitatively different (and more interesting) phenomena than the rest of the Universe as we know it. So enjoy making connections!

1.4 I am in Germany!

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 29, 2007

Here I am in Waiblingen! I am staying at a friend’s house for a few days, then I will begin the intensive German course on September 3 in Darmstadt. Here I will recount the intense day and a half in which I went from Boston to here.

We arrived very early at the airport, got set up and inside no problem. It was a strange no-mans land, the void between here and there. I felt as though I was falling into a black hole. After waiting about 3 hours inside, I went to a Starbucks and got a cinnamon scone. At the counter when I was waiting for my coffee, I asked an old Indian guy standing next to me “do you know what time it is?” he became very animated and leaned towards me looking right at me and loudly said “WHAT?” I said “do you know the time?” He exclaimed “TIME!” and excitedly uncovered his watch from below his sleeve and said loudly with a very thick Indian accent “QUARTAR TO EIGHT” and gave a huge radiant smile. I smiled back and thanked him. That made me very happy.

On the plane. Takeoff is beautiful - the lights of Boston, then the reflection of the moon on the sea, with varying patterns of ripple. As soon as I take off my shoes, I smell a mildly grotesque stench of foot. Oh no! My feet smell! I sneakily changed into a clean pair of socks that I happened to have. I smelled my socks and shoes, and they did not smell bad at all. I guess the guy sitting behind me took off his shoes at the exact same time I did!

Much to my surprise, I was presented with a meal in mid-flight. It was comprised of fried tofu (I think), rice, and an alien white and red creamy substance with crunchy stuff in it which tasted like lemon. It was excellent food. Then the stewardess came with tea! The tea was excellent, I drank it with the brownie that came with the meal. There I was with all of these other people who should be at home in their beds, but nooo, we’re flying across the world!! I couldn’t help but laugh out loud to myself.

At one point I looked out and saw the moonlight reflecting off a sea of rippling clouds far below. This is real!

We landed in Iceland as the sun was rising (6 AM Iceland = 2 AM USA = 8 AM Germany). The sunrise on the clouds was extremely beautiful. Descending on Iceland was like landing on the moon. The land was completely flat, and off in the distance we could see mountains. I looked at the baggage handling people outside and realized that they are from ICELAND! That when they speak it will be in Icelandic, not English. Inside the airport at Reykjavik it was completely silent, no hum, no noise, nothing coming out of the speakers. Only the sound of people. The view of the mountains in the distance was really beautiful.

Then I flew to Frankfurt. The flight was scattered with conversation with a very pretty girl sitting next to me and a guy next to her. She was going back home to Germany after spending a year working as a nanny in upstate New York. It was nice talking with her. She was much more talkative with the German guy on the other side of her, speaking German. Imagine coming back home to old familiar Germany after a year abroad in New York. I was beginning my year abroad! We were part of the crowd - a prime example - of people who had drastically different stories and situations, but all on the way to Frankfurt. Looking down on Germany we could see the arrangements of huge fields with dense clusters of houses in the middle of them (there were distinct regions of pure-buildings and pure-fields, a strange sight, something I've never seen in America) and distinct clouds hovering above them. Clouds over Germany.

After arriving in Frankfurt I proceeded to make my way to Stuttgart as planned. I asked (regrettably in English) at the information desk how to get to the trains, then took a shuttle bus to Terminal 1 of the absolutely enormous Frankfurt Airport (Flughafen), where the trains indeed were. There were stands selling things and I decided to buy a bottle of water for the trip (since the other two I had bought were confiscated going into the airport gates in Boston and Reykjavik) I grabbed the clearest bottle of water I could see and put it on the counter. The guy behind the counter proceeded to spew an incomprehensible outburst of German, so I presented him with a five Euro bill and smiled. With speed and grace he gave me the change while laughing and saying something in German. Was he laughing at the way I acted? Did he trick me or scam me? Hmm... I laughed with him and took my change. On the train I took a sip of the water and realized why the guy was laughing. I had bought seltzer water! He probably warned me of that, but I obviously had no idea what he said and bought it regardless.

I asked in German at the ticket window for a train ticket to Stuttgart, and she understood me! Then she said a bunch of stuff about the train which I didn't understand, so I broke down and said I'm sorry but I don't understand. We finished the deal in English. I have to start somewhere right!

The train ride itself was incredible. It was an ICE (Inter-City Express), which stopped in Mannheim, then Stuttgart. Everything about the train was *nice*. The doors were glass and very smoothly automated. There were pull-down shades on all the windows, which fit perfectly to the window. There were pillow things attached to the heads of the seats. The armrests had felt on them. The lighting outside the bathroom was snazzy, and the bathroom doors closed smoothly. Every stop was announced and a description of it displayed on a well-done screen in the front of the car (in German and English). The luggage racks were shaped such that there was plenty of room to get the bag in there.

The suspension was excellent, the ride was incredibly smooth and fast. No loud engine noise. I was thoroughly impressed. When I sat down I was able to awkwardly say "Can I sit here?" in German.

The train left Frankfurt Flughafen at 1:54, and arrived in Stuttgart at about 3:00. I thought I would arrive at 5:45, because that's what the online train schedule said (perhaps 5:45 was when it arrived at Munich - the final destination of the train). Approaching the station I saw an old sign which said "Stuttgart Hbf" (Hbf = Hauptbahnhof = train station). I tried calling my friend James from a payphone. I got his cellphone voicemail and hung up. I was disappointed at the phone when it didn't give me change for the Euro coin I put into it. OK THEN, I'll put in ten Euro cents THIS TIME! I did that and called the home number and got through, only to be disconnected when the ten cents quickly ran out! 20 cents this time, we had a full conversation and he came to get me.

I went to the bathroom at the train station, the WC (Water Closet). You need to pay money to get into the bathroom. I put in a Euro coin and peed, on the way out I learned that it costs fifty cents, not a Euro. Darn! Oh well.

For the half-hour it took James to go from their home in Waiblingen to the train station, I stood in one spot. I saw all kinds of people walk by - Old men in suits, young girls in groups, lesbians, sketchy people looking through the trash, a middle aged hippie with long hair and a bicycle. There were recurring characters too - a threesome of girls kept wandering around and coming back, an indian-looking guy kept coming back to the trash can and looking in it, sometimes reaching in to grab something. That's another thing which impressed me - the trash cans in the train station were divided into four sections: glass, paper, packaging, and real garbage (as in food).

James finally came, it was a great reunion. The last time I saw him was at the beginning of the summer when he went back to Germany after his year at UMass Lowell (where we met). His older brother was driving, what a great character - a big almost burly guy with short black hair whose English is OK and is really kind. The three of us went out for dinner in Stuttgart. We walked through a large open area in Stuttgart where there are many shops and whatnot. There was a lone saxophone player playing jazz dressed in psychedelic rags, and he had a large vibrantly colored real living Parrot perched atop his head. What a beautiful sight!

We went to a Beer Garden, which James had selected because it is very German and very good. First thing is, of course, Bier! James and I both ordered a light wheat beer. We were waiting for James' brother, who was picking up a hat he had ordered at a nearby hat store. Here comes the Beer. Holy crap! Two incredibly tall glasses, shaped nicely being thin towards the bottom and wider towards the top and filled to the brim with foaming beer, were placed on the table in front of us. After the waiter left I couldn't help but laugh! I just started laughing hysterically at the fact that I just ordered a beer, and got it, and I am in the middle of Stuttgart, IN GERMANY! James totally understood, and laughed too.

After James' brother came back with his spanking new top hat we ordered our food. I ordered (actually, James ordered for me) a white sausage. The waiter came with our food, and I received a bowl with two plates on top, and a huge pretzel on the top plate. I started laughing. In the bowl were two pieces of white sausage in hot water. It was so incredibly simple, it really was just sausage. I laughed some more. We all ate our food and drank our beer, it was

great. After dinner we went to get coffee at a nearby cafe.

3 comments:

Justin said...

Curran! It is good to hear that you are alive and well. Your journey immediately reminds me of my departure to Germany and beyond. I only wish I had captured every moment of magic as well as you have.

I am also glad to hear that you are with friends. This will make your shock of being on an alien planet that much more agreeable. I imagine starting university and the language course will be a real shock.

Here I am leading my friend from the UK around Boston and MIT's campus and I'm overwhelmed at the large number of new faces on campus. I don't recognize any of them, but I perceive that they are eager beavers. Within each one of them I see a frame of reference and anticipation for what their first year of MIT holds in store for them.

Yesterday, I spent some time at the Academic Expo talking to freshman about the Cambridge-MIT Exchange, and I was just struck at how raw and un-shaped each and every one of these people were. All that lays in front of them is the unlimited possibilities for tomorrow. I realized that the same must be true for me, but the feeling is much more removed for me and so directly a part of every one of these young ones' faces. Sometimes I feel like an old codger and almost feel resentment towards these newcomers! How have my three short years of experience transformed me? But then I read your post once again, and realize that you are a newcomer to a distant land. Your happiness corresponds to German-Justin being nice and welcoming to the freshman German-Curran. So it is resolved: I must sit back and laugh and appreciate the novelty of everyone's constantly unfolding new and foreign experiences!

Mary said...

Dear Bahnne,

I just read your posting "I am in Germany!" and felt like I was right there with you. I love how you write - as if your audience is standing there with you, buying seltzer by mistake, pee'ing for one Euro (I remember how shocking it was to have to pay to pee), having someone rattle away at you in German because your initial question to them was spoken with such a perfect German accent...

I looked it up, Bahnne: "eine einfache Fahrkarte, bitte" (instead of a Ruckfahrkarte)

Thank you for taking everyone along with you, into the airport in Boston, then into the Iceland stopover, and on and on - a day without sleep!! - into the evening with beer and white sausages (my favorite).

I will be checking in with you regularly, and I promise to start writing in German very soon. (After Sept. 3!)

Love and hugs to my dear Bahn (and I don't mean Bahn as in Bahnhof.) I think your best asset on this trip is your sense of humor (and of course your openness to all these new experiences and people). You're amazing, Bahn.

4dam said...

hahaha! I love it man. I can totally relate to everything... getting gypped on money because you don't understand how things work. Laughing at the simplest things like sausages in a bowl of water because they're sausages in a bowl of water IN GERMANY. And all the other little idiosyncrasies that seem to personify countries and make them so distinct from one another. Different road signs, cleaner trains, different food... I love it!

So glad to hear you're drinking it all up and savoring every taste like a fine wine. Keep doing so. Keep writing, and I'll keep reading!

1.5 A day in Stuttgart

THURSDAY, AUGUST 30, 2007

So, three days of being an alien have passed, and I am still high as a kite at the newness of it all. Yesterday James and I went into Stuttgart and I drove. Driving here is great fun! The streets are quite narrow, and the cars on average are much smaller than in the US. In Stuttgart I bought a cell phone (it felt *so* strange not having a cell phone or keys for a few days, like being naked) I was very impressed at the phone, a Sony Ericsson, which has gorgeous graphics, smooth animations, tons of internet services, Java games, a camera, oh man, oh man, and it is pay-as-you-go at €0.20/min.

As we were walking, we saw a great band playing in front of a department store. The song which stuck in my head the most was "I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien, I'm an Englishman in New York." As the band was playing, a very drunk fat woman was dancing like crayz (haha the y and z are reversed on German keyboards) and pretending to conduct them with her hands. Then she would dance around, waiving three huge wine bottles in the air, apparently which she had been drinking out of. It was a great scene, a huge crowd of people were gathered around until they stopped playing.

Stuttgart is a beautiful city, with tons of people everywhere all the time, and very safe because of that. At some point I saw a guy walking around with a look of complete awe on his face and bright eyed looking at everything, and realized that I probably look like that too! There was again the guy on the street playing jazz with a parrot on his head. Also we saw two young girls playing classical music on Cello and Violin. The atmosphere is very open, lots of big open spaces with people sitting, talking, drinking coffee, smoking, drinking beer (thats a cool thing about Germany - one can drink anywhere and smoke many places which you can't in America, like in the airport or in public bathrooms). We had dinner at a Turkish place called Königs Pizza und Kebap (King's Pizza and Kebab). That was quite good, we sat at a table outside and I was facing the street. Tons and Tons of people were constantly walking by.

Towards the end of the day we went to an internet cafe to check for Jazz shows (we found none). The coffee was excellent! Here in Germany coffee is

much much stronger than, say, Dunkin Donuts coffee, and in smaller portions. I love that. I ordered the internet and coffee in German - “Einmal Internet und zweimal Kaffee bitte.” Ok! I was understood, success! Always when I attempt to speak in German there arises a gut feeling of fear and apprehension. Often when someone responds I can’t understand them, so in such cases it is so great to be with James, as he then takes over.

Sitting on the big steps in Stuttgart and watching all the people walking by at night was refreshingly still. I had no intuition or subconscious judgments whatsoever about the people around me, because their culture was just so alien. Also, I didn’t feel as though I was constantly being judged by other people like we are so often in America. All of this made me realize that fundamentally, I am no different than anyone else, because we are all simply human. Everybody shits, cleans, loves, hates, eats, sleeps, experiences fear, and most of all, exists and is alive RIGHT NOW, just like you!

1 comment:

Schwarzgesichtiger Bulle said...

Hi! Loved your writing! I’m taking German classes too, but over here in Brazil (yep, i’m brazilian) :p Seriously, i’ve read a few of your most recent posts and... that’s gonna sound weird, but.. you remind me a lot of myself. Oh well... congratulations for your blog. keep it up! seeya

1.6 Morning before going to Marbach!

THURSDAY, AUGUST 30, 2007

Today James and I took a trip to Marbach. We woke up at around nine, showered, ate breakfast with his older brother Karl, and went to Marbach, the birthplace of Friedrich Schiller.

I hate to digress too much, but I can’t help but talk of the shower and toilet and blinds and windows. The toilet here is amazing. There is a small platform on which only a little water remains, and a deep hole towards the front which the water flushes down. When one poops, it piles up on the platform, and is not submerged. For the first time in my life I smelled my own shit! Then, when flushing, water flows only as long as one holds down the lever. So, only a small amount of water is required to whisk your feces away compared to American toilets. The shower head is mounted rather low, and comes off the hook. There is a switch right on the head which allows one to turn the water off temporarily, to lather up without water, so as not to waste water. The windows can swing open both from the top (fixed on the bottom), or out at you like a door (fixed on the right). I learned this as I was removing a large spider from the bathtub, with James emitting hilarious fearsome high pitched utterances every time the spider moved. There are blinds outside in front of the large doors to a deck outside, and the thing about them is the construction of the band used to raise and lower them: a thick band going into the wall at the top and bottom - if tight, it is fixed by a mechanism at the bottom and the blind stays where it is; if loose, then one takes the full weight of the blind in their hands and raises or lowers it with no limitations.

The point about all this is the attitude behind it. Always the user is in full control. I am *free* to flush the toilet as long as I like, and also free to develop skill

in flushing efficiently. I am *free* to keep the shower running the whole time, but it's arrangement is such that it doesn't make sense to, so I am inclined naturally and without resistance to use the water efficiently. I am *free* to let the blind drop unhindered and break it, but I am not going to because that's stupid, and I am also free to develop skill in moving it efficiently. Efficiency arises from freedom, not so much from control. In America, the attitude of "you, the idiot, will be protected from yourself against your will, and forced to conform to what we have dubbed best," actually leads to non-optimal situations, because the users of the system are not free to come up with better usages - it is not possible to develop any skill in using things, because there is no flexibility.

Now unfortunately we must go to bed, it is 2:30 in the morning, and we are planning on getting up early to drive to Heidelberg tomorrow. Posts about our trip to Marbach and pictures are on the way. Tsch!

2 comments:

Justin said...

Curran, I'm glad that you are appreciating the subtleties of the German Tao. Reading about the windows and the FREEDOM that you have to open it in two directions triggers fond memories of my summer nights in Goettingen. I remember having my heart stolen by Germany and it sounds like you too may be falling for that wunderland.

4dam said...

Toilets, windows... pretty much everything. I remember feeling the SAME EXACT WAY as you are currently describing when I was in some parts of Europe.

I remember thinking "now this is strange... but it really makes sense!" And "Hooray! This was clearly designed with no fear of being sued by the incompetent and maladroit."

It's amazing how different the world would be if we simply put faith in people as thoughtful and skillful users of STUFF!

1.7 Marbach!

FRIDAY, AUGUST 31, 2007

Two days ago we went to Marbach, today to Heidelberg, tomorrow we'll sleep as long as we want, go to a Jazz show and check out a club in Stuttgart. Sunday I'll take a train to Darmstadt, where I'll be for the year, starting my intensive German course on Sept. 3 and academic classes October 15 or so.

Before departing for Marbach, James, his brother Karl, and I had cereal, coffee, and cookies for breakfast. The coffee was very strong. I added a lot of milk to my cereal as I always have, but noticed that they didn't use much at all, just enough to soak the cereal. Karl went to University of Stuttgart, was a journalist for a while, and now teaches German and Political Science at a nearby school. He was a very friendly and likeable guy, and very willing to help me with my German. He seemed to really enjoy teaching. This day Karl was going to Munich for several days, so it's the last time I'd see him.

James and I left the house, I got in the drivers seat and off we went. It is fascinating to see the way that the German land is arranged, and I see this everywhere in Germany - condensed areas with houses and buildings surrounded by huge fields. On the way to Marbach we were at one point on a road surrounded by fields. We pulled over to take pictures and see it. Surrounding us were hills of fields with patches of trees. I thought to myself that I am in Germany, and laughed and laughed because everything is so great and beautiful.

We stopped for gas (diesel actually), and as I took a picture of the foreign gas pump a guy looked at me as though I was insane. Marbach is a very nice little old German town. All of the houses and buildings are made in a beautiful German style, the name of which I can't remember, where many crossing boards are visible against white or light colored material. We visited the house where the great German writer Friedrich Schiller was born. Unfortunately I had never read (because I can't) or heard much about him (he was never mentioned at all in school in America) before going there.

We walked around for a while, went up on the tower of the old city wall gate, and went for lunch to a small cafe across the street from Schiller's Geburtshaus (birth-house). The city once had a huge wall around it, with a mote and everything, because it really was necessary for protection against invaders. Imagine that! This is not some fairy tale, this is real! These people existed right here, on the ground beneath our feet! Perhaps that is why the land is divided so harshly into towns and fields, because to survive back in the day a city had to be enclosed by a wall. TIME! The fact that the stuff we hear about in fairy tales and textbooks happened so so long ago at the place where I was presently was quite wild. A theme of the whole experience here was that feeling one gets when disparate and incomplete knowledge of things comes together, the gaps are filled in, and it is all so much more REAL than previously imagined.

When sitting outside at a table at the cafe, I felt an almost orgasmic feeling of completeness, that everything is as it should be, that I need nothing. Watching people riding by on their bikes, hearing people speaking German while walking down the very narrow cobblestone street which meanders down the hill through an irregular sea of ancient but still excellently functioning beautiful old buildings, seeing the bright red LIVING flowers in front of the topmost windows of the very house where the fabled Schiller was born, ordering lunch and coffee auf Deutch (in German), drinking seltzer water. At this point the growth of my confidence in speaking German was palpable. When the waitress came I had not the feeling of fear and shameful incompetence, but felt genuinely welcomed. The waitress eventually knew I didn't speak or understand very well, but I felt that she really appreciated that I tried, and I really appreciated that.

We went to the nearby Neckar river to see if there were any more boat tours, there were none. The river was very nice though, we saw some people rowing sculling boats (I think that's what they are called..) and the front man was screaming counting with such oomph "EINZ! ZWEI! DREI! FIER! FUNF! ...". We broke the rule stated on the sign and walked out and sat on the dock for the tour boat (which was still out). It was very nice. Waves on the water of a river are the same here as everywhere, so many things are constant between worlds.

To try to catch the sunset we drove to the top of a hill in Stuttgart. It was beautiful to see Stuttgart from above, but mostly the view was blocked by trees. Across the street from where we parked was a building in which there was a group of old women walking around in circles to the most ridiculously

perfectly hilarious music. Someone was playing on a piano more or less a bum-chk bum-chk, some lady was yelling commands on how to exercise next, in German. The combination of the funny music, the high pitched and perfectly articulate whine of the yelling lady, and seeing these old people walking to the beat with an arm raised or some other silly looking exercise position was too much to bear. James and I laughed a lot, imitating them to each other on the street. We eventually found a place to see the sunset, at a field up a private way which we shouldn't have driven up. It was beautiful.

At night we went to a place in Stuttgart that we had looked up online which had a jazz show going on that night. The place was huge, and had Buddha statues in front of it. I was impressed. Unfortunately though the show was a "members only" type party, so we went to see Flamenco at a place that James knew instead. We went to a Spanish restaurant in Stuttgart where every day there are people performing Flamenco at night. The music was amazing, a guy tapdancing, a woman singing and dancing, a guy main singer, and a guitarist. The dancing people would clap in a certain muffled way to accompany the others when they weren't dancing. The music would always ebb and flow. The tapdancer was a times incredibly powerful, very loud and passionate stomping, all of them in unison. The singer was quite something as well, he would also get chances to "solo" so to speak, and his voice would rise and fall in rippling pitch which reminded me a lot of Indian music.

At dinner James and I got to talk about life a bit, about what it was like for him to come to Lowell for a year, and how now after being back in Germany a while America seems like such a distant memory. About what is real and what is not - only what is right now is real, and about how people actually don't need much. Like *The Old Man and the Sea* [2] says, "why be better?" the other says "so you can enjoy life" the old man "but I'm doing that NOW."

1 comment:

Justin said...

Sounds like you're having a wonderful series of escapades! I remember my summer in Germany, and to hear you speak of the sheer wonder and beauty which seems to fill everything abroad really makes me think. Except for missing my loved ones, I really felt complete and at home in a very weird way when I was living abroad. Why is that? Why do I often find myself resenting my way of life here in the US, even though I know it is beautiful too? Why do I feel this compelling urge to go traveling and join you in your discoveries of Germany?

A very interesting thing happened to me the other day. I was helping out with the MIT Academic Expo, advertising for the Cambridge-MIT exchange. Afterwards I ran into my friend Praveen, and I told him that I felt like I was really influencing these freshmen to study abroad. Like I had successfully convinced them that studying abroad is as necessary as breathing air, especially if they were studying certain subjects. Praveen then summarized my own thoughts for me rapidly and said "Whatever it is, it's better in England." I couldn't help but laugh, because my nostalgia for my foreign experience was so rose-tinted, that it really did express a lot of my sentiments.

As we both know, it is better to quiet the inner judge, but I often

ask myself “What is ‘better’ or ‘worse’ about Europe, the UK and the USA?” It looks like there is a little euro-phile in the both of us.

Chapter 2

September

2.1 Heidelberg!

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2007

Yesterday James and I took a trip to Heidelberg. The weather was not so nice, so there was some doubt, but we decided to go anyway. We got up at around 10:30, had coffee and cereal for breakfast, and headed out. This time I used little milk in my cereal, and it felt good. Out we go into the car, which is strangely enough becoming normal to me, along with ordering food and stuff in German, or asking where the toilet is in German. Now those things (driving, speaking) are nothing special. (well, they are still REALLY cool, but are more or less “known”). All of those unknown and alien things are deepening one by one into known things, and this deepening is extremely satisfying.

We passed through Marbach, because that is the way towards the Autobahn to Heidelberg, and stopped at the same gas station we did the day before. The way to Heidelberg on the Autobahn was very nice, lots of wide open spaces where one can see hills of fields and towns. Sometimes there is no speed limit, but there were other cars going slow in front of me. I learned also that it is illegal to pass on the right, and also illegal to be in the leftmost lane if you’re not passing someone.

We arrived in Heidelberg and parked at the Hauptbahnhof, the main train and bus station. As soon as we arrived I could feel the city, and it felt so nice, so warm. I thought that I would love to live there for a while, even though we still hadn’t seen much of it at all. We went to the McDonalds near the train station, and they had a “McCafe” also, which served coffee, espresso drinks, and excellent looking desserts. This McDonalds was just so much nicer than any McDonalds I’ve been to in the US, and people were speaking German all around us.

We took a bus to Altstadt, the old-city part of Heidelberg. Walking around we saw some University of Heidelberg buildings, a huge church, tons and tons of little shops. One was selling shirts which said “I’m no tourist, I live here!” because most of the people one sees in Heidelberg is are tourists. Nevertheless the city is beautiful. We walked to the bridge near the old city, there was a huge cat statue which had human hands as hands and feet, and uncensored male genitals. What?! It was so unconventional and at the same time so permanent.

Wow. I'm impressed. James sat on top of it and I took a picture. When we were on the bridge, the sun came out briefly from the clouds, and we could see the rays in the sky, and warmth beamed from everything.

Heidelberg just completely blew me away, I almost cried looking at it and being there. The vibe was so warm. It is the most beautiful city I have ever seen in my life. I really would like to live there some day. We went to a church intending to go up into it's tower, but there was an organ recital going on inside so we went in and listened for a while. All the organ music I have heard before sucked, but this was rediculously awesome. Wandering harmonies would descend into chaos then reappear, like sun breaking through the clouds. I got completely absorbed into the music. The church itself was huge, and the architecture was especially cool, with many crossing arches of different sizes, and even seemingly nested inside one another. After that we went to a river boat tour, but it didn't go anywhere because not enough people were there. It was still nice though, to see people drinking radiant mugfulls of beer with the water below us, looking down the river and at the hills of Heidelberg. Then we went up the church tower and got a vast view of Heidelberg. So many little buildings, and corn fields right next to them!

On the way back from Heidelberg I drove 210 km/h (130 mph) on the Auto-bahn where there was no speed limit, thats as fast as the car would go. It was great! I love driving fast, and here one is *free* to do it. We went to Stuttgart to the jazz club we looked up earlier. We thought the show started at 11:30, but we misunderstood something, because actualy it ended at 11:30. The waiter said there would be a show the next day, starting at 7:30. We decided to go to that.

After arriving back home in Waiblingen James and I talked for hours about all kinds of things. How incredible life is. About how the thing I can best compare to my experience of going from America to Germany is transitioning from Windows to Linux. Everything is different in the details, but the overall tasks are the same. Humans are human everywhere - people everywhere shit, eat, sleep, travel, work, bear and raise children, educate children, are soothed by warm drinks - so all of these needs have been filled, but since the means to fill these needs has developed more or less independently in Europe and America, many of the details are just different. How the details are filled in reflects the attitude, or culture, or context of the creator. Linux is also like this. Everyone needs a web browser, word processor, file manager, text editor, and by now mostly all of the commonplace desktop applications familiar to Windows users have been re-developed in the open source paradigm. Because windows was developed in the commercial world, there is much bullshit, ones freedom tends to be restricted, and the computer generally treats the user like a complete idiot. Linux on the other hand, since it was developed in the open source world, has relatively no bullshit, and the user has complete freedom to do anything, and is not treated like an idiot, but instead an intelligent human being who is willing to learn new things. When beginning to use Linux every new feature one discovers is magical, and there are seemingly infinite depths of beautiful hidden treasures waiting to be discovered, and all along the way one is given freedom and is respected rather than being protected from their own stupidity against their will. This is how it feels in Germany.

2 comments:

Justin said...

Damn! I should have read this post before I commented on your last post!

You make an excellent analogy comparing the transition from Windows to Linux to the move from the States to Germany. It also affirms what I said previously about the magic of being in Europe.

As an instance of a broader class of control, we see in the States the issue of the drinking age. Here I am days from being of “legal age” and yet when I was abroad I was treated as a full adult! However it is apparent that even adults have more freedoms abroad than they do in the States. So by crossing these individual boundaries my status as a human changes! How is this possible?! There really seems to be a fundamental philosophical difference in opinion of “What is Human?” and “To What extent can a Human govern itself?” As researchers in the field we should explore this question relentlessly.

James said...

Curran,

the way you write is awesome, but not only the way you write, but the way you PERCEIVE things; it is incredible how precisely you look at them, nothing escapes your perception. I enjoyed the times we had very much and hope (actually, I KNOW) there will be much more. Weiter so!!

James

2.2 Arrival in Darmstadt

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2007

Well here I am in Darmstadt! My new home. I am in my hotel room now, it is 4:30 AM and I can't sleep. Yesterday James and I woke up at around 3:30 PM and went to a jazz show in Stuttgart at around 8. The jazz was OK. After that we met up with a good friend of James, she was so *alive*, and the three of us went to a dance club in Stuttgart until about 5:00 AM. I had never been to a dance club before, so this was a completely new experience. It was great fun! So many pretty girls! After dancing for a while I got completely loose and not afraid of people judging me (I had not drunk anything either, as I was driving back). Actually people were not very judgmental there, it was very chill. At one point we went outside and got something to eat from a Turkish Kebap place - I got Döner Teller.

Today James and I said our goodbye, and I took the train from Stuttgart to Darmstadt. The vibe here is not what I expected. Darmstadt is extremely commercial, and has an air of desperation and emptiness because of it. This is only my first impression though, maybe there is great depth and beauty here which I can't see yet, I suppose time will tell. Today happened to be the Darmstädter Weinfest, so there were TONS of people everywhere in downtown Darmstadt. The first thing I saw when I got off the tram (which by the way was very nice - they had a screen with all the upcoming destinations and the current location, and was generally much nicer than for example the T in Boston) was a fashion show, with models walking down a runway in the middle of the square! I

had never seen such an event. There were tons of people watching it, apparently with much interest.

I asked someone at a shop where Hotel Weinmichel is, my home for the night, but she didn't know. An old guy noticed me standing there looking lost with a piece of paper in my hand and he and his apparent wife came up to me and asked me where I am going. The old guy very kindly gave me directions in German, which I could actually understand! (I got familiar with that kind of language from driving) I thanked him and he gave a great big smile. I found the place and checked in just fine. There were people everywhere, a homeless guy asked me for money I think, it was in German so it was hard to understand. There was a McDonalds nearby, and I think he said something like "could you spare me some change so I can get a coffee or something from McDonalds?" I didn't give him anything. That's actually something that always bugs me, should I or should I not give homeless people money? Does it really help them at all? Perhaps in the short term, but in the long term? I don't think so, but it's hard to say.

So I continued walking, past the many many immaculately clean shops which had countless mannequins in the windows. I had never seen so many mannequins! Eventually I came upon the main part of the Weinfest, where the street was completely packed. I was hungry but there seemed to be no place to eat that wasn't packed or very expensive, so I bought a sandwich from Starbucks.

I walked around for a while after eating my sandwich, which wasn't very good at all, and came upon a band that was starting to play in downtown. There was a wine shop set up there just for the festival, so I thought to myself what the hell, I'll have a glass of wine. I have always heard of Riesling but never before had it, so that's what I got. The guy was a bit uptight, and got a little frustrated when I couldn't understand when he said "do you want to buy the glass too? if so then it costs 2 euro, if not then 1.30" No, I don't want to buy the wine glass. Why would I do that? Do people do that? As I was drinking my wine the band started and they were very bad, they were playing annoying whiny-like loud rockish country music. The wine wasn't that good either. I returned my glass to a blank face and went to settle in my hotel room.

My hotel room was just fine. I couldn't sleep so I watched some TV. Most TV here is actually American television but with German overdubs. I found the Simpsons in German particularly funny - the voices sound nothing like the original. I was starving so I feasted on chocolates and water.

2.3 Meeting the First People

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2007

I am overwhelmed by the awesomeness of my situation. Today I met my contact at TU Darmstadt, took the placement test for the German course, got showed around campus, moved into my room, went to downtown Darmstadt and had excellent Döner Kebap with my friend Paul, also from UMass Lowell, had coffee, drank a beer, and hung out with Paul and some girl.

All my doubt about my stay in Darmstadt has been dispelled. Indeed, some parts of the city are very commercial and dead, and some parts are sketchy, but the university is purely awesome, and the people are really great so far, very

welcoming and friendly, and so many pretty girls!

I went to meet my contact at 8:00 AM like I thought we had planned, but she wasn't there. So I waited for a while with a very nice and very animated old German woman who was leading the exchange program with other European countries, called ERASMUS. She took me with her to the meeting place for that program, so I got to meet all the exchange students from Europe. I met two guys from England, one guy from Italy, and an extremely beautiful girl with piercing eyes - the most beautiful girl in the world. At the end of the welcoming a girl led me back to the foreign students office where I finally met my university contact, who had understood we would meet at 9:30, and there we were at 9:00, so no problem.

We went to the cafeteria and had coffee, I got to talk to the girl who was guiding us around, who was my age, and very pretty. She grew up in America and her parents are German, so she has spoken both languages since she was young. We went then went to the placement test, where we saw all the exchange students, a wide eyed bunch, everyone I met was very interesting and nice, from all over - England, Czech Republic, Italy, Finland, Turkey, Spain, Kazakhstan, India, South Africa.

Moving into our rooms was very exciting. Such suspense while waiting to see what our home for the year looks like. We had to wait for the Hausmeister (House-Master more or less), an adult whose job it is to manage the building, fix things, and also deal with administrative matters like moving people in. The dorms (although "dorms" doesn't seem to be the right word) are kind of far from campus, about 5 stops on the tram from downtown where the university is.

The dorms themselves are rather heavenly, with balconies looking out over lush green plants in a courtyard-like area, and vines with leaves on them growing on the opposite building. The rooms are set up with 4 rooms to a "flat" they call it, and each flat has a common area with a kitchen, table, and couch, or whatever (it's different for every one). There are girls in the same flats as guys, in fact I have a girl "flatmate" so to say. There is a large common area, and two rooms which share a bathroom on either side (so 4 rooms and 2 bathrooms per flat).

After taking a short nap (I had slept only 2 hours the previous night), Paul and I took the tram into Darmstadt to check out town. We sought out some Döner - really really good meat. There are Turkish "Pizza und Kebap" places all over Germany, and they are so good. Paul and I both had Döner Kebap, which is that meat inside pita bread with onions, some mysterious vegetable stuff, and creamy garlic sauce. It was so good. After that we went for coffee, which was great too. We both were elated about the fact that we were really in Germany! We got beers afterwards and walked around Darmstadt a bit, just because we could! Imagine that, one who is not yet 21 is allowed to buy beer and drink it in public.

We happened to run into Paul's flatmate, a really cool German girl, and the three of us talked for a long time, Paul and I trying our German and she trying her English. The three of us walked back to the dorms while drinking our beers, through nice streets, industrial streets, on a sidewalk with a wall next to it with winding plants and German Grafitti all over it, it was great, she was so nice to talk to!

2.4 Pub Crawl and Lasagna

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2007

Last night was a pub crawl with all the exchange students. I had never before had such an experience! Into a bar with tons of excited foreign people my age. Everyone was so nice, because we are all in the same boat and knew no one. It is a great group of people. I had an Apfelwein at the first bar, and when we arrived at the second bar the guys around me in a great mood all said “Mai Tai Mai Tai!” and pointed at me when the waitress came over, so I had my first Mai Tai, and felt accepted. It was “Sehr stark!” = “Very strong” in German but it was very good. I don’t drink much usually, after these two I was rather drunk. I got to talk a lot with the nicest and most beautiful girl in the world, about genuinely interesting and meaningful things, which made me so happy, even if we never see each other again, and for which I am infinitely grateful to the universe. The last stop of the pub crawl was a dance club which is very popular for Students in Darmstadt. It was a huge room with colored lights up high, and TONS of drunk students from Darmstadt talking, drinking, and dancing. There is nothing nearly so vibrant as this at UMass Lowell. I am on the moon, and there is always a party.

That’s the thing about a blog, it is in REAL TIME, so the characters in the story can read the story, so unfortunately I shouldn’t reveal the whole story in all it’s gruesome and offending splendor. Now my trip to Germany is getting into the pudding, where I am meeting other people which will also be here for the year, the root system is sprouting anew, I am living life all over again. I still can’t believe it is real. I have been in Germany only 8 days, and it seems like I have lived several lifetimes.

After the pub crawl I and two other very happy Americans walked home back to our Studentenwohnheim (dorms). But first... Döner. At around 2:00 AM there we were more or less stumbling around Darmstadt, and on the horizon an oasis appears. A very small Döner place, a beacon of hope, the only thing open. Several other students were also there. We ordered Döner Teller, and as it’s golden succulent greatness kissed our tongues we quivered with the overwhelming blissful delight which comes when one eats something warm, delicious, and filling when drunk, hungry, tired, and cold. We were obviously drunk foreigners, so (contrary to a pessimists prediction) the other students there were very nice to us, and thought it funny and respectable how we were trying to speak German. They taught us a few new words. We got totally lost on the way home, but we finally found a map and found our way back. I went to bed at 3:30 AM

This morning was our first German class. Us three Americans were planning on getting together and having a great breakfast, but all 3 of us slept through our alarms. I was the only one of us who made it to class! The class was great, the teacher is an excellent almost perfect image of the standard great professor, who loves to teach and is good at it, and also respects the students and is not intimidating. He only speaks in German in class, and the students too (except to clarify meaning of particular words by using the English word), but I feel like I can keep up, because he speaks very clearly and simply.

After class we did all kinds of things - had lunch, bought health insurance, went home, set up internet - and in the evening I got to really meet my flat-mate, a very nice girl from Germany. We cooked lasagna together while talking

excitedly about all kinds of things, in German and in English. She was amused and also very helpful when I tried to speak German, and I was the same with her speaking English (her English is very good, just a few little things and new words here and there). We both corrected each others mistakes and appreciated it. In our flat we have a sink, stove, shelves, couches, a TV, and an oven, so we are able to really cook stuff. She made the sauce right then from raw materials, and she was shocked to hear that my family in America only used pre-made tomato sauce. The lasagna was unbelievably delicious, and we ate it over wine. We finished and went our separate ways for the night - she went to call her boyfriend, and I washed the dishes and called my parents.

3 comments:

Justin said...

Not wanting to reveal all the details, eh? Good for you, but it does intrigue me. I'm glad you are finding yourself well-accepted and are enjoying what its like to be an adult as a student.

Your experience of doing a pub crawl with the other exchange students reminds me of my own year in Cambridge. If I were there, I would treat you to a pint myself!

Live it up! Enjoy life!

Sarah said...

Glad to hear the party rages on in moonland. Your trip to Heidelberg sounds especially inspiring. I loved it there too.

Cheers!

4dam said...

Enthralled as always, I'm glad to hear you're living with someone amiable who won't be afraid or annoyed to correct your German. It's baffling how much the human mind can absorb in such a short time! I have to admit I'm jealous. While life back here is actually going really well, I'm a travel addict. New experiences are intoxicating (sometimes literally haha)! ...still reading.

2.5 Bronchitis

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2007

I have been in bed all day for the past 4 days with bronchitis. For 2 of those days I couldn't do anything at all, not even watch tv, use my computer, walk anywhere, talk for a while with anyone, because I would start sweating and feeling weak any time I wasn't lying down doing absolutely nothing. For 2 entire days I did nothing at all but lie in bed, piss, and make tea. It reminded me a lot of my experiences at the Cambridge Zen Center, where Justin and I would go meet up with a bunch of other people and sit together doing absolutely nothing for 2 hours every Tuesday this past summer before I came to Germany. Everything around gets disturbingly familiar and repetitive - sleep, piss, tea, sleep, sleep, piss, tea, sleep, sleep, piss, tea, tea, piss, sleep, sleep - and

slowly the mind thinks less and less of perceptions and less in general, becoming still and reflective. It was wonderful, never was I unhappy to be sick.

Before getting sick I did a lot of things. I went out with my flatmate and met up with 6 or so Germans at a bar where we ate dinner and drank beer, they spoke German the whole time. It was very intense, I could only understand about 1/4 of what they said. They were very friendly, and each had a very unique personality. They talked to me for a while, but it was always difficult and tiresome for both of us. After a certain point people stopped talking with me altogether, probably because the prospect of clarifying and repeating just about every word they said was so burdensome that they would rather just avoid it and speak German to each other, fluidly and naturally. I am definitely a foreigner here, a stranger in a strange land.

On Saturday I went to Frankfurt with a great big guy from Singapore who is also at TU Darmstadt for the year and bought a bicycle at a stupendously large flea market from a lively old man for 25 Euros. We went with a group of exchange students from another school in Darmstadt. I talked a bit with a bunch of different people in the group, mostly they were nice but not *too* nice. We went to a restaurant in Frankfurt and ate, people complained about things and the vibe was generally bad. I started sweating and feeling sick in the restaurant, alone among the crowd. After this day I was sick in bed.

1 comment:

Justin said...

This is very unfortunate Curran! However, one of the things you'll experience as a man of the world is other bugs - bugs that your immune system has never before seen or encountered. The fortunate aspect of this experience is that quickly you will develop the antibodies to fend off these diseases and you will be impervious! You will have the immune system of a French Foreign Legion, you will be able to pass national and geographic borders and your immune system will stealthily kill those microbes of the night!

On another note, I am sorry to hear about the bad vibe in Frankfurt. I'm also sad to hear that your German is proving to inhibit deep social interaction. I think you'll find that this will oscillate, as YOU ARE A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND and thus are both fascinating and frustrating. Furthermore, I'm confident that your German will grow in leaps and bounds and in a month or so, there will be nothing to inhibit your interaction with new German friends but your own shyness.

Also know that you are utterly free to explore and meet a broad cross-section of people. You may find relationships transient, but that is the way for the hitchhiker of life. As someone who has already crossed the huge potential barrier of coming from the States to live in Germany for a year, you are without roots and thus able and willing to grab a backpack and just go! Be brave Valentine Michael Smith!

2.6 I met a girl

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2007

The most beautiful girl in the world. Whenever we run into each other in social situations, we end up talking to each other the whole time. Each time we get to know each other more. I can begin to intuit what she is thinking and feeling, the pauses are no longer fear filled and uneasy but are comfortable because I have come to know she is digesting everything. More and more there is no feeling of desperation against silence, in its place an appreciation of her presence is growing. Her eyes are penetratingly fixed on whoever she is talking to, and she takes her time to speak only meaningfully. I get high on meeting her gaze.

In other news I am getting to see the human condition up close. Violence, happiness, drugs, love, frustration, hatred, sex, addiction, loneliness, depression - all exist among my acquaintances and friends here in Germany. I think people are the same everywhere on earth, have the same needs, desires, and psychological space with all the same loops and traps. We are all HUMAN!

2.7 A day at the Woog

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2007

Today the other Americans and I went to Großer Woog, a lake in Darmstadt not far from where we live. We spent the whole day there and it was beautiful, the sun was shining and people were bathing topless. The water was too cold to swim, so we talked and took pictures. They were fascinated by my macro lens. I am feeling that I am really getting to know the Americans and they are getting to know me, they are great people and all very unique.

At the end of the day we all had dinner together at the flat of a guy from England, and a guy from France came too. They are both also awesome characters - Dave with his hardly understandable British English and lovably awkward mannerisms, and the French guy with his suave French walk and sly head movements. The dinner was great in that the discussion had so much energy and covered so many topics. We talked about religion, physics, chemistry, microscopy, drugs, relationships, France, history, told stories, drank beer. It was a great time, I am so happy to be among these people!

2.8 Freedom!

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2007

It is 5:00 AM and I can't sleep because I'm so excited about life. I realized that I have no obligation to anything, I must only stay healthy and be kind to other people. *I feel completely liberated.*

1 comment:
simpletonic said...

i wish i felt that free right now.

why are humans always looking for ways to fill up their time instead of letting things just happen? Why do I have all of these troublesome and stressful obligations, curran?

but what a happy post! I'm quite jealous

2.9 The Beauty of the Blog

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2007

My good friend Justin posted in his blog about the experience of having a blog, and his words echo my thoughts exactly. Having this blog and starting to use Flickr have made me realize how incredible the internet is and is becoming. The individual is so empowered, and the emergence of internet memes is a robust phenomenon which brings *anyone* who is interesting to the top of the world. From Justin's post:

So this music video has infected my brain.

Sometimes I really hate being the victim of internet memes, but then again our internet has enabled small jewels of high quality to become easily identified and popularized. It makes me wonder how this has impacted business and the ability for the "little guy" just to speak out.

The advent and use of the internet has also enabled things like this blog to actually come to life. I had thought several years ago that it would be nice for there to just be an open online forum for discussion for my family and friends to post on and read each other's thoughts. This could offer glimpses into each of our own personal worlds and thus we can get to know each other in ways that normally wouldn't have been possible. Normal interaction has its pluses: Visual eye contact, body language, tone, mood, etc. Whole worlds of emotions are hidden in the text-based communication of the online world, and often this leads to misunderstanding, i.e. flamewars. However, that degree of impersonality and chance to actually just write for whoever wants to read, in many ways allows your loved ones to observe you externally.

I'd like to dub this the "Relationship-Schrödinger's-Cat-in-a-box" paradox. When we interact with people in a face-to-face manner, we learn to exaggerate certain aspects of our selves and suppress others. We cultivate separate images of ourselves for separate friends and groups of friends. Pretty much everyone does this. When guys are out to a pub with just the guys we can almost become more crude than we'd like to think of ourselves normally. Machismo and all those little bits of our person-hood come rushing to the surface. In new social situations, some of us dry up waiting for someone else to crack the ice, or some of us become the group jester, to help break the awkward silence. The bottom line is that we have these constants, these eigenstates of personality that certain people always observe us in.

The fascination that I have with my blogging experience is that there is this rare opportunity for different people to tune in and look inside this box of personality you've created. Weird things happen. Your parents can see in a superposition of personalities which are both known and unknown. Certain friends can observe you

talking about things which you may have never normally discussed them. In some ways this may create stress, stress to keep your personal eigenstates separate for separate people, but I welcome the superposition. May it be insightful for everyone!

–Justin

2.10 The Root of Evil

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2007

We had a crazy drunken night last night, it was the drunkest I have been since coming to Germany! I experienced jealousy, sadness, and worry. Everything is my teacher, and nothing is permanent, so everything is OK, and all is forgiven.

4 comments:

Justin said...

Ahh... “The Root of Evil” indeed. But seriously it sounds like you had a crazy fun night.

I remember once when I was in Germany and I went on a pub crawl with my two friends Albert and Kelken. We got totally sloshed. On the way back home from our last stop, we were wavering away across streets like random walk (funnily enough the problem of a random walker is often called “The Drunk Man’s Walk”). My friend Albert was actually walking backwards until he ran blindly into a parked bike, and he the bike went somersaulting to the ground!

The whole next day basically consisted of me being very cautious and moving very slowly. It was as if I had lived so much life the previous night that I was being forced to live life slowly by being hungover.

This brings me to the title of your post. Is alcohol really “The Root of Evil?” I don’t think either of us think that. We would normally point the finger at excess. However this reminds me of a quote I read recently (I’m not sure where from) that says something to the effect that “Occasional binging is better than routine excess.” I think it is interesting that daily routine and practice of moderation and peace of mind, can almost earn you points for a total crazy week of partying or what have you. Upon further inspection of Wikipedia’s entry on “Excess”, I leave you with the following quotes: “Moderation is a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess.” –Oscar Wilde

“The road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom.” –William Blake

curran said...

Ah! You’ve misunderstood, it’s not the act of drinking alcohol which is the root of evil, but the jealousy and selfishness which I felt so strongly.

Haha I really enjoyed your quotes, and I agree whole heartedly that “Occasional binging is better than routine excess.”

Justin said...

Interesting...Is jealousy and sadness really the root of evil? I suppose that evil is a pretty multidimensional thing, that's why we have the 7 deadly sins.

Now that I think about it, evil probably isn't well-defined, but suffering is. Then we would have the Buddhist response connecting attachment with suffering. If we were to "westernize" this, we'd get that "the root of evil" is attachment.

I guess I overlooked the more pressing emotions of jealousy and sadness in your post. It seems so uncharacteristic of you! Those are two emotions I don't normally associate with sober-Curran, and I haven't spent much time with drunk-Curran!

curran said...

Yes, right, the root of suffering is attachment, and jealousy stems from attachment, and sadness and anger stem from jealousy, and evil comes out of the whole thing.

Also, experiencing all of this was not the result of be being drunk, it was the situation, and I just happened to be quite drunk.

2.11 Sitting in the Park

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2007

I am now sitting in a huge park in Darmstadt. The sun is shining, people are laying on the grass, riding bikes, walking, reading, with church bells ringing in the distance and the faint noise of water splashing in the fountain on the other side of the grass. I just came from the language course, during the second half of which I was experiencing a constant almost unbearable sensation of joy and excitement and love in my gut, and I don't understand why. Yesterday a group of exchange students went to a place in the woods where they have set up obstacle courses in the trees, and almost the whole time I was experiencing an extreme feeling of despair and aloneness. The day before that we went to a huge car show in Frankfurt, the IAA, and I got to talk a lot and more deeply than before with the most beautiful girl in the world, nothing else mattered then - I was just so incredibly happy the entire time.

In the past few days I have been constantly doing things and interacting with people, and I have felt the most extreme emotions both extremely pleasant and extremely unpleasant. Yesterday while walking with some friends on a trail through the woods leading back to our flat building I was milling intensely over the events of the past few days trying to resolve the involuntarily heart-wrenching uncertainty I have over the thoughts and feelings of the most beautiful girl in the world, and suddenly I realized how truly insane I was at that moment, and thought again of the fact that everything is my teacher, and tears came to my eyes at the greatness of this teaching, this opportunity to learn about and deal with my own psychology and thus the psychology of all people.

So again I am infinitely grateful to the universe, now overwhelmingly so and at every corner. Am I going insane or am I making progress? Is the glass half

empty or half full? It is both, and it doesn't matter anyway, one must just drink it!

2.12 The Days are Just Packed

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2007

I wish to tell of the people I have met and the sights we have seen. Every day I have been meeting new people and doing things with them. Life is great.

Here we go - to Frankfurt with a guy from Singapore and other exchange students. I sat next to one of his friends on the train who is also from Singapore, we talked about where we come from, what Singapore is like, sitting on the train on a beautiful sunny day with Germany whizzing past us as we relate, both bright eyed at everything. In Frankfurt, a very pretty girl from Spain after climbing on a statue told me she would have never done that in Spain, that she feels more free and on top of the world because she is a stranger in a strange land with like minded people. I think most of us foreigners feel like that here, I definitely do.

Tea with a guy from China, he very kindly had me try green tea and black tea that he brought from China, such hospitality! Outside on a balcony 3 floors up or so as the sun is setting we sat on the edge and talked about China and our situations, the prospects of traveling to Asia, and the culture. He told me almost no one drinks coffee in China, that mostly people drink tea. The tea was excellent.

The flatmates of one of the American exchange students - a German guy and a Polish girl - hosted a barbecue one night so they could get to know their new visitor. I, an American girl, and a guy from England came. We sat out on the balcony of our flat building, in the dark, with many candles on the table, eating grilled meat, bratwurst, corn on the cob, drinking excellent fruit juice. It was a collision of worlds. In the beginning the hosts didn't speak, and when they did they spoke German with each other, but as the night developed we all became more comfortable and all spoke together, in a mix of English and German. Often when I spoke with them, I would learn a new German word and get really excited about it, repeating it several times with a tone of amazement. The Polish girl found this hilarious and cracked up laughing every time I did it, which made for a great time for all! They are very warm and welcoming people.

On Saturday a big group of people went hiking to a place called Felsenmeer, which means "Sea of Rocks." The hike was quite long and tiring, up the sea of boulders and then through the forest all the way back to the train station - a 3 or 4 hour ordeal. The most interesting part was the people. I met a guy from Mexico who was just traveling, not studying or working anywhere. He liked heavy metal, and said he often hiked in Mexico and it's one of his favorite things to do. When I asked about what it's like in Mexico he told me that the culture is almost exactly the same as in the US. Also on this hike I met a couple from China, the way they spoke was so soft and warm. I learned that it is very difficult for one to come from China to the US to work.

Yesterday I went with the 2 American girls and the 2 guys from England to the huge park in Darmstadt. We laid there on the grass with our shirts off for hours, sweating as it was a hot sunny day, and discussing possible travel plans for our 2 weeks off - perhaps to Barcelona and Paris for a few days each. One

of the British guys made the point that if we want to see any city, we could go there in a weekend, and a better thing to do when we have a week of nice weather is to spend a week on a Greek island lying on the beach, which we might do. We ran into a German friend of one of the girls, and we tried tight-rope walking with them in the park.

There was a tiny bug crawling on my leg, and I tried to flick it off, but it got caught in my leg hair. I tried more but to no avail, it had already died, broken into many tiny black specks, and fell to the ground to join the dirt. I had no intention of killing it, but because of me it's life ended then. I witnessed a living thing turn into dirt. For me this was a profound reminder that life is temporary. Then I looked at the Europe travel book that we had, which had all the big cities in Europe labeled, and felt overwhelmed - that there is just too much of life to live! It's impossible to do it all.

I am getting to know the other Americans and two guys from England quite well, and I feel like they are getting to know me too. It is really great to be called "mate" by the guys from England.

Today I went to do my laundry, and A girl who I had met briefly yesterday happened to be there getting her laundry. We spoke for a while and talked about what we are each doing. She speaks no English, so it was a great test of my German. She suggested that we could meet in the future and I could teach her English and she could teach me German. That sounded great to me! Isn't it amazing how the littlest decisions, like doing my laundry at that exact moment and that exact place, change the course of ones life?

We have been eating dinner at different people's flats just about every night, and every time the group of people is slightly different. Tonight a guy from France and a guy from Wales joined us, it was a jolly time indeed! Tomorrow I am cooking, I'm expecting about 9 people. I need to learn quickly how to cook!

1 comment:

Justin said...

My jealousy knows no bound. Greece! How I want to sun myself on your Aegean shores!

But seriously dude, everyone I've run into that has studied abroad in Germany (or I guess in general) are dying to go back and enjoy the lovely mix of recreation, travel and education that dominates European and British university life. It really makes me want to go back so that I can visit all those places that I haven't been to.

You know the phrase "Make hay while the sun shines"? Well the same goes for traveling, so do it while its cheap!

P.S. It warms my heart that you are starting to form semi-stable bonds with people!

P.P.S. Were you making a reference to the Calvin and Hobbes book "The Days are just Packed"? [6]

2.13 Planning A Crazy Trip

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2007

So, we went ahead and started putting together our trip for next week: 2 nights in Munich at Oktoberfest, 1 night in Athens, and 3 nights on the Island of Serifos in Greece. We bought our plane tickets two days ago, booked a hostel near Munich yesterday, booked a hostel in Athens today. Our train to Munich leaves tomorrow at 4:25 AM. Holy shit!

I just booked our hotel room on Serifos, calling using Skype from my room in Darmstadt. At the first place I called - cheap, by the sea, perfect - the woman who answered the phone spoke no English. I said "I'd like to book a room" and she said, after a long pause, "No English." Oh man! What are we in for? At the second place I called, the woman who answered could barely speak English, but she understood enough for me to reserve a room for 4 people for 3 nights starting Tuesday night. "I'd like to reserve a room" "yes please" she said ... "I'd like to make a reservation for Tuesday" "Tuesday, how many people?" "four people" "how many nights?" "three nights" "what's your name?" "Curran, c u r r a n, last name.." "OK, ok mister, tuesday" ... "so we have a reservation?" "yes please" "OK, we'll be there on Tuesday" "yes please, thank you mister" "OK, bye" "bye" Phew! This could be quite an adventure.

In other news, a few days ago I hosted dinner for 9 people, and it went great! It was quite an effort to pull off, but the good vibe and good food that resulted was well worth it. Today was the last day of the German course, we had our final test. It was a great course. I came to Darmstadt with 1 contact in my cell phone, now there are 30.

1 comment:
Justin said...

Certainly sounds like a crazy trip! Have n pints for me, where n is a very very large number. Whilst your partying your butt off, I'm going to be experiencing one of those weeks straight out of an MIT horror novel. Once you arrive in Athens, spill a drink or two or whatever your substance of choice is to toast Socrates and our forefathers of Athenian wisdom and enlightenment. Thank Plato and his philosophic revelation. Most importantly, marvel at just how ancient of a place you'll be in! When your hand touches marble your hand will travel through millennia of love and conflict, thought and action, and it will touch the hand of some Athenian who once reached out for the future.

Go Boldly Intrepid Traveler!

2.14 Oktoberfest!

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2007

Today was the first day of our hairbrained adventure - we went to Oktoberfest in Munich, what a day it was!

We arose at 3:40 AM, and our train was off to Munich at 4:52 AM. The previous night we all got about 1 hour of sleep, because we were packing and booking the last of our things (return train tickets, ferries, and hostels), and the girls were out partying. Our group for the trip consists of me, a guy from England - Dave, and two American girls - Megan and Caitlin. We got the cheapest possible train ticket - a 5-person ticket from Darmstadt to Munich

for 35 Euro. The downside of this is that the trains are poor quality and the journey is 6 hours long, with many transfers between trains. The train which left Darmstadt was extremely loud, there were horrible screeching noises every time the train stopped, so it was impossible to sleep. Later trains had loud drunken people on them, so it was also impossible to sleep on those. On the last few trains in the direction of Munich, there were more and more people dressed in Bavarian garb, and more people in general. The train that actually arrived in Munich was completely packed with people. Every possible place to sit or stand was filled. We barely made it onto there, we ended up standing in the space near the doors of the train.

We finally arrived in Munich at about 12:40, so our journey in total was about 9 hours long (one of the trains was delayed). We met up with our kindly hosts - a friend of one of the girls from Illinois who was studying abroad in Munich and some friends of his - and we walked to his room in Munich where we would stay for the weekend. His room was quite small, there was just enough floor and bed space for 5 people to sleep. It was pretty far by subway from the train station, I was a bit awed at how huge Munich is.

Oktoberfest was a huge fair with drunk people dressed in lederhosen and dirndls. It was a hot day, so many people everywhere. It was impossible to get into a tent, and that was pretty much the only place that sold beer. We waited and asked nicely for almost an hour, to no avail. It was impossible to buy beer at Oktoberfest! How ridiculous! We bought huge pretzels, and eventually found the one place that sold beer and all had one. Since it was the only stand in sight that sold beer, there was a massive crowd of people surrounding it, all holding golden half liters of beer. It was an excellent beer - a Paulaner Weißbier.

After dinner at an Italian restaurant, we went to a dance club. Munich has an incredible selection of clubs, and all of them were packed. As we were dancing, I felt the most horrible pain in my gut, then had the shits for a long while. I guess chugging a beer after eating only half a pretzel all day was not the best idea. We left and got the last subway ride back to the other side of Munich where we were staying. The bathroom in the subway station was unbelievably disgusting, every white object festooned with various depositions from the drunken masses of Oktoberfest. As we were waiting for the train, all of us exhausted, there were people everywhere, all drunk, some in lederhosen singing drinking songs with all their heart. The last subway was totally packed, some people couldn't get on. We made it home in one piece, and slept well.

2.15 Munich!

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2007

Today we saw Munich. We went to bed at about 3:00 AM last night, and woke up today at about 2:00 PM. The girls got the bed, and the 3 guys slept on the floor, which left about 6 square feet of floor space in the tiny student room.

We went to the city center and saw all the beautiful buildings. We had coffee and cakes. As we were sitting on the curb with people walking every which way there was a guy playing perfect music on his accordion. It made us all so happy. We continued to walk, and saw the lion statues. One of the lions looked like it was crying, but also had the look on his face that he will carry on regardless, no matter how cruel the world is.

We wandered further, to the Hofgarten, a beautiful open space with green grass and orange flowers, people lying on the grass, a violinist playing with his band in the gazebo strange middle-eastern sounding music. Further to the English Garden, where there are often naked people walking around freely. We saw a naked guy from afar, the girls found it very funny. On our way to the top of the hill in the English Garden to see the sunset, we came upon a group of people, mostly African I think, who were playing drums and other instruments. There were also people juggling, dancing, and many just watching. It was such a vibrant place.

From the top of the hill we saw the sunset, along with many other people. One guy had brought a chair with him and just sat in one place until the sun went down, drinking a beer. There was also a couple dressed in lederhosen and a dirndl, kissing as the sun was setting. After sunset we went to the Augustiner brewery, which had really incredible food and beer. Excellent, excellent, so good, sehr lecker!

Chapter 3

October

3.1 Athens!

MONDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2007

Athens is nuts. This is a completely different world. It is Greece! Everyone speaks Greek, all the signs are in Greek, and I get the impression that most people do not speak English, or speak very little. At least in German, words are spelled with the same characters as English, but I have completely no idea how to decipher Greek symbols. How does one pronounce Χαλάνδρι? This is one of the tram stops in Athens, it is pronounced Halandri. Chi = X = ch/h, lambda = λ = l, nu = ν = n, delta = δ = d, rho = ρ = r. It is so odd to see these symbols I've only seen in mathematics used as letters in actual words that people here use in every sentence.

We managed the Munich public transportation system just fine, had a nice breakfast of Bavarian Weisswurst, pretzel and beer, and coffee and succulent Swiss chocolates, and flew to Athens with no hangups. Within the first 30 minutes we were flying over the Austrian Alps, a stunningly beautiful sea of snow covered mountains rolling all the way back to the beyond. The whole situation was totally surreal - here we actually are, flying over Austria, on our way to Athens, Greece, that place that we have hitherto only heard about in text books and travel brochures.

The Athens Airport is pretty far from the city. We managed to figure out the right train to get on, and were able to see a bit of the barren area surrounding Athens from the train. In Athens there are a lot of crazy looking people on the streets. The first thing we did after taking the subway to a stop near our hostel was go to a McDonalds, we were starving. As we walked out of the subway we saw two palm trees in the middle of an extremely busy city square. The McDonalds was very spacious. When we were finished, a lady who worked there took our trash for us. How interesting. We asked her how to get to our hostel but she couldn't speak English.

Out on the street there were little shops which sell porn and comic books and candy bars and cigarettes and drinks and shirts and postcards and various other things with only a square foot hole through which one could buy things from the crusty old vendor. We passed a street shop which sold nuts and meat and a huge variety of various things. One of the guys working there was so

amused that I had a camera, and invited me to take his picture, so I did.

On a street corner was sitting a lone very young girl with a dirty old doll and the dirtiest bare feet I have ever seen. It was so sad. Elsewhere we passed a homeless woman who was chanting a prayer in Greek and holding a cup, with a young child sitting between her legs on the cold sidewalk.

Finally we found our hostel. It was on a very sketchy street, with homeless people, probable drug dealers, prostitutes, and a strip club. The hostel itself though was extremely nice. Beautiful wooden steps and decorations on the walls. We were greeted by a very animated and kind guy from London. In the words of Dave "Curran, how did you manage to book such a nice hostel with free internet and a proper geezer at the desk!?"

I went to take a shower, and when I placed the towel on the towel rack it broke and fell to the floor with a piercing clang. I took it to the guy at the desk - "Oh yes, no problem, we've got to get that fixed then. I guess for now you'll have to manage without a towel rack." Indeed my good sir! After my shower I went out on the balcony overlooking the busy street with my shirt off. It was about 5. I felt like that was appropriate, because on the streets of Athens I saw several people walking or riding a moped with no shirt on, and much crazier things than that. Sitting there looking down on the street I could see a homeless guy with the most enormous black beard and scraggly hair I have ever seen wearing a classy top hat hassling people in cars for money as they stopped at the traffic light. Every time he got turned down he would do the Catholic Trinity hand motions and waddle on unperturbed to the next car.

We walked up the hill where the Acropolis is and saw the sunset. We passed many old ruins of ancient buildings and street vendors selling little trinkets and whatnot, racing the sun. The sunset from the top of the hill was very beautiful, we could see Athens stretch on and on and on for miles. Athens is huge, has only small buildings, and has some barren dry hills around it. As the sun was setting we talked about Plato and Aristotle, and all the ancient Greeks who changed the course of history who probably stood in the very place which we were at that moment. Wow.

We met some girls on the hill from Tennessee who were studying abroad in Belgium. How nice!

Walking back from the hill after sunset we passed a streets which were packed with little shops and restaurants and people and were extremely well lit. It was so alive! We had dinner at a real Greek restaurant, and the food was excellent. The waiter was extremely cordial and jovial, exaggerating all of his motions when he poured our wine so we could taste it. He had such liveliness. As we were leaving we met the people sitting next to us, a stewardess from Canada and friends.

Walking back to our hostel we passed the empty meat market which reeked of fish from the day's work, saw a huge tractor parked in the street, were passed by a guy riding a moped towing a roofed cart on which a dog was standing, towering above the traffic, legs tense for fear of losing balance and plunging to its certain death in the heaving streets of Athens. At a red light a pizza delivery man on a moped decided not to wait for the light to turn green, and went right through it and up onto the sidewalk, taking a shortcut through the throngs.

After having some excellent ice cream we made it to the hostel, and went to bed fairly early in preparation for our early departure the next morning.

3.2 Aegina!

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2007

We are on the Greek island of Aegina (Αίγινα). What a beautiful place! Every time I look back at the Aegean sea I am awed by it's vibrant hues of blue and green. The water is so clear! I am on another planet.

This morning we woke up at 5:00 AM, payed our hostel bill at 5:45, navigated the Athens subway to the port Piraeus (Πειραιάς), where our ferry would leave from. The train station at Piraeus was totally packed with people when we arrived there at 6:20 AM. There is so much there! tons of little travel agencies who sell ferry tickets, little shops, a few cafes. We had plenty of time before the ferry left at 8:00, so we went to a place which served breakfast right outside the train station where all the people and traffic were. Walking in we see scattered people, some drinking coffee, some smoking, some drinking beer, and some eating. Everyone in there looked ragged and weather worn. Two old guys were drinking a beer, one of them had patches of different colored skin on his face, and just looked so beat, but also so durable. The only food they served for breakfast was toast with a cake, jam, butter, coffee, and freshly squeezed orange juice (we could see the guy making the juice out of whole oranges at the counter). The milk for the coffee was yellower than most milk, and smelled so good and fresh. It was quite a good breakfast.

After eating, at about 7:10, we headed to our ferry. We had to walk quite a distance, past all the other gates, as the sun was coming out the water was illuminating blue, with ferries and small boats everywhere, and the barren hills of Athens in the distance. We finally found our ferry line, and the booth was closed, so we showed some guy at a nearby booth our ticket and asked where the boat to Serifos was. He kindly pointed out that the ticket was for tomorrow morning, and no ferries are running to that island this morning. Oh no! That is so stupid of me! I can't believe I booked the ferry for the wrong day! I was very apologetic, and nobody got upset about it. This is such a great group of people to travel with.

After considering our options and heckling with some ferry companies and travel agencies, we asked for the cheapest ferry ticket to any island, and we went to Aegina. The ferry left every hour, unlike the ones to Serifos which only run once or twice a day. The ferry turned out to be a long, small, strange looking yellow boat. The ride was great, although it smelled of puke. We could go outside onto a tiny balcony and feel the wind and the sea. When we got there, we were all awed at the clarity and blue green hues of the water.

Soon after arriving on the island we found a nearby cheap hotel. The island is quite large, a popular tourist destination, and is pretty densely populated, little funky buildings everywhere. After checking in we went to the nearest beach, which had the most beautiful clear water and a view of nearby islands and boats passing by. The girls went out and stood on some rocks. Megan took her top off and swung it around. Freedom! On the way back and got a small spike from a sea urchin stuck in her finger. When I tried getting it out, an old lady came over and started speaking in French to me. When she realized I couldn't understand she motioned that I was not doing it the right way. She drew on a piece of paper a match and a needle, saying in French that we need a needle to get the thing out, and we should sanitize it with a flame. She got a kick out of it when I understood. We talked a bit more, or rather we

communicated with hand motions. I gathered she told me there are 25 cats at her hotel, after she drew a cat on a piece of paper, saying a l’hotel, a l’hotel!

Dave and I rented a moped (despite the many warnings of certain injury from the dirty Greek guy adorned with huge aviators and an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt renting it to us) and went speeding all over the island. It was shaky in the beginning. Such beautiful views! Oh the views! Small roads, strange plants, small white houses, very few beaches, rocky hills. At one point we went down one of the tiny non-paved roads with lots of rocks. I almost crashed the moped into a large rock. At that point we left the moped and continued higher up the barren hill on foot. We arrived at the edge and found a tremendous view of far off islands. Only rocks and hills around us, and one lone building at the very tip top of the hill.

After we got back to the beach, we ran into the same two girls from Tennessee that we met in Athens. What are the odds! Later we went out to dinner and spent more money than we should have on really good Greek wine. Excellent calamari.

3.3 Serifos

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2007

Serifos is magical.

We arose very early and left our hotel on Aegina to get the 6:40 AM ferry to Athens, then took our 8:00 ferry from Athens to the island of Serifos, a 2 hour ride in a high-speed ferry. I love that feeling of being on the way to an unknown place. The ferry ride was beautiful, we passed many islands, some near, some far, sometimes completely open sea.

As we approached Serifos I recognized the town of Chora, which I had seen pictures of on the internet, but other than that there were very few buildings, one could only see barren hills with narrow unpaved roads leading to nowhere. After getting off the ferry we realize we are on another planet, you can feel the place in the air. The water around Serifos is incredibly clear. One of the first things I saw was Σεριφός written on the side of the concrete pier (Serifos in Greek), eroded by the sands of time, with crystal clear water lapping at it gently.

We rented a car for 2 days for only €15. The lady who rented it to us spoke so gently. It was a standard, and I was the only one who knew how to drive a standard, so I drove the whole time. Near the port (which is just a single dock), there is a small village along the rounded bay where there are restaraunts, shops, and hotel-like places.

We drove around the bay searching for the place I had called (where no-one spoke English) called Delphini Rooms. We drove all the way around the bay and didn’t see it, so we just kept going, up a hill on the other side where there was a nice hotel overlooking the bay. The road became narrow, and had some points where the car was at a very steep angle. At the top of the hill was a parking lot, where we saw an old Greek guy walking to his car. We asked him where Delphini rooms was. He couldn’t speak English, but he eventually recognized the word Delphini. He pointed and tried explaining with a mixture of hand gestures, body movements, and Greek, then drove away. From the top of this little hill there was a view of the bay, and looking down to the sea we saw a bit

of coast where the sand and rocks transitioned into deep water and seaweed in such a way that accentuated the water's blue-green hues.

We drove back down the hill, and passed the same guy we had just saw - now he was watering plants with a hose. He recognized us and pointed wildly, we waved back. Eventually we found Delphini rooms and checked in. The people spoke almost no English, but enough for us to get a room. The place felt so peaceful and quiet. Near the front desk there was a view looking up the hill to Chora. As we were leaving for our drive a sweet old lady gesticulated that we should walk up to Chora, and there is a great view in mid-afternoon. We couldn't talk about much, because she spoke only Greek.

Off to explore the island in our rented car. Oh man, what wild things await? After a few wrong turns, we found the one tiny road that leads away from the bay and goes around the island clockwise. The density of buildings very quickly diminished, all that was left was rocky hills with no vegetation. Occasionally we would pass some goats.

After rounding a few corners we came upon a beautiful beach. There were no other cars on the narrow unpaved road, and no civilization in sight. Only rocks, barren hills, some ancient decaying abandoned buildings, and stone walls everywhere. To get to this beach we had to drive off the main road and down a hill on this very narrow unpaved road. There were no signs at all. The rocks and indentations in the road got progressively bigger, and at some point it wasn't safe to drive any more, the rocks would probably have damaged the car, so we just left the car and walked to the beach.

Walking towards the beach on the sand through the strange plants I felt a little uneasy, because there really was no one in sight. Near the beach there were a bunch of buildings that were not completed, and had Graffiti on them. Not a soul in sight. The beach itself was pebbly, not sandy. The first thing we did was put down a blanket, take off our shirts, and put down all of our stuff. Instantly after we did that, an unbelievably powerful gust of wind scattered all of our possessions along the barren beach. The wind blew so hard that it kicked up pebbles into the air, and they hurt when they hit our skin.

Nevertheless it was a great time! We secured our things with huge rocks and went swimming in the deep blue green Aegean Sea, feeling the pebbly bottom and Greek seaweed on our feet. At one point we took off our bathing suits and enjoyed the not too cold water in nakedness! Then we slept in the sun and the wind for hours, absorbing.

Onward, out from the rocky road onto the main road, looping around the corner to reveal another small bay with a beach. We stopped to take in the view of the other side of the bay and observed the strange spiky vegetation on the side of the road. More roads with nothing around them. One hill had on top of it a temple - a blocky white building with a round blue roof. Further, still empty roads, until an old guy on a motor scooter passed us. We passed a bunch of goats, standing there in their spots doing nothing, and an old woman in robes riding a donkey. Oh man, we are really on another planet.

Eventually we came to Chora. The whole thing is one huge structure - white washed houses piled on top of one another on a hilltop surrounded by barrenness. We parked and walked into a maze of stairs and passageways. It felt like we had gone back in time. Walking through walkways which had walls that looked so organic, never perfect angles, sometimes chipped paint. It felt like this town was not manufactured, but rather it had grown incrementally over the ages. I

bet in Chora, everyone knows everyone else. We were walking past places where people actually lived. An old Greek guy passed us and said something in Greek to us. Sometimes we could see people's laundry drying on lines outside. It was a nice warm sunny day. Up up up, to the top where the temple is. We were all sweating. At the temple there was an incredible view down to Livaldi and the Aegean Sea. The sky was hazy, and we could see another island faintly in the distance.

We drove down the hill to Livaldi and had dinner at a restaurant on the seaside. There were dirty emaciated cats everywhere. We drove around and found a nice beach at twilight. We went there the next morning to see the sunrise and relax all day, then took our ferry back to Athens and stayed at the same hostel as before. The next day we saw the Acropolis. That was a roaring mess of upset tourists and tour guides of all ages, but incredible to see because of its age and place in history. We dawdled at the shops and just barely made it through the smelly loud bustling throngs of the Athens subway - I got stopped going into the subway because I had a sandwich! - in time for our flight back to Munich, but we made it back to Darmstadt in one piece.

1 comment:

Justin said...

Once again my jealousy knows no bounds. Live the good life for me Curran!

3.4 Getting to Know people

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2007

Since we came back from Greece, I had no time to write about anything, every moment I was doing something. I went to several parties, a pub crawl, hosted a party for my 21st birthday, got to see a bit of the computer science world at TU Darmstadt, and went on two weekend excursions with all the exchange students.

We got back from Greece around 11:30 last Friday night, and left Darmstadt the next morning at 9:00 AM for a weekend excursion to Wiesbaden and the Rhine River valley. About 120 exchange students went on this trip. Many of them had arrived in Germany when we were in Greece, so there were a lot of new faces. We walked around in Wiesbaden for a while and saw the city. Wiesbaden feels nice, pretty peaceful. The vibe is similar to Washington DC. It is the capital of Hessen (the region of Germany), so has a lot of government buildings.

We then went to the town of Rudesheim on the Rhine River. It was typical of small German towns, with half-timbered buildings packed densely together. We had Federweißer, which is something between grape juice and wine which is continually fermenting. It is only available in a few weeks in September and October. All of us walked through the vineyards overlooking the Rhine and I talked with various people.

Meeting all of these people over the past week has been really incredible. All of them are so open, because they just arrived, alone in a foreign land. About 50 from Spain, what a crowd. They always speak Spanish to each other, are very relaxed, and know how to dance. There are a few people from Mexico, they

usually end up hanging out with the Spanish crowd. About 40 from France, they also cluster together and speak French. About 15 from Turkey, 10 from Poland, 6 from Finland, very few from Norway, Sweden, England, Wales, Australia, China, Hungary, Singapore, Czech Republic, Italy, Greece, Korea, Brazil, Japan, Indonesia, Uganda, and South Africa.

10/10 was my birthday. About 25 people came for the party. We drank a lot, it was a great time. The group of people was incredible. I can't believe the quantity of really great people that I have become friends with in the past month.

We had a meeting for all exchange students who are studying computer science on Friday. There were 8 of us there. We walked in to a room with a few people, and at every seat there was a wine glass with a bottle of seltzer water, and plates with chocolates and cookies. A woman talked to us about various things, and later on some German students went over some possible courses and told us which professors are good. There were three Spanish guys there, and at one point when a German girl was presenting serious matters all three of them started giggling, trying so hard to contain their laughter. They were laughing because they had absolutely no idea what she was saying. I realized this and started laughing too. The situation was quite comical!

All in all the computer science people seem pretty cool. There is a computer science building where all the computer people hang out. There was a room with couches and desks and posters all over the wall with geek jokes on them. It seems like it might be a really cool community. I look forward to starting my courses here.

Today I got back from a weekend trip with 80 of the exchange students. We went to a nowhere town and walked into the woods on a dirt road up a big hill to a youth hostel surrounded by forest. We played silly games all day and had a hell of a dance party all night.

1 comment:
Justin said...

Good to hear your birthday went well.

Sounds like you're really blossoming.

3.5 The Semester Begins

MONDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2007

Today the semester began at TUD and I started my research job. I went to one lecture - Introduction to Software Engineering. This course is taught in German, but the slides are in English. The lecture hall (der Hörsaal - another new German word!) was packed with about 200 people, people were even sitting halfway down the stairs on the side, where I parked myself as well. It was very intense listening to an entire lecture in German, stressing so much to decipher every sentence. I could understand enough to know where he was in the slides. "Hard-coded" in German is "fest codiert!"

While the professor was lecturing I was whisked away into a series of thoughts about software engineering as a unifying framework for understanding everything in the universe. Many things are like software projects. Everything shares

the property of coming into being, existing, then fading away and disappearing. Correctness and robustness are needs common to all engineering projects, biological systems, and religions. Software projects always serve some purpose, but does everything that exists serve a purpose?

Since my new boss at the Zentrum für Graphische Datenverarbeitung (ZGDV, Computer Graphics Center) in Darmstadt hadn't responded to any of my emails, so I decided to just go to there and locate his corporeal self. I inquired as to his location at the front desk, and the lady located him in the cafeteria. As I waddled awkwardly towards him and his colleagues through the chairs and other professionals, I received curious and uneasy glances. I introduced myself, and was greeted whole heartedly.

The head of the lab is a very cool guy, really chill. We had coffee together and discussed his research and his teaching and my background. He told me about a course he is teaching called Ambient Mobility, which is related to ambient intelligence, which means that objects in your environment are intelligent (the buzzwords elude me as well). After coffee he took me to the lab and introduced me to everyone.

The project I will be working on has to do with computer vision, reconstructing 3D objects from images in real time, and perhaps eventually integrating the construction into augmented and virtual reality systems. I will be working with a Ph.D. student from Korea, a German guy, and perhaps others. The people seem great so far, and the environment is very relaxed. I have no idea how we will go about the project, it is a challenging problem, and I don't know anything about computer vision. I really look forward to learning about all of this stuff - the computer vision algorithms, image processing, C++, kinematics, graphics... Ahh what a wonderful world!

After work I ran into a wonderfully vibrant and flamboyant girl from Indonesia, and she came over for tea. I had met her at one of the parties, and it turns out she lives nearby. We talked with my new flatmate who moved in yesterday, a calm and silent Croatian guy who grew up in Germany. Two Spanish guys came over to help me with the TUD web interface for courses. One of them is still looking for a place to stay, as the university's housing is totally full. Later, the 3 other Americans came over for a pasta dinner. After dinner I went to a bar on the other side of town for the birthday party of a girl from Hungary who I met on the Wiesbaden trip. Mostly French people came, so we all sang happy birthday in French, then German, then English. After that, everyone (about 50 or so exchange students) went to a party at a club. We danced and danced, and went home sweaty and tired. What a day!

1 comment:

Justin said...

Curran!

Good to hear that classes are well underway and that the Deutschlanders are treating you well. I hope classes aren't too crazy being in another language. I can't even imagine learning group theory in German. On the plus side, programming is a universal language, and as long as the computer understands it, everything is okay.

Taking the research job sounds like an incredible opportunity. It also sounds like a good way to keep the class-time commitment low, while you're acquiring the language. You are very brave!

God Speed Intrepid Traveler!

3.6 Buddha

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2007

I couldn't sleep so I began reading Buddha [5], a graphic novel by Osamu Tezuka which my brother sent to me from home as a birthday gift. In the first few pages was depicted the following:

An old man is walking alone in the cold wind, starving and fatigued, and cannot walk any longer. He falls to the ground. A bear, a wolf, and a rabbit see the man and go in search of food for him. The bear finds fish, the wolf finds berries, and the rabbit after searching and searching finds nothing. They return to the old man. The bear and wolf scowl at the ashamed rabbit. The bear and wolf growl with indignation at the rabbit, invoking fear. The old man makes a fire. The rabbit thinks "I would be good to eat" and jumps into the fire. As the rabbit sizzles in the flames and dies the old man, wolf, and bear are shocked and horrified. The old man takes the rabbit out of the fire, the wolf and bear look on in disbelief. The old man sees the rabbit is dead and cries. The old man holds the rabbit up to the sky, the wolf and bear sit in mourning.

This made me cry when I read it.

In the next few pages the story pops out into the situation where the master is telling this story to his students. I immediately stopped reading because I have the feeling that this story deserves much thought. It feels like it contains something universal, but I can't pin down what exactly.

I kept reading a bit, and after the master told this story to his students, he told them that it was told to him by his master, and that his master was the old man in the story. After this event happened to the master's master (before he was a master), "HE WANDERED DOWN THE MOUNTAIN IN A DAZE AND TOOK TO BED FOR 10 FULL DAYS. DURING THAT TIME HE ACHIEVED ENLIGHTENMENT. HE GRASPED THE GREAT CHAIN OF EVENTS THAT IS OUR WORLD."

3 comments:

Justin said...

There is a lot in that story. I would like to extract one string of personal meaning.

Too often I feel like the crazy achievement-centered world of MIT, creates this sense that we all need to scramble around for success and if we don't produce, then the only route left is self-sacrifice, by giving up ones interests and instead throwing ourselves into the market-driven capitalist world and grind of the 40 hour week.

This is very sad and when the bear is bringing in fish, and the wolf is bringing in berries, then bringing in nothing creates such an intense artificial world of guilt that the only thing left for the rabbit to do is suicide. What if no body found any food? The man manipulated the animals without him knowing. I'm glad he meditated on it and found enlightenment, but what about the rabbit?

Sean said...

(For some reason the fact that I was listening to OK Computer while reading your post seems to underscore something, but I can't say what)

That story DOES have piles and piles of meaning in it. I think the main point is that compassion is the ultimate goal in life, and the rabbit knew that and it realized that it couldn't give anything less than its life, so it gave its life. Like Justin dissertates, it could be interpreted as an unconsciously selfish manipulation on the part of the old dude, or a working out of the natural order of things - the way.

Anyway, the fact that it can deliver such meaning and emotional impact is a good case for the power of comics as an art medium. FORWARD!

Justin said...

I agree with Sean. Well said!

3.7 What to do with my life

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2007 What is my fate?

I met a German girl at a bar, and she told me a bit about what she's doing with her life. She is studying civil engineering at a university. She left school and worked as an assistant to someone in an engineering firm for a year and a half, then decided that it really was important to finish her degree, because otherwise companies just wouldn't hire her - she could never get a job higher than an assistant. She already knows which company she wants to work for - a German company which specializes in glass exteriors of buildings. She told me that the job training in the company lasts two years, and you spend time at different sites of the company learning about all aspects of the company. Then work work work for years and years.

At a beer festival in a small town (in celebration of the founding of the town church) outside of Darmstadt, I met the father of one of the German students who works with the exchange students. He is a chemical engineer, and has worked at Merck (the huge drug and chemical corporation) in Darmstadt for 30 years or so. Maybe that's the way to go, just really dig in some place and move up over the years.

One day in the German course we were asked to walk around Darmstadt and ask people that they thought about a certain strange building in Darmstadt - Waldspirale, created by Hundertwasser. I was walking with some girls from the class, and we came upon a guy painting the door of a church and asked him what he thought of the building. He was a jolly fellow, dressed in painting clothes. He had a young guy with him helping him, perhaps aspiring to become a painter himself. I saw this painter on the tram a few times after this encounter, always in overalls and covered in paint. I wonder what that life would be like. Painting things, always looking for new painting jobs.

When we were in Greece, walking up to the Acropolis in Athens to see the sunset, passing all kinds of little shops and vendors, I stopped and bought a bracelet for the most beautiful girl in the world. The lady who sold it to me

was wearing some kind of robe and had big thick glasses and horribly dirty and crooked teeth. She was very amicable. She spoke good English, German, and Greek. She told me that she is from Freiburg, Germany, and has traveled many many places in the world. She gave me the advice to travel as much as possible, that it is one of the best things to do - to learn about people and the world. I saw the same lady in the same spot 4 days later on our way back from the Acropolis. Every day setting up her little table of trinkets and selling them to the passing tourists. She seemed happy. Why would she choose that life? Maybe she didn't, who knows.

On the island of Serifos, what do all those people do? As we were driving we passed a lone old woman in black robes riding a donkey down the road.

In Darmstadt I have encountered a pair of Mormons, two guys my age always dressed in suits trying to deliver their holy word. I have seen them many times, in different parts of Darmstadt. I talked to them a bit and found out they are both from the US. "I'd really like to share our message with you, it has been an incredibly positive influence in my life." What is their life like? Spreading the word in the city and spending all their time involved with Church activities?

I have many friends whose main concern is to succeed in academics, who often live a miserable lifestyle of study study study in hope of a bright and successful future. Is this what I should be doing? On the other hand I know many people who are in school because their parents say it's the thing to do, but don't care about school or anything except sports and drink drink drink in pursuit of a good time, slowly wasting away.

I know a Buddhist nun whose lifestyle and future prospects are quite interesting and different. She spends much of her time teaching young children from Korea about Buddhism, practices psychology independently, and is pursuing her Ph. D. in transpersonal psychology at a university in California. Presently she is traveling the world conducting interviews with various Buddhist masters, hopefully including the Dalai Lama she told me. Is this what I should be doing?

There is also the life of a musician, pouring out your soul, risking poverty, always practicing and hopefully improving every day, finding people to play with and enjoy life with, and finding places to play. For many the happiness one seeks in life is there when playing music, and can be communicated to the audience. Is this what I should be doing?

What is the goal of my life? What am I living for? It is simply the pursuit of happiness? Is it to "change the world?" What does that really mean? What about the world needs to be changed? Is the goal to live a life of quiet desperation, working in a corporation for years and years because it's the thing to do? It is to procreate? Is that what really matters? To find a woman I love and pour my whole being into raising a family? Is it to help other people? To feed the hungry? To write the worlds coolest computer program? To explore the mysteries of biology? To teach people what I have learned? but why? to what end? To alleviate suffering?

Everything is temporary, it comes and goes. It seems many people live their lives with the purpose of finding or creating something to hold on to with all their might, something on which they can rest their burdens of uncertainty and insecurity. For many it is belief in Christianity - a perfect never changing God, or a long-term job (in France, it is illegal to fire someone!), or a family. It seems like all of these things are all still drops in the pond. One always will die and disappear, then what? (Is there some reason to believe that I have an eternal

soul?) One will become a memory to others, others will spread pieces of you infinitely into the future. Is this what I should focus on in my life? To make the biggest, best splash and be remembered by people? but why? to what end?

Right now I am in Germany, grokking the world more every day, talking with people, laughing with people, learning German, integrating into their world, being alive rather than dead. Maybe that's all there is, what we have right now, and it's not even worth analyzing all possible paths, or being consumed by contemplation of the past and the future. Maybe I should live with no path, no plan, just react dynamically to what is happening around me, be completely free. Just for the sake of being free? Is this how one achieves happiness?

I am seriously considering doing a Buddhist studies program in Kyoto, Japan next fall semester, run by Antioch. In this program, we live in a series of four Buddhist temples in Japan, and every day meditate, drink tea, learn about Buddhism from Japanese masters, and learn Japanese. There are some trips around Japan, and at the end of the program we have 3 weeks of independent traveling time. Alternatively, I go back to UMass Lowell to work towards finishing my degree. A third option is to stay in Darmstadt for a few more years and dig in, building a global network of friends and work contacts, a solid body of work in the field of computer vision and graphics, and getting a Bachelors degree from both UMass and TU Darmstadt, or maybe just TU Darmstadt.

Here we have the chance to utilize the magic of the internet, the blog. I am at a tipping point, and your comments will influence the course of the rest of my life, and yours, and perhaps others.

What should I do?

1 comment:

simpletonic said...

curran, I like reading your observations and thoughts. I've been pondering the same question lately... What am I to do?

what is the right path?

you are a smart person to be asking these questions. it's good to know that not everyone has decided to work work work study study study or drink drink drink.

i'll talk to you sometime!

-Amy G

3.8 Learning Japanese

MONDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2007

Last week I met a guy from Japan. He speaks German very well, but not so much English. I told him I was interested in learning Japanese, so we decided to meet sometime and teach each other our native languages. Today we met for the first time.

This guy has so much energy! We resonate very well. He can piece together sentences, and he appreciates it so much when I correct him. It was hilarious when we were sitting in the cafeteria next to some German guys and I was correcting his English as he was trying to say "I appreciate it when you correct my English." He has that real amazement and joy when he learns new words.

He taught me a lot of Japanese words, and seemed to really enjoy it. Often when I would say something correctly he would burst out laughing and so would I. Especially when I would pick something up and say “what’s this?” in Japanese “Nani kore?”. We had the following conversations in Japanese: “what’s this?” “this is a fork” “yes.” and “where is the bathroom?” (“Toire wa doko desuka?”) “How should I know!” (“nnakoto shiruka!”) oh man we were laughing so hard. It was great!

I think it really is doable to learn Japanese.

Chapter 4

November

4.1 A Thought Provoking Day

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2007

It is 4:30 AM after an interesting day. I can't sleep because I am having interesting thoughts.

A few days ago I met a German girl at a party and asked if she would be interested in being my tandem partner (this is what it's called when two people hang out and teach each other their native tongues). She agreed, and today we got together for the first time. We went to a nice coffee shop and spoke German for an hour. I felt comfortable speaking German with her, and felt like she really listened. She talked very clearly and let me know where her head was at, so I tried to really listen to her too. Sitting outside in the cold in front of the little coffee shop at a round table with our warm steaming mugs people were walking by and riding bicycles on the cobblestone street.

Back to work. Coding is much fun, sitting in the spacious white office with my two colleagues - a soft spoken but incredibly intensely working Ph. D. student from Korea and a German guy who is always very busy but also approachable and friendly. After hours of working on something and finally success comes! This happens to all three of us periodically, and when it does we share our gleeful victory with each other, and we really can share it because we all know that feeling! Then with shared joy we give each other high fives and go back to our desks and work for hours in silence, occasionally gazing out the large window at the plants and houses and the children sometimes playing and the time passing.

A left work at 7:30 and went to the flat of a friend of mine from Finland for dinner. There were 7 of us drinking Apfelschorle (carbonated apple juice, a favorite in Germany) and wine and eating, sitting on couches around a table in the comfortable well lit flat with lights hanging from the ceiling which were surrounded by various shapes of partly opaque paper whose texture was slightly imperfect - making one feel at home. A German girl was there too, a rare and welcome occurrence. She told us about her year abroad in Sweden, and we could all sort of relate to her experience when we talked about the life of exchange students - how people from the same country tend to group together, and all the exchange students speak English because it is the common language of the

world.

After dinner we went to a bar where there were many exchange students (there was “Foreign night” or something every Thursday at this bar). I talked for a while with a guy there from Wales about the nature of friendships and the social phenomena that surround exchange students. There are a bunch of normal students who always hang around the exchange students, and he expounded to me his take on them: there are some who just have no social skills and are sort of “hangers on” who don’t really have much to contribute, and there are others who have done a year abroad already in some other country and come to relate to people who are having a similar experience to theirs, and maybe help them out somehow. We talked also about etiquette, what is acceptable and what is sort of strange - like when someone shows interest in you when there is no “reason” to. Maybe this is the impression that German people get of us - we talked about this common experience - when a German person shows general disinterest in us, like they are already all set with their group of friends and don’t really want to meet anyone new. For example my flatmate - who is a perfectly nice guy - always stays in his room when I have parties or people over for dinner.

I met up with some fellow computer science students later on at that bar - from France, Poland, and Germany - and we went together to an Irish pub for a big karaoke party. I decided to go because a girl from Italy who I get along with well and hadn’t seen for a while - Gabriela - told me she’d be there and I wanted to see her. It was very loud, and many of the exchange students were there, and also many American soldiers from the army base in Darmstadt. As I was taking a shit I could hear the strangely familiar sounds of crass drunk American dudes “I did my four years in the Army, I did my four years in the Marines...” “Don’t reenlist man, get out while you can” “they’re starting shit... I’m gonna break his fucking head!”

Exchange students took over the karaoke night. When one of us sang, then a whole bunch of us would go up and sing with them and dance around. It was nice to see all these people, but it was too loud to have any conversation. I had to walk home alone through Darmstadt at 3:00 AM, that’s a first. It reminded me of my days coming back from Boston to Lowell on the last train, and walking through Lowell at 1:00 AM, when it is so quiet that all you can hear is your own footsteps, and you look down every dark alley ready to start running as you pass it, walking with an extra manly stride to ward off the evil doers who occasionally walk past you in the other direction.

Speaking of friends and etiquette made me crystallize in my own mind how my actions fit into that whole schema. I realized that they don’t, that to me all that stuff doesn’t really matter, that all I care about in my relationships with other people is that we have the ability to really relate to one another and grok the present head space of each other, and find solace in mutual understanding. It is so satisfying to listen to someone and be able to relate to them, and to talk and feel them listening and know that they can relate to you too. I think this is something everyone seeks in life.

But what is really going on here when we are “relating” to someone? We are probing their mental space, learning to read their current state of mind, and learning over time the dynamics of their state of mind through their mental space - how they respond to things, the mental and psychological paths they tend to traverse, where the attractors are where many paths tend to end up -

pervasive conclusions. All the while the same is happening in the other person too. It is a dance through thought space, two minds wobbling around together, woo into the dimension of this that and the other, can you follow me here? no? bummer, we'll go somewhere else, (a graceful fall?) yes, let's go there, yeah go further, I'll lead you somewhere you never thought to look before, amazing? yeah, right on, ok I'll follow you there, WOW! I never looked for that under there before! thanks! that makes sense! satisfaction. great, I can feel that you feel my joy, lets go down this path from our newfound peak and explore the mountains. It is so satisfying to engage in this dance.

But what is this mental space made of? It is independent of language, because I danced this dance in German with that girl today over coffee. It would be really quite something if we could reproduce this kind of space in a computer, but how? If we could, then it would be the centerpiece for translation between natural languages: "Wie war deine Vorlesung?" -> (parse the sentence) -> [some structure which contains in it the essence of the meaning but doesn't rely on words of any language] -> (traverse the structure with English grammar and words) -> "How was your lecture?"

I thought a bit more about how one might go about implementing this, and realized that one could indeed construct something like a semantic web of what words mean - I mean a word network including types of relationships between words, broken down into the finest detail (so I guess it would be a "n-dimensional graph" where n is the number of predicates (types of relationships)). For example the word "Man" might be defined as "A mature male human", which could be translated into this data structure as < "Man", means, [<"human", hasProperties, ["singular", "male", "mature"]>]> or something like this. Then, each of the words "human", "singular", "male", and "mature" would be also expanded in the same way, and so on until all words are defined in this "deep" structure, which can be traversed. I think this may somewhat resemble the structure of static human knowledge.

Now how can we tell stories using this structure? What about dynamic mental activity? Time relationships, and sequential relationships must also be stored. I get the feeling that it can indeed be done, but it requires that chunks of the static structure be able to be "instanced" in dynamic thought space (like RAM), and sewn together with arbitrary predicates arbitrarily many times, AND (heres the kicker which enables pushing and popping) one of these strung together objects can itself be placed on one end of a triple, enabling arbitrarily deep nesting of any kind (using any combination of predicates). One last touch and I think we've got a model for mental space - that the predicates be not fixed values which are outside the system, but actual words which are inside the system and can also be linked with other entities with predicates. This language is like the scaffold for infinite dimensional thought space.

But the thing is, that will never really do it, because when I hear the word "man", in my head are indeed all the relationships and whatnot that are described above, but there is also an image of a man in my head - the thought of a man - which by itself is independent of words. The same is true for stories, I have them in my head without words. In people words are a pointer to a recollection of the thing itself (the accumulated experience), and we don't necessarily store words, we store a memory of the thing itself, but in a computer it seems words can only be defined in terms of other words. How is a memory of the thing itself stored in our brains?

Ahh! Now it is 7:30 AM. I just had to get it out. I'm going to bed.

6 comments:

Sean said...

Two notes: Your writing style seems rather influenced by Tom Wolfe (Of the Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test), and I have thoughts along this line at least 12 times a week. We are crazy people.

HOWEVER, something independent of language can never have the richness of human linguistic communicatory experience (That was SO FUN to type!) because the sounds of the words themselves can create a new texture and layer of meaning beyond the real meaning. Thus, onomatopoeia would be totally eliminated in such a system.

(Also, Look at the lyrics of any song from the album "Close to the Edge" by Yes, and if you actually analyze the words it makes NO SENSE yet the sounds of the words almost always create more meaning than the words. Try encodin' THAT into a theoretikal system for the truth of language using pure *structure*.)

Justin said...

OK. There have already been a few comments made about how thought-space doesn't seem to just be made up of words and the pointers to and from these words. Be that as it may, IT would be a fun programming project and a good start to recreating thought-space in a computer.

Along these lines, I've realized more and more how much thinking occurs in a visual context. As one of my great mathematician friends from Cambridge once told me, there is no such thing as a "conceptual thinker" or a "visual thinker", we employ both approaches in solving problems and on a daily basis. However, I think it would be fun to create a visual inference engine, where a computer can reason geometrically by either deducing facts from a diagram or by translating a problem from a "word domain" into a picture and then use the picture to solve the problem. This is what most of us do in the sciences: a visual representation of something often holds the secret to understanding its inner essence.

Ahh!!! Curran there is so much important work and coding to be done. It makes me wonder whether my current pursuits in mathematics is just a waste of time and that I should pull a Douglas Hofstadter and retool as an AI researcher and computer scientist.

On another note, your post reminds me strongly of the wonderful life of being abroad. Your description of drinking hot cocoa in a European cafe right on some cobblestone street is an immediate reminder of the wonderful life I had last year. Of course I ask myself "Can't I experience the same magical experience here in Boston?"

Perhaps.

However MIT has successfully robbed this freedom of experience and contemplation. A freedom to just sit in a cafe and drink and think and love and laugh and share the experience however long I'd like.

Granted the phrase “MIT has...” is a faulty anthropomorphization of the institute. My labors are self-induced.

But one of things I’ve realized is that my constant occupation and run-run-run pace of life is not entirely self-created. The attitude towards vacation and work in the United States is still founded on a puritan work ethic, a fundamental belief that “idle hands do the devil’s work.” Our consumerist, capitalist society of excess has created a new world order built on wage slavery and this type of slavery knows neither religious nor ethnic bounds, we are all being denied the rights of life.

Each encounter that I have with Matt is a reminder of this fact of American culture. According to Matt, the 40 hour work week as we know it is fabrication of companies and business around the turn of the 19th century. In the 1920s or so, there was apparently an intense advertising campaign to encourage people to buy things they didn’t need just so they would work longer hours and subscribe to the 40 hour work week.

More and more I’m contemplating moving abroad again and taking life as it is in Europe. Imagine what it would be like to abandon all of our life’s previous plans and go wait tables in Greece! Or sail and be a fisherman! Or a freelance photographer-writer! To lead a simple life that is real in the harshest sense in a different country just because this is life and we must live it now for tomorrow we might be dead!

Sarah said...

1. Amen, Justin.
2. grok: This refers to a unit of pre-linguistic information that I recognize, though its verbal manifestation is unfamiliar.
3. I think when we say that we “relate” to people, as you say, we are really talking about *empathy*, which is a beautiful place to be.
4. It strikes me that, at the center of your externalities (interactions with others, explorations of foreign environments) and internalities (reflections on the iteration of thought in the world of programming, your sleepless nights which end in koans) - you *yourself* are growing into every sense of the description “male” “singular” and “mature.”

curran said...

HAAHAAAHA! Sarah that’s so perfect. That particular meaning of the subject in relation to the writer never occurred to me!

Thank you.

4dam said...

Curran, as I respond to this entry, it’s worth noting that I haven’t even finished reading it. There are just so many things that are thought/response-provoking that I’m afraid my fickle head will forget them all by the time I finish the entry.

So far you've talked a lot about psychology and sociology from the perspective of an alien... a legal alien (though not an Englishman in New York).

First off, I think it's great that you've found a tandem partner to help you learn German. Learning can be such a fun and easy process when we have someone who can hold our hand. Imagine how much we wouldn't have learned if our parents hadn't shown interest in our intellectual development!

You've said before that the world is your teacher. I think it's profound that we, as humans, learn the most from other people around us. In fact, the vast majority of what we learn is learned through other people isn't it!? People, I think, have the greatest capacity to teach. Granted, a rock or a tree can teach you a few things, but each only of themselves, and more subtly, their environment. But a person can teach you of rocks and trees, and infinitely many other things... but then, rocks and trees don't lie. What a complicated world.

"...We talked also about etiquette, what is acceptable and what is sort of strange - like when someone shows interest in you when there is no 'reason' to..."

I find this phenomenon interesting and frustrating. I think it highlights the balancing acts we have to perform with the people we call friends, best friends, and acquaintances. This was very apparent to me at the beginning of this semester, when freshman were abound meeting new people left and right. I would enter a conversation and find that the person I was talking to was taking more interest in me than I felt I could support regularly in my already saturated life.

I have so many friends and acquaintances, and what we get out of our relationships with each other are SO different and probably tell us more about ourselves than they do anything else. What we expect of our friends and what they expect of us are also often very different things. Some of my friends are more fervent about spending time together, while others are overjoyed to see me once a month or less and yet we remain "close".

Your metaphor of the mental dance we make with people when we engage in conversation is beautiful. Your attempt to model is also very interesting, but consider this, and Buddhists might disagree. Everything we learn is filtered through the respective gamuts of our 5 senses, and stored in the (potentially lossy) file-format of our brain. Wouldn't it then make sense to model conversation with this in mind (oops - pun)? The so called ".mind" format would be very complicated to implement because of it's dimensionality. Each idea is apparently grouped/traversed with SO many others to form bigger ideas, and those are grouped/traversed to form bigger ones and so on. Oye, I need to pick up a book on this stuff.

4dam said...

On second thought, I don't think what I said steps outside what Buddhists would consider learning.

4.2 Where am I going?

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2007

Life has suddenly clarified itself into a self-contained grokkable. All that we ever do is get things, create things, build things up into truly beautiful and remarkable things, and lose those things or pass them on to others. One's life is a time line of various things coming and going, evolving and decaying. Why are you doing what you are doing? To get [an education, a degree, money]? To create something of your own? To provide something for someone else to get? To get something for someone else? To get love? to get respect? To get an experience? To build up your self? To get happiness? The startling thing for me is, that's it! That's all there is to it! That ethereal "answer" that I was seeking is simply not there! HAAAA!

Turning over in my head, where am I going? What do I want? What do I want to achieve? Where am I happiest? What am I happiest doing? I spent my childhood in upstate New York, now that world is gone and dead completely. I went to high school in Holden Massachusetts, that world has also mostly faded away. I was a college student for 2 years in Lowell Massachusetts, there is nothing for me there except a nice community at the Eggroll Cafe, a decent place to work, a nice dirty river to walk along, and my bachelors degree. In Boston there is the most incredible community of people I've ever seen. The sunlit green grass of the esplanade, the electric halls of MIT, the absolute insanity of TeP, the wondrous contemplations of the world at NECSI, the wisdom and warmth of the Cambridge Zen Center. Yeah, that's where I want to end up. After my prime years in which I insanely gallivant around and do things, I want to settle in Boston. I want to raise my kids in the area, show them all the beautiful things that I have seen, give them all the opportunities I can, and teach them all I have learned. When I am old and have no juice left in me, I'll sit around and watch all the young people walking fast like I once did. When my wife dies, I'll become a fixture on some street corner, and the college kids will come hang out and talk about science and philosophy with me, and I will pour my soul into enlightening the youth. Then when I can't walk I'll live in a nursing home and get excited when the sweet nurses come and give me my medicine. Then I'll die.

A few days ago I was hanging out with a German guy and some other friends for his birthday party. He had a really sexy installation of Gentoo Linux, which from what I've heard is a real pain in the ass to set up. He had really nice speakers, and he had mounted them above the head of his bed. He also had a remote control to control the music playing out of his Linux box (now I'm really impressed). He had nice curtains in his window too. My first reaction when I saw the Linux box was awe that he had really done it, then jealousy, because my Linux box doesn't look nearly that cool! Then the sense that he is somehow trying too hard, and that it was a bit strange how everything in his room was perfectly arranged, he must have spent a lot of time and effort to get it that way.

Today I set up my laptop with the latest Ubuntu Linux, and it looks pretty

damn sexy! It feels good to really like my computer, the way it looks and behaves. I felt that this is the way everything should be if I can make it that way - *nice* - something I can be proud of. I wanted to listen to some music to go to sleep. As I brought my laptop over to my bed and put on some Bach I thought to myself, I could also go for some really nice huge speakers installed on the wall over my bed. I guess a man's home really is his castle, I've never felt this way before. I've never wanted a castle, but now it's starting to make sense to.

The traditional respectable man tries to build up everything so that he has something to be proud of at the end. This goes for his room, his work, his family, and his life as a whole. I think the German guy's nice room and sweet computer setup stem from a leaning in this direction in how he views life and himself.

All of this is beginning to make practical sense - it can give me some grounds on which to base my decisions in life, and a clear means to achieve happiness. But I deeply question it, because it implies a great building up of the ego, which inevitably leads to suffering for me and the people around me. It also is based on possessions, the notion of which is only in our head and accepted by our culture, but has no intrinsic truth - things are just things, in real reality there is no distinction between mine and yours, it is just superimposed on reality by our minds. So, I feel like I could indeed adopt the stance of a traditional respectable man and head down that path, trying to build up my things for the self-satisfaction of it, and focus on the sort of happiness which comes when I am proud of myself.

Alternatively, I could give up all self indulgence, proudness, and judgemental tendencies instead of fuelling them with every action. I could just live moment by moment, dynamically reacting to every situation as it comes, with no plans, agendas, goals, or preferences. I could just look at things in a positive way and be happy all the time, and share this happiness as intimately as possible with everyone I come into contact with.

Which way to go?

2 comments:

Justin said...

Curran,

Bravo. Very nice post. It brings me happiness to read your words and know that these are the most intimate thoughts of Curran.

"Why am I doing what I'm doing?" I ask myself this question more and more often and the bottom answer seems to be pleasure. What frustrates me is that there seems to be more and more of a barrier to getting to do what gives me pleasure. As much as I have had cause to doubt myself and my prospects as a professional mathematician, there is something that remains constant - my love of understanding. It is exactly as you and I used to discuss walking from the Zen Center to the T on every Tuesday - We get high off of a feeling of comprehension, knowledge, understanding. Imagine that! Something so insubstantial as thoughts, something you can't even point to, identify physically or temporally, really does serve as my primary source of enjoyment. But then again, what is a rock

but the experience of a rock, which has the same ontological status as thoughts.

Perhaps it is just my crazy perception of the world's elite mathematicians here at MIT staring down at me and my desire to do mathematics, but I can't help but feel like I'm being discouraged from entering a Ph. D. in mathematics. But whatever.. I feel like at the end of the day I still love mathematics a lot and I feel almost like there is no other end than my understanding and my desire to get high.

I agree with completely your statement that the ethereal "answer" to our life's motivation and purpose is not there. So what? We do whatever we can do to maximize happiness, but in today's world this is often not the case. Although I do not value it, society has valued for me money over happiness. Life has become the pursuit of money rather than happiness and because I'm forever bound to this system for my own survival, I must have some money too.

But I don't want money, I just want to sit around and learn mathematics and philosophy and continue to live life and travel and figure out the mysteries of the universe. Who doesn't? But in order to exist and do these things I need money. Where does this money come from? Someone else. How do I convince people to give me money? By being competitively better than other people who want to do the same. So what if I'm not competitively better? I don't get money and either I don't exist or I find something else to do.

But isn't this sad? This appears to be almost direct evidence of the external world - I cannot just do what I want, however harmless or wonderful it may seem.

So the question is no longer "Why are you doing what you do?" But more that "How can you do what you do given the operating limitations of society?" Granted I would love for mankind to collectively question its purpose, and maybe we can all figure out a better way to do what we want.

It has then struck me as profound that I shouldn't shun people for "selling out" by going to work to get nice-paying jobs. All of these people have just realized that given the system of competition that exists in MIT and academia that they can no longer do what they are interested in - they have been robbed of the chance to synthesize their interests, their play, with their work. Now they must go sell themselves at the Auction Block for at least 40 hours a week FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES, just so they can do what else they might want in the remainder of their life's time.

What do we do when we've had the the innocent purer wants of life kicked out of us? It is not likely any of us will be astronauts, or doctors, or scientists, but some of us take so much longer and get so much closer to our dreams before they are dissolved by the acid baths of reality. When such a vacuum of purpose is created we are disoriented and we are easily influenced by the new artificial wants of society - a new car, TV, house, speakers, etc.

Hopefully, most of us can find happiness in the “normal” life, because for the majority that is all there is. But I suppose if we had never been attached to the idea of our dreams in the first place there would be no disappointment.

The beauty of Buddhism is that it can alleviate suffering via this philosophy of non-attachment. But isn't this just a nicer version of Stoicism? We accept that our condition is the human condition and we may laugh at it all, but we are still stuck flipping burgers for minimum wage until we are incontinent and on Medicare. Where is the activism for humanity? How do we resolve “Do what you want” with the harsh facts of reality?

Jacob Fenwick said...

You always have such insightful things to say.

After considering this question for many years I've concluded that the only thing to do is to do what you want. Ironically, this sometimes involves doing something you don't want to do for a while, like holding down a job that you hate because it pays the bills. However, as long as it gets you where you want to go in the end, that's all that matters.

However, the path of just taking everything in as it comes to you and accepting it is a path that seems hard to come back from. That particular path is the antithesis of exercising will. The will is a powerful force which can cause direct change in the environment when exercised properly.

For many years I was confused about what my desires were. I had a vague idea that I wanted acceptance in some sort of social context that I had been robbed of for most of my life, while keeping the superior entities in my life happy. Unfortunately, the vagueness of my goal made direction of will impossible, leading to depression. Eventually I was able to find exactly what I was looking for, and now that I've found it, I am much happier. But, I've suddenly realized that there are all these other things I should have been interested in a long time ago, mostly in academics, but now it's very late in the game and I'm having trouble delving those depths.

Sometimes the obstacles I face drive me mad, and I scream in the night at all the bad choices that I made, or that other people made for me, trapping me on the paths that I seem to be trudging down. But still I persist in grappling with escaping those paths and chasing the things that I want. I refuse to detach from the game. In my mind, detaching is the ultimate form of selfishness, more selfish than the man with the complicated Gentoo Linux with the speakers on his wall with the pristinely organized room. The reason I say that is because I believe I have a chance of doing something that could actually benefit society through technology, biology, politics, or art. It's not so much that I care whether anyone recognizes me. It's more that I care about creating something that other people can enjoy. When I think back to the moments where I've been really, truly

happy, it was because someone else put in the time to research or create something that benefitted me, usually in a way where I never met them, and never knew who they were.

That, for me personally, is what will make me happy, and that's where I'm going.

4.3 My Geek Juices are Flowing

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2007

Today was a nice Monday. I had my software engineering course this morning, that is turning out to be a really interesting course. I get to see the academic take on software development. Design is emphasized a lot, we have been learning a lot of UML. Sometimes I disagree with what the professor says, but don't say anything because my German is not good enough to explain myself - my fear of being that stupid looking foreigner, mouth agape and unable to speak. I got a good look around the room, there were about 100 people - about 8 girls. Lots of people have laptops, about half and half Windows and Linux. There was a guy sitting in the row in front of me with really long hair with dandruff and a crappy t-shirt booting his linux computer over and over again, and never doing anything on it. Once he booted to an install CD for some Linux distribution then rebooted again. Why? During the break there were some people hear him standing around and talking, and he came back from the bathroom, sat down, and booted his computer again, staring at it all the while. He sometimes would look up at the people near him talking in an almost envious way. Eventually he shut his computer off again and just sat there, sometimes looking over and smiling at the talking people. I felt like I could relate to him in a way. He is a geek.

On my way to work I ran into a friend of mine from Italy who I hadn't seen in a while - Gabriela. We spontaneously had coffee at the cafe near where I work, which is a really nice place. It was wonderful! She told me all about her trip to Italy last week, visiting family and friends, and attending the wedding of one of her best friends. We talked a lot about our experiences of living in Darmstadt, and we were in agreeance on everything that came up. She is interesting in that she sometimes seems a bit awkward or nervous, but I know her well enough to see that when it comes down to it, she is really chill and reasonable, which makes me very comfortable talking with her. She told me that originally she had planned on staying for one semester, and now she wants to stay then entire year because it has been such an incredible experience.

At work today we finished and delivered the hairstyle java applet project that I have been working on alone for the past month. Finally! It turned out fine I'd say, it does what it should. Now I get to start working on interesting things instead of being a Java monkey - I started learning about CUDA: a parallel processing hardware/software framework for these incredibly powerful GPUs made by NVidia with 128 processors in them all working in parallel, and how to program them. This is in preparation for using them for our crazy computer vision project which I probably shouldn't reveal too much about. It is really cool stuff, and I am really excited about it. At one point at work when I understood something fascinating (that the device is composed of many multiprocessors, and each multiprocessor has this curious architecture where

one set of instructions are executed simultaneously on many processors inside the multiprocessor, but are operating on different data...holy shit! What a great idea!), I shared it with the German guy I work with, and he thoroughly got it, and thought it was really cool too! As I was walking towards the tram station after work in the rain with my crappy umbrella passing all the Germans walking or riding their bikes on the street I realized the greatness of this opportunity to become an expert in this area of parallel computing - most people don't have access to such hardware and the time to learn it, and parallel computing is undoubtedly the way of the future. Also it would give me a real leg up in the community here at work, because nobody here knows very much about how it works, but it could be a key component in our project. I stayed at work from 12:00 to 6:30, reading the documentation for the GPU architecture and feverishly building up a massive diagram of it on our white board while dancing slightly to the chill electronica music that we play in our spacious room with our really nice speakers while working. I look forward to going to work tomorrow!

I found another tandem partner - a German guy who I met at a party a while ago. We meet every Monday and cook dinner either at my flat or at his, alternating between English and German, always correcting each other. Today I cooked Bockwurst, which is similar to hot dogs but much more delicious, and pasta. He studies mechanical engineering, so we can relate to each other in several geekish areas. I told him about work, and he actually understood and thought it was exciting too! We can talk to each other about scientific things which most people don't care about, and both get a kick out of it. It reminded me of home, of my good friends at MIT who can understand that part of me and really resonate with it. I really love that, and I miss that about home.

The weekend has seen unprecedented escapades into the depths of the soul. I really love the people here, and all the twisted relationships and situations that arise and evolve. I guess only time will tell what it all means. All I can do in the mean time is simply live life the best I can with my imperfect knowledge and incomplete analyses, and just enjoy it.

2 comments:

Justin said...

The parallel computing stuff sounds interesting. I keep forgetting how there is a whole world, which almost seems to parallel mathematics in size, contained in the computer. It's as if our machines have reached the level of complexity where no one can understand them fully.

Glad to hear things are well in deutschland!

Sean said...

"...all I can do in the mean time is simply live life the best I can with my imperfect knowledge and incomplete analyses, and just enjoy it."

That basically sums up the best approach to living that our feeble minds can understand.

Chapter 5

December

5.1 An Excellent Day

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2007

Today was great.

At work we had really great conversations and ideas about how to go about solving our problem with parallel programming on GPUs using CUDA. Sparks were flying. He told me he couldn't sleep very well two nights ago because a new algorithm idea came into his head and he was very excited about it. He told me all about it today, and it launched into an electric conversation, in which many many ideas were inspired in both of us and discussed. Both of us got really excited about discovering new ideas, and the excitement resonated between us. One simple idea led to the next, which led to the next, and the next, and by the end of the day the complete outline of a solution to our top-level problem was clear to both of us. The problem is, we haven't yet written any code!

After work, I went to the Gabriela's flat and we had yerba mate then dinner with two other guys - one from Finland and one from France. I have gotten to know all of these people fairly well since being in Darmstadt. The whole mate ceremony was very cool - first soak it in hot water in the special mate cup thing, wait for a few minutes, then stick in the special mate filter/straw device and drink it. Then, the cup with mate is refilled with hot water and passed around, again and again for an hour or so. As she was explaining all the parts of the traditional method of drinking mate, and telling the names of all the special things, I felt like I was being transported to South America - like I was getting a peek of it's magic. The conversation was great, we talked about many things - about the whole mate thing, what it's like in Uruguay (where Gabriela is originally from), Religion and how it is viewed by each of us and in the cultures of the countries we come from, languages - how English is strangely the world's common language, food, what I'm doing at work, what we're all up to in Darmstadt.

After dinner I went to another French guy's flat to play guitar - Ronan. Much to my surprise, he knew some Gypsy jazz songs! So we played on one of them for a while, then played a bunch of jazz standards. Much to my surprise again, he told me he likes Klezmer music. Me too! And furthermore - Bulgarian folk music. Me too! He showed me some of his compositions, and they were

actually really beautiful and cool. I was impressed. Playing music again - like every time after I haven't played in a while - reminded me of how awesome it is, and how much I really love it. I bought a crappy guitar a few weeks ago at the flea market in Frankfurt, but it is really not very playable. I hope my parents can send me my violin. I have been inspired to get more into music again.

On my way home, I ran into my friend from Japan! I hadn't seen him in a while, and he was pretty drunk, so when he saw me, he screamed "Heeeeyyyy! Curran! Aaaerrrwsssoooome! Aerwsome! hahahaha Aerwsome!" Oh man, we were both laughing so hard! What a guy! Last time we met I had taught him the English word "awesome" and, although he has a hard time pronouncing the w, he gets such a kick out of saying it now. Oh geez, I love that guy. He had a beer, and as we were walking towards the bus stop with a big group of people he put his arm around me and started singing to me some drinking song that an Australian guy had taught him. I had no idea what he was saying, but I sang along anyway - so our voices together echoed through the street. Everyone was smiling and laughing, it was excellent. On the bus I said at some point I pointed to his beer and said "nani core?!", which he taught me is Japanese for "what is this?". He started laughing hysterically and gave me his beer! He was doubled over laughing on the bus, then some other people also started laughing, just because he was laughing so hard. They all got off the bus at the stop before mine, and he forgot his beer, so I rode the bus, walked on the street to the tram stop, and took the tram home with his beer in my hand, which I found quite comical.

After getting home, I had a nice skype call with my mom. It was nice to again get into the old familiar head space of being at home, where things don't change much - such a contrast to the crazy ever changing life here. A few days ago I released some software I have been working on lately (a math expression parsing library) as an open source project on SourceForge (check it out), and much to my surprise, it has already had 21 downloads! After only 2 days! Wow, that's really cool. Maybe it will become famous and widely used some day. Imagine that!

It is unbelievable how much the internet and open source software empower the individual - this blog is a free service, hosting on Sourceforge is a free service, the tools I used to create the software are free and open source, and the web browser I am using now is also open source. With only time and access to a computer and the internet, anyone can publish content and influence the world. That never ceases to amaze me.

5.2 A Step Back

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2007

Today I worked all day on a homework assignment, wasn't able to sleep, and read a good chunk of the book *Dharma Punx* [3], which my mom sent to me for my birthday. *Dharma Punx* is an autobiography about a punk rocker who became an alcoholic, then a crack/heroin addict, then became sober, then discovered Buddhism and got way deep into it. After turning in bed for a few hours not being able to sleep I began reading it. I read a few chapters, and ended with the one in which the author recalls his year-long journey in Asia, making a so-called pilgrimage to all of the Theravadan Buddhist countries. He describes

his travels, and they sound really great, but in the end he feels he failed because he couldn't handle living as a Buddhist monk. Instead of becoming a monk, he invited his girlfriend who he had been constantly thinking about to visit him in Asia. They planned on getting married, but soon after they arrived back in the US, they began fighting a lot, decided that it would never work, and broke up. She then became an alcoholic again and he was compulsively dating other people and as confused as ever.

After finishing that chapter I got up and opened the windows of my room and felt and smelled the cool winter air and heard the sounds of the wind and light rain outside. I looked down to my window sill and rested my eyes on my little vajra, which was given to me before I left for Germany by friend of mine who is a Buddhist nun from Korea. We had met many times and talked about life and the universe over tea. Looking at that vajra made me remember all those great talks with her, and the times at the Cambridge Zen Center, and made me take several steps back and ask myself - why am I in Germany? The answer was crystal clear - I don't know. Then - why am I going to school? I don't know. There are countless pretexts, but that's all they are, there is no real substantive answer.

I came to Germany in pursuit of new and varied experiences. Aside from just the desire to feel more, the purpose of this was to test and refine the set of abstract universal principles which I have developed in my head for understanding the universe. I have done both of these - I have felt more varied and extreme feelings in the past three months than ever, and have had many experiences which I have learned so much from. If I had to go home now I would be satisfied with what I have done. I am staying for another nine months, and I look forward to it! But it feels like part of the mystery has died - living in Germany too will become old in a way.

I am in school because that is what I was supposed to do, but every day I am becoming more convinced that it is not what I really want to do. It feels like a burden which I am carrying not for myself but for other people - to meet their expectations, not to fulfill a personal goal. It is not to learn what the courses teach - I can teach myself or pursue independently anything I want to learn about. It is not so I can get a good job - I can already work as a programmer and have enough connections to bootstrap my way up to a well paying job.

What I really want to do is alternate between working full time very intensely doing research, traveling and adventuring, and practicing Buddhism intensely. I always feel a sense that something is lacking, like there is something much much greater just around the corner (even though there is probably not) when I am not engaged in something. This leads to a tendency to leave people behind - much pain, but also leads me to places where few people can go.

So be it. **1 comment:**

Justin said...

For some reason I'm reminded of that scene in "A Scanner Darkly" where Bob Arctor recalls how he transitioned from being a normal police officer with a wife and two kids to living as an (unknown to him) undercover cop addicted to Substance D. The scene is very haunting. He asks his children if they want popcorn and as he is pulling out the popcorn machine, he bumps his head on the overhead cabinet.

“That pain, so unexpected, so undeserved, cleared away the cobwebs in my head. I didn’t hate the popcorn popper, I hated my wife and kids.

I hated my backyard, ... my front yard,... ... my power mower.

All the elements that made up my life were right there. And nothing new would ever happen. Like a little plastic boat that would sail on forever, without incident, until it finally sank, which would be a secret relief to all.

So I ended that life and started this one. Now I dwell in a ugly world...”

But he goes on to discuss how in this ugly world, nothing is predictable and occasionally things come to life and shower sparkles of excitement. The drug world that he inhabits is filled with magic and wonder and he feels that he can never go back to the life he once had.

I’m not sure entirely why I am reminded of that scene, but I believe it depicts strongly the dissatisfaction we can feel with our lives in the ends to which we go to reignite that sense of purpose... and magic...

I would like to ask “Why do you feel like school is a burden? That you are doing it for someone else, but not you?” but emotions do not have reasons, so I will not ask those questions.

The lab that you are working with and the programming that I think you’d like to do seems strongly connected with industry and academia. We have constructed a social game that places immense importance on a particular piece of paper known as a diploma. It is a symbol that you can be trusted, that people with money feel comfortable giving you money to do the things that you want. One has to be careful because in industry, you are directly dependent on those people and must please them directly. You will not be programming for your own enjoyment and enthusiasm, but rather for their needs and wants. Perhaps in academia this is less so...

You mention that you want to “alternate between working full time very intensely doing research, traveling and adventuring, and practicing Buddhism intensely”. This seems to me that you want to also be near intellectual hubs of excitement so that you can continue to discuss ideas with intelligent people and grow personally. Although one can find exciting and interesting people in the most unusual places, the marketplace of ideas tends to occur less in the city’s center and more in the university.

So the answer to your question “Why do I go to school?” seems less to be so that you can take classes, etc., but rather so that you can live the intellectual life and continue to grow in that dimension. The trouble is that, school/university/academia has its own internal bureaucracy and fountain of bullshit, but it is what we must deal with in order to live. The money has to come from somewhere.

On the other hand, I am intrigued by your idea that (AFTER GRADUATING) that you find a job that either gives you flexible hours, or a ridiculously high-paying job that enables you to take several months of vacation. It would most likely have to be a personal startup, but even then whatever product you are producing usually requires constant maintenance and attention and feedback from the community and active attention to what other people are doing/releasing so that your project isn't "scooped" months down the line. It is very rare to find a job that allows you to work for half a year non-stop and then vacation for half a year. You become – in the eyes of industry or anyone else – "rusty" after not working for that period of time and the down time in productivity required to be brought back up to speed is usually not afforded by your employer.

My cousin worked at the Monterrey Bay Research Aquarium Institute (MBARI) and they let him take his coding work for Argentina for 3 months and submit his work remotely. These things are certainly possible, but mostly in the academic/research setting... a setting that has its own internal game of earning degrees and working with specific people/institutes, etc, etc.

Godspeed Intrepid Traveler in your quest and let me know if you have decided on any major life changes!

5.3 Zen

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2007

Today I went to an introduction to meditation session at the "Zen Dojo Darmstadt" to see what the scene is there. The place is just an apartment in a big apartment building in the midst of shops on a busy cobblestone street near the middle of the city. There were lots of people waling by and Christmas decorations and lights were up. There was a tiny sign that said "Zen Dojo" on the door. The door was locked. I pressed the "Zen Dojo" button, among all the other buttons with people's names. The door immediately buzzed and unlocked and I went in. A completely empty hallway, with stairs going up and down. Up or down? Where is the Zen Dojo? I went up, and saw a door with a Zen looking sign on it.

The door was half open. I knocked and was greeted and welcomed in (in German) by a thin bald man. He asked if I was the American (I had emailed a few days earlier saying I was interested). I said yes. He was very gentle and jovial in his manner, and made me feel very comfortable. We introduced ourselves and talked a bit. I took my shoes off and hung up my coat in the small coat/shoe room. He changed into his black robe.

I was the only person there, but it was - strangely - totally comfortable. The whole Zen Dojo is just a coat room, a bathroom, another small room which I didn't get to see inside, a closet for meditation cushions, and a small meditation room, with room enough for about 10 mats. The guy guided me to the closet and we both took a meditation cushion and a mat. He instructed me on the proper way to carry the thing into the meditation room, and we went in. "Step in with your left foot first, bow, then walk around the Buddha statue and find

your place to sit. Put down the mat and the cushion on the floor. Bow to the wall, turn clockwise, bow to the room, turn clockwise again and sit on the mat facing the wall." All this ceremonial stuff seemed a bit silly to me. I didn't quite get what the point of it was, but I didn't ask about it. Our conversation was a mix of English and German. When his English was missing a word or phrase, he would just go into German, and many times I would say in English what I thought he meant, and his eyes would light up and he would say "Yes! exactly!" and repeat the English version - like he had heard it before but just couldn't remember it.

We sat down, just the two of us, and he explained to me that they practice meditation from the Soto school of Zen. He explained that this is one of two major Japanese Zen schools, the other being Rinzai. He said many other schools of Zen focus more on mental trips focused around koans which eventually lead to some deep insight, whereas their practice focuses more on breathing, posture, and simple meditation directed more at the body than at the brain. "What we do is we just give ourselves up to the universe with this posture. Our existence is beyond our control - we are not the reason for our own existence - so we can give ourselves totally to simply appreciating our own existence." Sometimes he didn't seem to totally make sense, but he was so completely sure about what he was saying. It seemed to all be very clear to him.

Then he went through how to do Zen meditation. "Put the left hand over the right hand and put the tips of the thumbs together. When you are thinking too much the thumbs tend to push together and go up. When you are falling asleep the thumbs fall down. Maintain just enough pressure as though you were holding a piece of paper between them. They should be always straight across. Focus on your breath. Don't force anything about your breathing, just focus on it. When thoughts come into your head, just notice them, let them go, and return to focusing on the breath. Zen is about existing fully in the present moment. This is when consciousness is completely clear. Our consciousness is like that to begin with, but it is clouded by our thoughts. The only thing that is really real is this empty consciousness. Our thoughts are made by our head, therefore are not objectively real, and are always a delusion."

As he was talking with me, some more people trickled in. There was an Asian girl who had never sat Zen before - with a streak of her hair dyed bright pink and wearing a short skirt. The other people who had evidently been there before, because they had their own robes. The guy I was talking with was apparently the leader of the group. The meditation began with the hitting of some wooden thing in loud, evenly spaced beats which get faster and faster and then fade away. By this time everyone is sitting at their cushion facing the wall. Then a large bell is rang a bunch of times. The sound of the bell was quite cutting. It was almost like the only thing that existed for a brief moment was the sound of that bell.

The leader walked around, and he corrected my posture by pushing in my lower back and pushing back my forehead. It reminded me of one time at the Cambridge Zen center during a meditation session one guy got corrected by a teacher because his thumbs were falling, and he started crying. I could tell he just felt like a complete failure, and couldn't take it. He never made a sound, but was definitely crying. Eventually he settled down into meditation again, every once in a while frowning again. I felt proud of myself for being able to handle being corrected. Then thought to myself that feeling proud is not really the right

thing to do, it is based on ego, therefore blah blah... Then that little mental automata petered out and then just the breath again. This is what meditation is like - seeds of thoughts creep into your consciousness then you start following them through without realizing that your consciousness has transitioned from experiencing reality - the outside world - to experiencing thought-space - the inside world (although maybe that's not really the best way to put it..). Then you realize that you are in thought space - like realizing you are in a dream - and let the mental space traversal fade away and come back again to the breath. Over and over.

Afterwards I learned that this is a *Zen Dojo*, not a *Zen Center*, which means that it is just a space where people come to practice meditation and chanting. Nobody lives there, there are no talks given there, just meditation and chanting. Interesting. I thanked the guy and left. Outside I talked for a while with the Asian girl who was there for the first time. She was quite interesting. She said that from what little she has read about Zen it resonates very well with her own personal philosophy, so she decided to check it out. She is involved in an anarchist group of young people, also an anti-fascist group, and told me she is often involved in various political activism. She asked me if I am politically active at all, then why not, then said maybe I should be. It felt a little like those pushy religious fanatics, a bit cult-like.

On the way home I ran into Megan and Caitlin on the street. I ran up to them in glee and gave Megan a hug. I was in an ecstatically good mood after meditating. We threw a big keg party for Caitlin's 20th birthday, and it was an excellent time. Now I have a half full keg of locally brewed German beer in my room. Imagine that!

1 comment:

Jacob Fenwick said...

It's funny that you mentioned the political Asian girl.

I just got off the phone with my mom. I'm flying home to California soon and I needed to talk to her about travel plans. As soon as that was squared away, she launched into this huge talk about how great Ron Paul was and how I should get involved. She said that Ron Paul was the only honest man in politics. She said that this was about getting our freedom back, and idealism.

I normally feel most people aren't interested enough in politics, choosing beer and football over politics, or academics, or anything that might actually require rational thought. But there was definitely something about her energy that gave me that same pushy, sickly feeling that always seems to accompany religious zealots. My family is quite fundamentalist, perhaps even Evangelical, and I felt this was just another obsession into which she could channel that energy.

However, this isn't just a right-wing, Christian energy. A friend of mine who is Socialist Atheist, probably with similar views to that Asian girl, has also exhibited this same energy.

In the end, I feel they are exhibiting the same energy. These types argue that they are struggling against others' wanting power over

them. But at the same time, I feel that energy is the basis of a struggle to obtain power.

At the basis of my mother's argument was that the government shouldn't be involved in any sort of handouts, as the government was just selectively choosing who it should help. I argued that if someone who had a genetic medical problem couldn't work to get the medical attention they needed, who would help them? She said, traditionally, the church helped people. Charity should be a privately owned entity, essentially. But all I saw this as was a shifting of who got to selectively pick who got handouts from the secular state to the religious institutions.

I started wondering how Eastern spiritualists looked at these kinds of problems. Later, in one of those delusional thoughtspaces, I remembered you were into studying the East, and somehow ended up looking up your blog. And of course, here you were, discussing a pushy political girl.

Oo, a synchronicity! Of course, belief in synchronicity is probably just a delusion as well... but it's still an interesting coincidence.

5.4 Off to England

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2007

Tomorrow morning we're off to England. I'm traveling with Megan and Caitlin, the two American girls I went to Greece with. We're visiting three friends in the UK who are also studying in Darmstadt for an exchange year - one in Cambridge England, one in Aberystwyth Wales, and one in Fleet England.

This week was nice. Last Sunday I spent the day in Frankfurt with the most beautiful girl in the world. We walked along the river then through the city, talking the whole time and taking pictures. It was wonderful, I felt like I really got to know her a lot better. On Monday to the software engineering class, to work all day doing very interesting stuff with CUDA, then met with a friend who's teaching me German. On Tuesday, work all day, then I got together with Ronan (the musician guy from France) and we played guitar for a while. It's great to play again. On Wednesday we had a nice small Christmas party at my flat with all kinds of delicious food. It's a really nice little community of people that has developed here. Today there was a dinner party with the people I work with. We went to one guy's parents house where he cooked us homemade pizza in a real brick oven. The food was delicious and I got quite drunk with my boss and colleagues. It was an excellent time! I really like the people I am working with.

The whole week has had sort of an air of tension as we are leaving for England tomorrow. The time has finally come. Oh man!

5.5 Arrival in Cambridge

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2007

Here we are in Cambridge, England! We woke up this morning at 6 and took the 7:30 bus from Darmstadt to Frankfurt Hahn. From the bus as the sun was

rising we could see the German fields covered in mist. We arrived in Stansted and Sam's father drove us to their house in Cambridge. He is a jolly fellow! Properly hospitable.

We got hassled at the passport validation place. The lady interrogated me about what I was doing in the UK - Are you traveling alone? Who are you with? Where are you staying? When are you leaving? What date? What time? "Do you have a printout of the return ticket?" "no" "Well then how am I supposed to know you're leaving?" "I'm sorry, I didn't know I needed to have that" "I need a return ticket or the address where you're staying" "I don't know the address" "Well how do you know where you're going then?" "I'm staying with a friend who lives in Cambridge and we're traveling there together. I can call him and ask what the address is." So I tried calling but my German cell phone didn't work. At that moment I spotted Sam in the distance waiting for us to come out, and waved him over. He gave her the address and everything was fine. Megan was having the same hangup, and Sam rescued her too. I think if we had lost Sam we would have never been able to leave the airport!

We met Sam's dad in the parking lot. He was a very cheery guy, and very welcoming to us. Driving on the left side of the road was very strange. We Americans talked about it in amazement as we were driving, and Sam's dad was laughing with us about it. When we arrived at their house in Cambridge we were greeted by his mother. She gave us bread and cheese. Their house is quite nice, a two story house in a nice looking residential neighborhood just outside of Cambridge. All the houses on the street look exactly the same. We went into town just after the sun was down and walked around a bit. Cambridge feels very old and settled into itself. Everywhere you turn there are ancient intricate buildings. We didn't really get to see much, as it was getting dark.

We had dinner with Sam's family - his parents and 13 year old brother Jack. Jack looks just like Sam, it's quite funny. They were incredibly welcoming and nice to us. Sam's mother obviously put a lot of effort into the dinner, and it was delicious. After dinner we all sat around and watched TV. We all slept well!

1 comment:

Justin said...

Ha! I went through the same shake-down going through customs myself.

5.6 London!

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2007

Today we spent the day in London! It was a 45 minute train ride from Cambridge. Sam's dad cheerfully gave us a ride to the train station in the morning, making jokes all the way. We managed to get a group ticket for round trip trains and tube (British for "subway") access in London for £10. The train was really nice. We passed many flat green fields.

Getting off the train in London the sun was shining into the old station and people were everywhere, speaking British. We took the tube to the part of London with all the beautiful buildings and walked around wide eyed for a few hours. The feeling on London is quite unique. It is a huge really old city. Walking across the bridge in the direction of the London Eye past Big Ben there

was a mist over the water and the sun was shining. The Parliament Building with Big Ben and its endlessly intricate spires faded into the distance. It felt so *old*, like I had been taken back to old London, like in *Mary Poppins*.

For the second part of the day we went to the Tower of London. That was a trip. It is such an unbelievably dense collection of historically significant things. We ate some fish and chips, then went in and tagged along with a guided tour with a very entertaining Beefeater. He told us in his loud accented voice tales of the Kings and Queens that had been there, people who had been imprisoned or executed there. In the chapel some lady's baby started crying, and the Beefeater asked her to leave, then went to the door and opened it for her - "Pardon me while I get the door for the lady." After that Megan commented how the British culture is different than American in that we were asked to take our hats off before going into the chapel, and the guide opened the door and escorted the lady with the crying baby out.

After the Tower of London we made our way to Buckingham Palace. We walked through the park as the sun was setting, and saw some really beautiful places. Buckingham Palace was really nice - it was again strange being at such an old and famous place. We had fun discussing what the Yeoman guards - the ones with the huge furry black hat things - must be thinking all day while just standing there guarding the Queen or whatever is inside Buckingham Palace.

As we were waiting for the train back to Cambridge in the London train station, we found gate $9\frac{3}{4}$ from Harry Potter. The sign said on it "Gate $9\frac{3}{4}$," and there was half a shopping cart (called a "trolley" in British) stuck in the wall. We were all tired on the ride home. At Sam's house we watched some TV and were treated to an excellent English curry.

5.7 Cambridge!

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2007

Today we really got to see Cambridge. Originally we were just going to "laze about" as Sam would say, but we decided instead that we wanted to see the city. Sam's parents were up for giving us a tour, so we took a taxi into town and saw some of Cambridge.

We walked around the city, past countless beautiful buildings, and through some colleges of Cambridge University. The university is spread out throughout the whole city. As we stepped into one of the courtyards of St. John's college, we were all overwhelmed at the beauty of these castle-like buildings. Megan was breathless. She started trying to say something but gave up and said "it's beyond words". It really did have a magical feeling to it. The sun was golden and there was mist everywhere. The grass was green and perfectly flat. There was no litter anywhere, even in the city. All over Cambridge, the buildings are so incredibly detailed and intricate and old. Not just one or two buildings, but just about every building you see! It was almost too much, it was overwhelming.

After our little walking tour we had drinks at the Eagle, where Watson and Crick hung out all the time and first announced their discovery of DNA. The atmosphere was very warm. It was fairly crowded. People were eating fish, drinking beer, laughing. Sam's mom and I had a coffee and Baileys, everyone else had beer. Then we went ice skating at a poor quality temporary ice-skating setup. The skates smelled horrible. You had to give them your shoes before

getting your skates, so everyone's socks got wet and dirty. The ice was choppy and kids were screaming. Actually skating around slowly for an hour was very relaxing. After skating we got properly pissed at a pub called The Avery. I was speaking with a British accent the whole evening and Sam's dad thought it was really funny.

2 comments:

Justin said...

Sounds like you got a proper tour of Cambridge! This pleases me.

4dam said...

Blimey! How could you NOT speak with an English accent when you're surrounded by people on all sides who speak that way. I'd go nuts just trying to remember how to sound American.

5.8 Going to Wales

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2007

Today we got up early, had breakfast at Sam's, and left for Aberystwyth, Wales. Sam's parents took us to the train station and showed us which train to get on. They were so nice to us the whole time. We couldn't have asked for a better host family in England!

We took our 3 hour train ride to Cambridge to Birmingham. The train was absolutely packed. At some stops near Birmingham it was so full that no more people could get on, and they had to wait for the next one. A middle aged woman sat next to me on the train and we talked a bit. She told me it was so busy because "everyone's going to the sales." I said "What does it mean 'going to the sales?' I'm not from England." "Well you know, all the sales that the stores have after Christmas." "Ahhh!" I had misunderstood the word sales, I felt so silly. I told her we spent a day in London, and she said "Oh, it's a shame. London deserves at least a week, there's so much to see!" She had huge disgusting clumps of eyelash makeup (what is that called?) on her eyelashes. I was trying not to stare. She was very nice to talk to!

Our train from Birmingham to Aberystwyth was cancelled. A train worker told Megan we could get the train on track 6 instead. We went to track 6 and it's destination was not Aberystwyth. A worker there told us we could take that train and change at Blahblhampton for Aberystwyth. We got on the train, not knowing exactly where it was going, where to change, or if our tickets were even valid for that train. There was a dirty man whose stench filled two entire train cars - he smelled distinctly like rotted French Raclette cheese. There we were flying through the English countryside, going who knows where and about to face who knows what. It was great. We joked about the worst possible things that could happen to us. The ticket man finally came and told us that our tickets were fine, and that we need to change for Aberystwyth at the next stop. Great!

We got off at the next stop and asked a worker there where the train to Aberystwyth was. "Track 7. Leaves in 5 minutes." The train came, no signs anywhere said it was going to Aberystwyth. I asked an old lady if it did, and she said in a thick English accent "That's what they all are tellin' me!" We got on.

After the train left it was announced that it was indeed going to Aberystwyth. The ticket man told us that the train is going to split in two - one half will go to Aberystwyth and the other somewhere else. We were on the wrong half, so we moved. The countryside got hillier and greener. We were in Wales.

We finally arrived in Aberystwyth at 3:30 PM, after a 6 hour train journey. Our friend Einion was on the platform when we arrived. It was a great greeting. We ate some food at a restaurant near the train station. After we awkwardly ordered our food Einion said "It's that familiar feeling I always get in Germany" I said "What's that?" "Being a foreigner." It was totally true.

We walked around town a bit. Unfortunately it was already quite dark. In Aberystwyth the buildings are very colorful and the streets are incredibly narrow. After walking around a while we came to the end of a street and came upon the sea - a wide open horizon of the Irish Sea, a sandy cove with a big hill in the distance, lit up at night. We could smell the seaweed and hear the mass of birds making a horrible noise from under a big pier with some shops on it.

We had coffee at a bar, then went to Einion's parents house where we received a warm welcome, were fed an excellent dinner, and went to bed.

1 comment:
4dam said...

The thing with bad mascara, is you have to stare at it because that's where the eyes are. I find this wonderful and amusing, it means you can observe the clumpy mess as scrutinizingly as imaginable, and at worst, the person will think you are paying VERY close attention.

5.9 Aberystwyth

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2007

I woke up today in a small cozy room flooded with orange light. There was an orange shade in front of the window. It was raining. Something on the roof was blowing in the wind and making soft creaking noises. I could hear Megan and Caitling talking in the next room and their voices echoing softly through the hall. We all got up and had a nice breakfast of cereal and toast. We were all in a really great mood.

It was dark and rainy, but we went into town anyway. We drove around a bit, down to the ocean. We got out and walked to the end of a pier. We had to struggle against the wet wind to walk. In the distance we could see a huge green hill with sheep on it. At the end of the pier the wind was incredibly strong. Huge waves were crashing into the rocks and exploding.

We walked back into town, past all the little shops, and went into the post office for a bit. We walked out of the post office expecting rain, but the sun was shining! The wet street and wet buildings and wet people were all illuminated gold. We walked again to the sea, and this time the green hill was radiantly lit by the sun. We decided to walk up it. Some guys were playing cricket on the street with a tennis ball. Up up up, the sun comes and goes. We reached the top just as the final clouds were closing in. We could see the entire town, and the beach, and the distant hills. Over the other side of the hill was a big green hill which descended into the rocky coast. Looking inland one could see more green hills with sheep on them, as far as the eye can see.

Dinner was great - shepherds pie. I sat down for a while and watched TV with Einion's mom and brother while the others were occupied checking their email. There was a show on about a guy who traveled to Scotland and videotaped all of it. I thought that was such a cool idea - to travel and document all your experiences on video. Later we went out to a few pubs with a friend of Einion's who studied at Oxford and is one of those guys who does everything and is really enthusiastic and intense. He and Megan launched into a discussion about philosophy. I didn't know what they were talking about, because I hadn't read it. It made me realize I'm just not well read.

1 comment:
Justin said...

Curran, you are well read - just in a different way than you think. Plato is good, but so is Buddhism, programming and complex systems!

5.10 Welsch Countryside

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2007

Today we went for a drive and hike in the Welsch countryside. It was cloudy. Einion's brother came with us - a quiet but very personable tall skinny fellow. We drove on narrow paved roads that wound through the hilly green sheep-dotted fields. We didn't talk much in the car, because we were all occupied staring out the window at the hills and the sheep, and the occasional old white washed or stone building. On these roads, there were many corners one couldn't see past. Just after Einion told us how he enjoys driving alone on these roads and going very fast because sometimes one can see quite a ways down them, we rounded a corner just as another car was coming the opposite direction. We slammed on the brakes and came within a few feet of hitting them. The other car had 5 guys in it, and it turned out Einion knew them! They chatted in Welsch for a while then we got on our way.

We went deeper and deeper into the countryside. The fields were yellow instead of green in these parts. We parked and walked to a big reservoir in the middle of nowhere. It was actually the one which supplies water for Einion's village. We walked through forest, and when we emerged there were yellow rolling hills with no trees at all for miles and miles in all directions. Some had sheep, some didn't. We walked to the small dam. The wind was incredibly strong. There was sort of a cliff above us, and there was a lone sheep eating some grass along the steep edge. Megan said "Look at that sheep! He's stuck! He's going to fall and die!" It was pretty funny, because the sheep was just fine.

On the drive back we passed a bunch of guys with shotguns on the side of the road. One of them was a shepherd that Einion happened to know! We pulled up in the car and they chatted in Welsch. He was a big scruffy guy, very animated and jolly, holding a shotgun. Einion told us that he told him they are all out shooting foxes, because there will be many lambs in the coming months, and that is what the foxes get at. Driving around there were a lot of "cattle grids" - sets of metal beams laid across the road where a fence crosses it which allows cars to pass through but not cows or sheep. The beams are spaced such that they don't damage a car's tires, but cattle's feet fall into the gaps between

them if they try to walk over them. There were sheep in the road at one point. We got out and chased them. Man can they run fast! Soon we had a whole herd of sheep running away from us.

We went back home at around 3 and ate some nice food prepared by Einion's mom - Welsch apple juice, tea, Welsch "pizza," fresh bread, and salad. We sat around a while just talking and eating and drinking tea. Megan fell asleep on the couch, and Caitlin was taking a shower, so I went into the other room and talked with Einion's brother for a while. I asked him if he liked this area, he said he really did because it is very quiet. He told me he enjoys Tai Chi and tries to live the healthiest lifestyle possible. He made "the kidney drink" and I tried some. This drink is hot water with fresh grated ginger, Japanese salted plum paste, and a drop of soy sauce - "The kidney drink. It's good for your kidneys" he said. It was a hot, salty, and ginger filled. The taste was not the greatest, but when it went down it really did feel nice and warm. Megan popped in and I said "hey, try some of the kidney drink." She tried it, and made a disgusted face and said "Oh God! That's disgusting! I never want to drink anything like that again!" It was pretty funny.

We went back out into Aberystwyth again to have some Indian food for dinner. "The Taste of Bengal." It was a small place, only one other table with people at it. The food was really delicious. I had never really had Indian food before. I ordered Lamb Tikka Kashmir. It was a sweet curry sauce with tons of banana slices in it, and lamb meat. The rice soaks up the sauce. The Naan bread is soothing and soft as it touches your tongue, and it all mixes together very nicely when chewing. Megan's food was really spicy. I tried some and it burned on my tongue, then my nose ran, then my eyes teared. It felt great, like my plumbing was being cleaned.

After eating we walked around a bit in town with it's narrow hilly streets and pastel buildings lit up by the yellow streetlights. We walked around along the sea. It was dark, and we could hear the swells of the waves and smell the salt in the air. The rugged sea where cycles within cycles are the last word, and everything is worn down and swept away eventually. While we were walking I had a strange experience of suddenly feeling that everything is OK just as it is, and I don't need to change anything. At the moment I was thinking about things to try to resolve numerous questions in my head, because I felt that I need to change my state of not understanding the world completely. With this new realization my perceived need for thinking disappeared completely. I looked around me and remembered that I was alive! It was like a great burden had been lifted off me. I saw the lights and sand and buildings and waves and smelled and heard everything around me very clearly. I heard the voices of my companions directly, for once without any judgment or distance, and I really loved them. My fellow humans! Wow! We are the same!

We found a hotel with a nice bar which served coffee and sat down for tea. It was just really *nice*. Just to sit and talk and drink tea together, with no pressure to do anything. We talked about that, and all agreed that it is the way social interactions should be. We felt well nourished after the spicy Indian food and tea. We went home and slept well.

5.11 The Beach

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2007

Today we went to the beach. It was cloudy. Einion's brother came with us again today, which we all thought was really cool. When we arrived at the beach parking lot the view of hills in the distance was overwhelming. There were big sand dunes held up by tall grass which we had to walk through to get from the parking lot to the beach. From a distance the tops of the grass patches look soft and fuzzy, but close up they are comprised of long thick hard blades of grass. The beach was very long. The first thing we did was take our shoes off and walk in the water. It was a cold day. The water was incredibly cold on our feet. We put our shoes back on our cold sandy damp feet and walked and talked for a long time down the beach. Looking down the beach we could see people at all distances, all with their soft reflections on the wet sand. This place is very calm. We ran up and down the sand dunes. The sun went down. Megan and Caitlin wrestled in the sand for a while like sisters before we went back.

We had tea and toast when we got back - always tea and toast. We watched a film while Einion went to church, had pasta and pesto while checking our email and things, then watched a few episodes of a comedy called Peep Show. After that we sat around drinking tea for hours and hours. That was one of the best conversations I've had in a while. We shared some of our experiences of being in Darmstadt. We talked about our lifestyles and how they've changed since being in Germany. Last year I swam early every morning before class. Now I have no schedule aside from my two lectures and haphazardly going to work. We all talked about such things that we have stopped doing. It became clear to me that how I have been living in Darmstadt is not good. I have been wasting so much time doing half assed social things which don't lead to anything. It was pleasing to find that Megan has had a similar experience. I remembered that in fact I was happy when I was swimming every day, and working all day, and playing music every week.

The conversation was basically everyone sharing their opinions about what is good and bad and what they like and don't like. The conversation got me thinking about what is good and not good, and what people like and don't like. I realized that these judgments are entirely subjective, they are made up in our heads and enforced by our surrounding culture, but have no intrinsic truth to them. Lets take for example going to lectures. Some people hate it because they have convinced themselves that courses are dull and something to dread. Other people enjoy it because they have convinced themselves that they are something of value. But the lecture itself is not intrinsically either of those. It is only exactly as it is, as it is happening.

Then the tendency to generalize kicks in - the notion generalizes from good/bad and like/dislike to all opposites. All conceptions of opposites are not really real reality or truly true truth *ever*, they are projections onto reality. Our framework of interlocking opposites is our tool for understanding and coping with the complexity of the world, but in fact it is an overlay which dulls the things it covers. Things only are what they are without judgments, not good or bad, without our framework of ideas stuck to our eyeballs.

It is an ingenious machine really, this system we have built into us, in which opposites which our experience fits into are grown - learned from our family and

society, and their relations to each other are established over time, and they are generalized to have variable strengths instead of always being black and white opposites. Concepts are linked with past experiences, and with our emotional subsystems. It functions quite well to model the world, and to fit ourselves into it and with other people. It is absolutely necessary for survival, to function in society, and to interact productively with the world.

However, our model of the world is only our internal model of it, not the world itself. It is very disturbing to realize that - that all that you thought was true and real is actually entirely subjective - made up in your head. It is a filter through which you perceive. It is possible to take off this filter, if only for a split second, and glimpse what reality is like without it, they way things actually are, real reality, independent of ideas. Perhaps this is what happened yesterday - the wind in my head swirled around just exactly the right way that my whole perception filter blew away, just for a little while.

1 comment:

Justin said...

Amen.

5.12 Train To Fleet

MONDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2007

On the 6 hour train ride through the green hills and fields to Fleet, I was reading a Zen book - "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha." by Seung Sahn [4]. It is always the same thing over and over - don't think and contemplate anything, just hit the floor (which symbolizes being fully immersed in the present). It gets really repetitive after a while, which made me give it more consideration: maybe that's all there is to Zen, maybe that's their whole point. I have always tried to analyze everything and come to some conclusion about how the world works. Today it has become clear to me that this is a burden, always trying to project the world into my system. I really enjoy figuring things out, and testing my ideas in every situation - but it is actually a prison. It blinds me to what is in front of me in a way. Contemplating the past or the future or your self image or your opinion of other people also are made up, and blind one from reality. All thinking is a prison - today I felt that in my gut and saw the truth of it instead of just reading it.

It's actually a shame, because I really love thinking. It is something rewarded for by society, and something I identify with. It's sad in a way to learn that I'll have to give it up in order to find real freedom and happiness, that elusive thing that everyone yearns for. But this is it, there is no longer any doubt, this is the way to go forward. I am sure of it.

So now that I know that, the only thing to do is to start doing it. To throw away all unnecessary thinking and analysis all the time in every moment of life. To just always experience directly what is happening.

3 comments:

Justin said...

Curran. As you might expect, I must disagree. You are free. Thoughts do not create suffering, craving creates suffering. You can love thinking, you just shouldn't become attached to thinking.

In fact part of becoming free involves perceiving the karmic process of cause and effect. If you do not think, the cue ball hits the 8 ball and you just say it is what it is, but part of thinking involves perceiving cause and effect. If a blind man walks into a wall repeatedly, and you can see what the problem is and logically solve his problem, it is your duty to go and guide him in a different direction.

Remember that reality as you perceive it is just as impermanent and transitory as your own thoughts. Why should you value direct experience over your thoughts?

curran said...

Yeah! Reading your post has brought me a bit of a clearer view of the role of intellect. I have actually been thinking a lot lately about that. Seung Sahn always says "Cut off all thinking," but I think what he really means is "Cut off all attachment to thinking." You're absolutely right in that thinking itself is not the cause of suffering, attachment is - clinging to the notion that your ideas are the truth. We do this all the time. This is the thing which is difficult to let go - the notion that what we know to be true is true.

I realized I was trying to divide my experience into two parts - thinking and perceiving - but actually the two are so deeply interconnected that it may be useless to try to separate them. We think all the time. And here's the kicker which made me realize I was on the wrong path - we can perceive ourselves thinking. It becomes nonsensical. So I think you are right - being immersed in non-thinking perception is of no higher value than being completely immersed in thought space. The thing is - not to be attached to thinking OR attached to perceiving, but to be able to give up anything at any moment and flow freely between states without being hung up on ideas or blinded by them.

Justin said...

I'm glad you have swung from the other extreme, but to be honest, I'd like to spend more time meditating to experience directly "the freedom from worldly suffering." Zen is such a balance, it really is like walking the edge of a samurai sword.

Chapter 6

January

6.1 New Years

TUESDAY, JANUARY 1, 2008

We arrived in Fleet and met our great friend Dave - an awkward but selfless bloak with a heart of gold. On New Years Eve we had an excellent meal with Dave's parents. We held hands and said grace before eating. We all thought that was a bit strange but just went with it. There were Christmas cards all over the place, and every one of them was extremely religious. Jesus! Jesus! God! Jesus! Holy! Jesus! - everywhere you look.

After dinner we went to a New Years Eve party hosted by one of Dave's friends - a girl studying law at Cambridge. Most of the people at the party were also studying at Cambridge. The party was very nice. It was a mixture of older people and younger people. The girl's dad was serving drinks, and her two younger brothers were there too. There were little things to eat all over the huge table in the center of the oversized kitchen. Everyone was schmoozing, as in making smalltalk and kind of trying to sell themselves, to show the other how much they knew about such and such.

The house was incredibly nice. Perfectly clean. The bathroom was huge, and had glowing stars embedded in the floor. There was a big cabinet full of little glass statues. For the final countdown to 2008 everyone piled into the basement room, which had a huge flatscreen TV and really nice speakers. Everyone was served a glass of really good champagne. At midnight Big Ben in London was shown on TV with its ominous deep ringing chimes, followed by the incredibly huge booming fireworks show in London. We were thinking about going to a dance club but the host decided instead to have a dance party in the basement. This was entirely plausible, since they had a big room with big speakers. There were only a few of us, but we danced like crazy. By the end I was sweating my balls off and was completely exhausted. It was a great New Years.

Today we got up late and fixed ourselves a proper English breakfast - eggs, bacon, mushrooms, sausages, coffee, tea, and orange juice. We lazed about all day, watching TV, drinking tea, discussing things, talking with Dave's parents, and planning our next few days: tomorrow into the countryside to Jane Austin's house, and the next day to London. Dinner was shepherd's pie. Again we held hands and Dave's father said grace the same as the night before: "Thank you

Jesus for the delicious meal we are about to receive, and our friends we have with us to enjoy it. Amen.” After dinner we went to a pub. We drove out into the countryside to find a particularly English pub that Dave know of, but it was closed. We found a nice pub nonetheless, in Fleet. There were middle aged people there chilling out and conversing. It was a cozy atmosphere, almost like everyone there was family. There was a fire going in the wood stove. We all had coffee and Baileys.

6.2 Jane Austin Country

THURSDAY, JANUARY 3, 2008

Today we went to Jane Austin’s house and took a 4-mile walk around the countryside. It was the same walk that Jane Austin herself used to frequently take, back in the day. This area felt really old, almost like nothing had changed since Jane Austin’s time. We walked along a street lined with old houses with thatched roofs, saw an old church, walked through a field where someone was walking with horses, through a trail in the woods, through more fields. We passed through a tiny village and had lunch at a cozy restaurant overlooking fields. It felt great to warm up. It was a very cold day. We walked through more countryside back to the car, and had coffee at the bar across the street from Jane Austin’s house. Again it felt great to warm up. We slept well.

6.3 The Journey Back to Darmstadt

SATURDAY, JANUARY 5, 2008

The day after seeing Jane Austin Country we spent shopping in London. At every shop we passed the girls went in and looked at things. It seemed they approached shopping as though it satisfied some craving they had - an addiction of some sort. We had lunch at a Chinese restaurant overlooking a busy street, went to Covent Garden and saw a great string quartet busking, walked through Hyde Park (it was freezing, and started to drizzle), shopped at Harrods, walked through London to the train station and took the train to Cambridge. It was an exhausting day. We got kebab at a Döner stand for dinner. After dinner Sam’s dad and I got drunk together on lemonade and Pernot as he showed me an incredible Frank Zappa DVD. The next day we shopped in Cambridge. Again it was a cold cloudy day and generally exhausting. I think we were all ready to go back home to Darmstadt. That night we went grocery shopping and cooked a chicken curry for Sam’s family. It was delicious, and we were all pretty happy. The next morning Sam’s dad took us to Stansted airport and we flew back. What a trip!

Chapter 7

February

7.1 Back in Action!

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2008

So, almost a month back in Darmstadt, and no bloggage! Sorry for the absence. So, here's whats shaking:

When we got back from the UK, I decided that I wanted to change my lifestyle, that I hadn't been living life as well as I could have in Darmstadt. I had no schedule and no plan, just go to class on Monday morning and Wednesday afternoon, and go to work every day whenever I felt like it. I was not setting my alarm clock except for the days I had class, so I would get up at around 11, 12, 1, or 2, and go straight to work. In the evenings I would leave work usually pretty late, maybe 7 or 8, then there would always be some party, so I would go there and hang out and get a little drunk and stay out late. I realized that there were a lot of things I like to do, and actually *want* to do, that I wasn't doing because I hadn't thought about them and allotted the time for them - like swimming, or playing guitar, or meditating, or reading, or cooking, or eating healthy food, or really getting to know people instead of just happening to see them and make smalltalk at big parties where everyone is drunk and can't really talk anyway.

So I made a weekly calendar for myself - every morning get up at 7:00 and go swimming, then come back home and practice guitar for an hour, then read for an hour, then make my own lunch, then go to work. Every Tuesday go to the 2 hour meditation at the Darmstadt Zen Dojo, every Wednesday night go to the jazz jam at Jazzkeller in Frankfurt, and every Friday cook a big excellent dinner and have a small group of people over. That was the plan.

On Monday I looked up on YouTube how to cook Bulgogi - great Korean style Beef that I had had once before. I went out and bought all the ingredients, which required going to the Asian market. I also bought a blender, so I could make marinades and milkshakes and smoothies. I bought the beef at the German grocery store. That was a small adventure in itself! this little old German lady was going on and on about which kind of beef I should get depending on what I wanted to do with it, and everything was in German and alien as usual, but I finally did get the beef. When I cut the beef there were beautiful intricate fractal patterns in the texture which resulted after cutting it. I think what

happens is that the white stretchy parts in the beef take more pressure to cut through, so squish the soft part under them out more, so as those soft parts are cut through, they un-squish, resulting in different heights for the parts of the soft parts which are closer to the edges of the white parts in the direction you are cutting it. I was totally amazed at all the unique material properties of beef.

On Tuesday I went to the Zen meditation. That's an interesting little scene. There are about 6 people who come every Tuesday, and they are all at least 40 years old. None of them speak English really well, so we mostly speak in German. The whole thing is a bit absurd - A 21 year old American sitting Zen with a bunch of German geezers - but I love it! I think it is the best thing for keeping me sane in this strange land.

On Wednesday I went to Frankfurt and met up with my friend James who I'd spent my first week in Germany with. It was great to see him again! We had dinner at a Chinese restaurant and then went to see what this jazz jam was like at a jazz club called Jazzkeller. To find it we walked through a lot of big streets which were completely empty. We finally found it, a little sign and a little door with some people outside smoking - the only people in sight, their voices echoing around the empty dark street amid the huge flat buildings. We went downstairs, hearing faint drums and piano. 5 Euro to get in. The place was completely packed with people. It was a really small place, a real German basement with those curved ceiling structures. It was pretty dark, and lights were shining the stage and the bar. It was a very cozy atmosphere, but just so packed. Too packed. It was difficult to walk through, you had to swim through the crowd. We never found a seat.

On Friday I cooked Pad Thaim, an excellent Thai dish - with the special ingredients and all. I had just a few people over, and it was really nice, almost like a family meal. The food turned out surprisingly well. Strangely, there was no alcohol, just tea and water.

One day I had yerba mate again with Gabriela, then afterwards I cooked Bulgogi for her and Ronan. The three of us had a long great conversation about life, the universe, and everything. We talked a lot about happiness - what is happiness really? I proposed that "personal happiness is completely subjective - meaning it is completely dependent on the perspective you take at every moment. You could choose to focus on the negative aspects of things, then you would not be happy, or you could choose to focus on the positive aspects of things, then you would be happy. No matter what situation you are in," I proposed further, "it is possible to be happy by choosing how you look at things and at what level you look at them. This is how I live." Gabriela opposed me with the counterexample of when someone close to you dies, in which case you will inevitably experience grief and sadness, no matter how you look at it. Ronan debated the notion that it is possible to control how you see things - that often it seems impossible to consciously choose which truths play more prominently in your mind. It was a great discussion.

The next week I went to the meditation again on Tuesday. Again the bell and the smell of incense, and the agitation which creeps up when one sits still for so long, then the quiet mental zone which ensues. On wednesday I went again to the jazz jam in Frankfurt, this time with Ronan, Gabriela, and a chill German guy. Again it was packed, but we found seats and sat. Everyone enjoyed it! There was a really really incredible saxophone player there who just licked the

music so perfectly. There was a guitar player. I thought of how much I looked forward to going home and picking up my guitar again, and bringing it back to Germany, and bringing it to this jazz jam and throwing myself into the fray like in the good old days.

Occasionally in Darmstadt you run into these Mormon guys in suits trying to convert people. I had always thought to myself, yeah, it would actually probably be quite interesting to sit down and talk with them one day. One of the Mormons talked to me on the street one day. We began speaking in German, and he was really surprised to find out I was an American! He was from Utah. As his bus was arriving he asked for my phone number. I said "Oh, I'm sure I'll see you guys around some time, you should catch your bus." And he said emphatically "Oh no, it's really important to me to spread our message, it doesn't matter if I miss this bus. I can take the time to take down your phone number." I was really impressed by his overall demeanor, he seemed genuinely happy about everything, and really like he *knew* that the inconveniences in life don't matter if you don't let them. I gave him my phone number, and he missed his bus.

I finally found a swimming pool to go to, after a week of telling myself and other people that I would do it. There was always that feeling of guilt when someone asked me "So have you been swimming like you said you would?" and I told them I didn't. I had attempted a few times to get up early, but I just stayed in bed because it felt sooo good to just sleep. One day I finally did it, I got out of bed and went to the swimming pool - an unknown place. It is quite far away from where I live, about 30 minute of travel to get there. It was very nice though. Nordbad ("north-bath") is what it's called. It's a huge 100 meter pool with 10 or 15 lanes. My muscles were quite sore afterwards, but I was glad I finally did it. I then went back home and passed out in bed for three hours or so then went to work. Hey, it's a start!

The Mormon guy called me and we planned a time to meet in the center of town. I was waiting for them, and I saw two young men in suits in the distance approaching me. It reminded me of the Matrix. They were super friendly as usual. We sat on the edge of a fountain and talked for about an hour. "So we just want to share our very important message with you, but before we do we'd like to just say a short prayer. Do you know much about prayer?" "Not really, could you explain it to me?" "sure, prayer is just a way of finding out what God's will is, and asking him for guidance" "so how does God answer your prayers?" "well, he could give you signs, or he could use the Holy Spirit." "So you have to look at everything that happens and ask yourself if it is a sign from God in answer to your prayer?" "Right." "Ok, and what is the Holy Spirit?" "When you get a warm feeling of knowing that the word is true when you pray about it or read it - that's from the Holy Spirit." ... "so why do you believe the Bible is true?" "Because God told me it is, through the Holy Spirit." "How do you know that God exists?" "Because it says so in the Bible."

One exchange student had a dinner and a party a few days before he was leaving Darmstadt for good. Lots of exchange students in Darmstadt only stayed for the first semester. For most of the people at the party it was probably the last time I would ever see them. It was like in a dream, because I knew that the whole community was going to disappear completely so soon.

I have been playing music with a French guitar and clarinet player, Ronan, and a German guitar and bass player Stefan. Stefan's apartment is in a part of Darmstadt I'd never been to before. Going there the first time, Ronan and I

walked past some pastel buildings, an old church, and lots of old simple houses which had vines growing on the sides. The bassist's apartment had an entrance gate which was old and creaky. It was almost like walking through a fairy world. We learned some klezmer songs and a Django Reinhardt song. It's great fun to play music again!

A Finnish guy named Jon had an excellent party today. All the exchange students were there, many of them I hadn't seen in a while, many of them I would probably never see again. I had an interesting conversation with a Swedish guy, Per. He told me "I have to say, I don't think there are any well adjusted Erasmus students." (Erasmus meaning exchange students.) We talked about how different exchange students have been living - some have sort of been depressed and recoiled from society, some have only drank and partied the whole time, some spent all their time on school work and now regret it because they missed a lot of opportunities to meet people or do new things. A lot of people only spent time with people from their own country, and didn't learn much German, or in some cases not even English, alienating them even from the Erasmus culture. It is quite a crazy, even dangerous, thing actually - throwing yourself into an alien culture alone, knowing no one. I got to have some good conversations with a lot of people at that party. For everyone there was an air of value to all their interactions with others that wasn't there before - like we had all been through a war together and were going home now - almost a sense of mourning.

There was one girl there who was very pretty and probably very young. She was the sister of an exchange student from Turkey, visiting Germany for a week or so. I started talking to her, and realized that she didn't speak much English at all. She blushed whenever she said something or couldn't understand someone, and sort of shied away from the group most of the time. We were talking about something, and at some point she said "I'm sorry, my English is not very good." I said "But at least you can communicate yourself, and I can understand you." Then she looked at me and said with a look of total amazement and wide-eyedness and such a soft genuine voice "you can understand me?" It was like an alien consciousness coming through an almost impenetrable barrier. She was *totally* a stranger in a strange land, totally immersed, eyes forced wide open. It was amazing to see that, and feel that. I said "Yes, I can understand you, and you can understand me. It's an amazing thing." She called over her brother and talked in Turkish, then he leaned over and said to me "She's my sister," and smiled nodding, as if to say "She's off limits." She immediately got up and said "Smoking". She went outside to smoke a cigarette and never came back. I got the feeling she was suddenly afraid of me and wanted to get away from me. It was very awkward and I felt like an incriminated creep. Oh well, I don't blame her.

The rest of the party was almost like a family reunion, everyone catching up and saying what they've been up to, their European adventures, and what they are doing next semester - some leaving Germany and going home to finish studying, some finished entirely with university and off to the working world, some staying in Darmstadt. One quiet French girl told me she might be doing an internship in South Africa next semester. That made me think how small the world is - maybe "small" is not the right word, more like "real" or "accessible" or "right in front of me".

Towards the end of the party I was dancing around with drunk people and

pretending to be drunk, it was really fun. I hadn't drank any alcohol since coming back from the UK, just as an experiment, and life really wasn't any worse because of it. As I was leaving the party, Mikko (from Finland) pulled me aside and said "So are you still not drinking?" "Yeah." "So you didn't drink any alcohol tonight?" I smiled and said "Yeah!" He cracked up laughing and said "You're like – that animal that changes colors, wwwwwhat's that in English?...a komo..coma.." "chameleon?" "YEAH! Yeah! a chameleon!!" he was dumbfounded! It was pretty funny.

So, my goals of getting up early and swimming every day didn't happen, and reading every day didn't happen at all, and practicing guitar also didn't happen. But I did go swimming a few times, and have been playing guitar more with people, and getting up earlier than before at least. I only cooked two meals - Bulgogi and Pad Thai, and only in the first two weeks back. I only used my blender for drinks once - to make milkshakes for two Indonesian girls - my good friend Agnes and a girl who I've seen around a few times - who came over one day and cooked a delicious Indonesian meal for me. They really loved the banana milkshake though! I did go to the Zen meditation and jazz jam every week, except this week when I was just feeling lazy and overwhelmed by all the studying I need to do for the Software Engineering test. Off to Finland tomorrow! I'll be traveling for a week, then taking my test in Darmstadt, then going to the US for a month to visit home.

3 comments:

4dam said...

wow man.... just wow.

Sarah said...

Here's to jazz and Zen and sanity and REALITY.

Cooper said...

The Mormon missionary thing was exactly what I was doing. With me it was so funny because I'm socially awkward.

7.2 Finland!

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2008

We took a trip to Finland - Sam from England, Mikko from Finland, and I. We stayed with Mikko's family for a few days in a small town called Hollola. Mikko's parents were really sweet, really nice as hosts. Mikko's mom put tons of work into preparing wonderful Finnish meals for us - moose, reindeer, homemade cranberry sauce, Karelian pastries, cheeses, buttermilk, strange sauces. It was great the first day, then I had really bad diarrhea for the next 3 days. The bathroom is close to the dinner table, so when I went and my ass was particularly loud I could hear everybody laughing. Very funny indeed!

One day I was sick in bed. When I woke up Mikko's mom came in and said in a wonderfully enthusiastic motherly tone "I know what you need! Milk and potato flowers!" She was smiling so vibrantly and almost laughing, with such humility, because when I knew that "potato flowers" was incorrect. She continued "Mikko what's that word..." "Starch." said Mikko from around the corner. "Oh

yes! Starch! That's what you need. That's what I used to give Mikko and his sister when they were little ones." She had spent a year in London 40 years ago, so her English was what they spoke in London 40 years ago. She was so great!

They had a sauna in their house, so we all went in - naked. That's the way they do it in Finland. Sam and I threw our cultural taboos aside and went with the flow. It was just fine to be naked! No problem at all! We went, still naked, outside in the snow - the essential Finnish experience! One day Mikko's dad cooked salmon on the open fire. That was so warm, such an at-home-in-Finland thing to do. Every meal was fantastically prepared. Thank you Mikko's family!

We walked into town several times. One day we took a big walk around one of the local lakes. The tall trees and ground were covered in snow. There were lots of people out cross country skiing. When we passed a group of kids, one girl looked at me like I was an alien. I got the feeling generally that they were not used to running into foreigners. It seemed like a quiet little town. There wasn't much at all in the town center, just a grocery store, drug store, video store, a gas station, and a McDonalds.

The night before we left for Helsinki, we all sat around the table while Mikko's dad showed us places to go on an old map of Helsinki. He hardly spoke English, but it was enough to communicate "I lived there for 2 years" and "That's where I studied" and "That's where I went yesterday for work." It was a great scene - travelers from England, France, and America gingerly checking out this great old place. Perhaps I forgot to mention, a guy from France - Lucas (pronounced "Lükaa") - joined us at Mikko's house a few days after we arrived.

Helsinki the whole thing was tainted by my angry bubbling stomach, and covered in depressing clouds, a big busy bustling bummer, but fun in a way.

Our last stop was Tampere. We went to the *Kyykkä* world championship, which is, as Sam put it when recording his homemade documentary about it "Nobody gives a shit really, it's just a laugh, as you can see by these guys here dressed as bananas." It was a really huge festival on the Tampere University of Technology campus where everyone gets really drunk starting at 9:00 AM. The premise for having such a festival is that it is the world championship for a game called *Kyykkä*. When playing *Kyykkä*, there is a big rectangle spray painted on the ground (which was ice and snow), each team throws a wooden bat (*karttu*) to the other side to knock the little wooden can-shaped things out of the spray painted rectangle. 600 teams or 4 people each played the day away, dressed in jumpsuits colored depending on their major at university, with their speaker setups blaring comical Finnish music - loads of people standing around drinking and having a good time.

As the day progressed, people were getting crazier. Some guys blew fire, that was really cool. After the games we went in a sauna with a big group of drunk Finnish guys who we had met earlier at the *Kyykkä*. They were all drinking beer in the sauna, and we were all naked. They started singing a Finnish drinking song, every verse accompanied by a ladelfull of water thrown into the hot coals, filling the sauna up with searing hot steam - my ears felt like they were burning off - "Ahh! The pain! It really hurts!" I thought to myself. Eventually one of the guys says "Stop! Stop! Enough!" and the guy stopped. It was great fun!

We had a crazy drunken night wandering in and out of various student parties and around the streets of Tampere. I started talking to a random Finnish guy who was really excited to talk to an American. He joined us on our adventures, in the words of Sam "I don't know what this guy is doing with us, his friends

turned off somewhere miles back!" Then we lost Mikko, he had stayed behind, engrossed in intense drunken conversation with a girl. When we called him on his cell phone he had no idea where he was! "I'm in a parking lot somewhere!" he said. We waited at the apartment of a friend of ours who is also from Finland studying in Darmstadt, and girl called Oili.

Mikko and the girl eventually found their way to us, and on our way back Mikko said in a totally hilarious drunken manner "We are going home. In times that may have been...lets try that again - in times, it might not seem like the shortest way, or the best way, but I assure you, it is a way .. in a way." Sam and I couldn't stop laughing for a while. Mikko was so hilarious! We made it home to Mikko's friend's apartment, slept fine, chilled out the next day, and flew back to Germany.

7.3 Home Sweet Home!

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2008

Here I am back in the USA! I've been here for 2 weeks, and I'll be here for 2 more, then back to Darmstadt. I met a really great French girl on the plane who was a vet, and on her way to a Chinese Medicine conference in Boston. She was applying Chinese medicine to animals. We got along extraordinarily well, but probably won't ever see each other again. I always love experiences like that, it makes you feel like anywhere you go or whatever you end up doing, there are people who you will be able to relate with.

The whole time being back has been very dream-like. Coming down into Boston was really great, so exciting, Boston! Home! Then seeing my parents and my brother again - my mom burst into tears when she saw me come out of the airport. Driving back to Worcester the mood was really high, my brother and I rapping nonsense off of each other and laughing the whole way and just loving it. Settling back in at home was wierd - nothing had changed, it's like I never left, it's like Germany was a dream, again a far off fantasy.

I represented my German exchange program at UMass Lowell one day, it was strange coming back into that old familiar, kind of dull, university world again - seeing familiar faces of those people that you always see around but don't actually know. It was kind of nostalgic, like looking at old pictures, but it was real. I felt like going up and hugging one girl who I always used to see walking around, but then realized that I didn't even know her name.

There were two German girls there too, on an exchange year at UMass. We spoke German, which transported me back into the whole mental backdrop of being in Germany. It was very disorienting, like I wasn't sure which world I was in! Later that day I met with my advisor. He was concerned, as were a few other people, about my blog entry about "not thinking". We had a great conversation about Buddhism and how it fits into my life and the world of science and academics. I clarified that what I meant to express about "not thinking" was that it leads to a lot of pain in the world when one is convinced that the world of concepts in their head is reality. We agreed on that. He invited me to work for him for a week, and I thought maybe I could do it, but where could I stay? Maybe with friends in Boston, maybe with somebody in Lowell, maybe at the Cambridge Zen Center! Hmm. Something to think about.

I met with a wonderful friend of mine in town, a Buddhist nun from Korea.

We talked over tea for three hours about everything under the sun. It's always like that with her, she blows your mind! We talked about the potential of me going to Korea and living as a monk for a while. She says it's totally possible, and if I like teaching I could make plenty of money teaching English. I might like to do that one day, I'm sure it would be a great adventure! We went out to a Mexican restaurant for dinner. There I was walking into a Mexican restaurant packed with young college students, with a middle aged Korean lady with a shaved head and walking with crutches (she had hurt her foot in a skating accident). People stared, and we both got a kick out of the whole thing. The food was wonderful. We went back to the temple and had more tea, then said our goodbyes. She is a great friend, independent of time. I feel like I am always welcome there, to come and ask difficult questions and have long discussions about life.

I visited my great friend Justin at MIT, 'twas a great reunion! We were talking madly, really intensely about all that's happened in life and what to make of it all. He told me of his attempt at a Zen retreat which ended in a freakout. As I understand it he began questioning everything, the premise of all his actions and the direction he is going in life - going to graduate school, staying with his long time girlfriend - and casting them in the light of attachment and how it leads to suffering in the end. The thought came up - "What is the difference between love and attachment? Are all of my pursuits based on attachment? Is attachment actually a bad thing? Ahh!" We met up with his girlfriend after having coffee and smores overlooking the electric streets near MIT. We all caught up and got pleasantly drunk over really good sushi and plum wine at a beautiful Japanese place called Fugakyu.

7.4 A Trip to Grandmas

SUNDAY, MARCH 2, 2008

This weekend my mom, brother, and I took a trip to upstate New York to visit with family. My uncle Frank is an artist, he had a crazy party in his art studio. It was a great huge space - a warehouse in the middle of nowhere - surrounded by silent fields, turned into an studio. There was all kind of funky art on the wall, lots of it really well done and beautiful. A lot of family was there, aunts and uncles I hadn't seen for ages. There were also a lot of Franks artist and carpenter friends, and other friends from various walks of life. There were about 120 people there throughout the night, all middle aged. I talked for a long time with a woman from New York City who had seen the Dalai Llama once. She was funny, a great warm soul. Another woman I met was quite interesting, she had spent something like 5 years in England, 4 years in Hong Kong, 4 years in Paris, and 5 years in New York state. She was an artist, and had a british accent. She kept talking about her 17 year old daughter "Oh you should meet my daughter! She would *love* you!"

As the night wore on everybody was getting drunker. A guy had brought his accordion, and asked me to jam, so I pulled out my guitar and we jammed indeed - he played some really nice tango type stuff, simple chords which were easy to follow. It sounded really great, the accordion can be really such a beautiful instrument! Crowds amassed as we played. They danced their hearts out. My mom was having the time of her life dancing with various people, and

my uncle Frank - a great tall fellow. After playing music my mom and I went up into the "smoke room," which was a tiny but comfortable attic room with beautiful paintings hung up all over the walls - lots of nudes, a couch, and lots of people hanging out smoking cigars.

Various people came and went in the smoke room. Some were really great characters. A big bald middle aged man who listened intently to whatever you said and always responded in an understanding way, and took your idea further, even if it was complete nonsense. There was also a quiet guy from England there, who when asked jokingly "What do you bring to the party? You've been rather quiet" replied in a totally dry and suave manner (with a British accent of course) "I'm insane. I bring the insane element to the party." I just about rolled around laughing! Then there was a big biker-looking guy with a huge mustache and straight blonde hair, who intently told various stories of adventure, with his slight southern drawl, and mused whimsically while drawing intricate designs on a plastic cup. He taught me how to blow smoke rings with the cigar smoke. It felt like hanging out with friends, but they were all over 40. No matter, they still knew how to party!

The next day was really nice, a breakfast of bacon and eggs with coffee and the company of my grandmother. My aunt and uncle Mary and Eric came, they are so great! Mary and I call each other "Bahnie!" and laugh. While Eric was intently playing chess with my brother Sean, Mary and I went for a walk around town. Kinderhook, New York, what a place. The town is pretty dead, not much going on at all, but the area is beautiful. We could see the Catskill Mountains in the distance as we walked and talked. The place was really beautiful - some nice fields, an apple orchard, an old falling apart barn with mountains towering behind it in the distance. We talked about how the US is so spacious and open compared to Europe, where every inch of land is used. We agreed that if my friends from Germany came it would blow their minds! She loved traveling in Europe, and loves traveling in General. I told her stories of Germany and our trips and adventures. She listened with great love and told me some stories of her own. She longs to travel, but is sort of stuck in a dull routine, a job she doesn't love or hate. Maybe she'll visit me in Germany one day.

When we got back to the house I talked with Eric about cameras, and took pictures of him with a lampshade on his head - with his mustache of greatness sticking out and rimless glasses shining in the sunlight. At the party he told me that I'd changed since going to Germany - that I'm much more animated and loosened up now. At the party I had told him about Greece, and he told me a story about when he was my age - he randomly met a guy driving to Vermont, and hitched a ride there with him! After the 8 hour drive to Vermont, they are in Vermont and go to some party. He stumbles out not knowing where he is or where the guy went, and hitch hikes all the way back home to New York, all in one day!

On the drive back home through the snow covered tree speckled hills of New York I had a great conversation with my mom and brother about life and death. What is it about? What to people consider to be important in life as they are dying? Leaving the world forever and taking nothing with them, what is important? My mom said what comes up most when people are dying is the question "Have I loved, and have I been loved?" I had the feeling that *that's it!* *That* could serve as a great guiding principle in life. In light of death, most of our problems are not really problems, and it leads to always being aware and

compassionate towards other people in day to day life. Maybe that's why all those wise men have said "Help people, serve people."

I decided to take up my professor's offer and work in Lowell for a week, staying at the Cambridge Zen Center. I have only a slight idea what it will be like to live at the Zen Center - intense meditation, every morning and evening, and sometimes interviews with a Zen master. I'm excited. I'm sure it will be an adventure! It reminds me of leaving for Germany - into the void of the unknown again.

Chapter 8

March

8.1 Zen Center Day 1

MONDAY, MARCH 3, 2008

After a good day of research work with old friends, I embarked on my week at the Cambridge Zen Center. I was greeted by a guy I had met there before, a “senior Dharma teacher” I believe. He showed me to my little empty room, then we ate dinner with about 6 people. The people there for dinner were all older, mostly over 40. There were some interesting characters, who I’m sure I’ll get to know throughout the week: an extremely dignified and well spoken American guy (if he sang, he would sound like Frank Sinatra), a gray haired and perfectly articulate German woman, a very quiet younger guy from Korea, a jolly guy with a southern accent and big face and mustache, and a woman from Korea. The conversation turned towards politics and the situation with gypsies in Austria - how society criticizes them and blames problems on them because they stay in their own self contained society, but at the same time if they try to integrate into society they are rejected. Everyone seemed to know quite a lot about it, certainly much more than I.

After dinner was an hour of chanting, then a half-hour of meditation. We all put on robes and went into the “Dharma room,” a big room with meditation cushions lined up around the edge of the shiny wooden floor, and a big altar with a Buddha statue, incense, and various other alien things on it. The walls were completely empty and white, except for a portrait of Seung Sahn, the Zen master from Korea who founded the Kwan-um school of Zen and also the Cambridge Zen Center.

So what is this chanting? What is the difference between special and regular chanting? Well I found out. The “special chanting” was Korean chants spelled out phonetically in the chanting book which were sung too fast to follow and with a pretty active melody which would take many repetitions to learn. Only a few people were there for that, but they were intense. They knew these chants without looking at the book, and they are really long chants! Sometimes I smiled to myself and almost laughed at the insanity of the whole thing - a bunch of old guys singing jolly incomprehensible chants, something like “hum yak shi-ji hum yuk cho, ro-shi ji-ju” Then, for a really long time in the middle of special chanting was “kwan-se-um bosal” repeated over and over and over and over to

the same melody, so that part I could follow. That was kind of a weird experience - after so many repetitions (and I knew that more were coming until who knows when), the sound of that chant filled my whole entire head for a few seconds here and there. It was almost scary in a way, disappearing and reappearing. The regular chanting was the same thing but slower with simpler (followable) melodies, with no “kwan-se-um bosal,” plus the Heart Sutra in English. A few more people came to that one.

The meditation was pretty intense. It was fine for a while, with swirls of thoughts coming and going while peacefully sitting there. After a while I got an urge to just do something, to get up and leave and do something, anything. I realized that is part of the whole thing though, part of the path, so kept sitting there. That feeling reoccurred many times. I began questioning what I was doing - what am I doing at the Zen Center, what is this “Zen Center?” What is the deal with all the bowing? Maybe this meditation thing is just too hellish for me, maybe I would prefer just working on stuff and doing stuff. Well wait a minute, who is it that has that preference? What am I? That’s always the impenetrable question - what am I? What is this? There’s also always the question “why bother?” “Why meditate at all?” After meditation everyone immediately dissolved into the Zen Center, disappeared, I was left with these two guys sitting on the couch engrossed in conversation about some apartment. I didn’t really know what to do, so I just went to bed, I guess that’s what everybody else did.

As I was going to bed I realized that there was a pervasive mood or feeling at the Zen Center and surrounding Buddhism in general, bleakness. Absolute loneliness, and also the attitude to not run away from it but embrace it as your teacher. It is particularly hard to describe this atmosphere, bleakness and loneliness don’t do it justice. Life is centered around practice, there is no room for all the other stuff, no room to occupy yourself for the sake of indulging in the distraction, that desire to indulge and all its baggage just falls off like layers of an onion. Your identity is thrown out into the cold night to die. It is genuinely uncomfortable. But alas, life goes on, we’re still here!

1 comment:

simpletonic said...

curran! you are such a fascinating human being. You really are living, my friend. This sounds really neat! I shall continue to read!

8.2 Zen Center Day 2

TUESDAY, MARCH 4, 2008

Wake up at 5:00 AM, the head guy walks around ringing a bell outside all the rooms. Into the robes to do 108 bows at 5:15. Bowing means going from standing up to being kneeling down on the floor with your forehead on the floor and palms turned upwards. 108 times! My legs were sore after that. The whole time I was occupied looking at what the other people were doing so I could get it right. People seemed to be pretty much asynchronously doing it, sometimes someone would only bow standing up a few times, then go back to kneeling. I was trying to figure out if there was a pattern to when they bowed all the way and when they only did a half bow.

After the bows I finally met the woman who had set me up with the room, the director. There was a house meeting going on, which I was not invited to, “but you’re welcome to sit in the alternate Dharma room!” she said. Ok, sure. She led me to the “alternate Dharma room” which was a smaller meditation room. Another guest was there. I had met her briefly earlier. She was from California, and had spent the past two years in Korea living in a monastery in the mountains and teaching English.

Meditation ended at 7 AM, then everyone had breakfast. Breakfast was every man for himself, but everyone can have anything from a wealth of communally owned food. There are shelves of spices, a refrigerator full of fruit, plenty of cereals, bananas laid out in a big box, huge glass jars of various nuts and oats and beans and things. I looked around and saw one guy putting together a monstrous bowl or fruit with yogurt and nuts, one guy was cooking an egg, the girl from California was making coffee in a giant French press, some people were sitting down already eating. There was a pot with some kind of grain in it that people were eating - the same thing we had for dinner the day before. I had some of that, and a banana. I was rushed leaving as I barely had time enough to catch the 8:10 train to Lowell.

I was hungry when I arrived in Lowell. The meager grain and banana was not enough. I got a bagel and coffee from Dunkin Donuts at the train station and ate it on the bus to campus. The bus braked sharply. My large coffee went hurtling toward the floor and spilled everywhere. There wasn’t much I could do about it, so I just kept eating my bagel. A scruffy old guy with dirty crooked teeth and gray stubble on his chin and big thick glasses - typical Lowell folk - noticed the coffee on the floor a few minutes after I spilled it. He looked at it, shifted his gaze to my cup, then looked at me. I looked at him and said “yep, it was me.” He said in his crony old high pitched voice “Ah! I was wondering where that was coming from! ...Well no worries, nobody got hurt.” I said smiling “right! Nobody’s dead.” He laughed “Heehaahee! Nobody’s dead! Thats right!”

The working day was good, always something new and exciting storming into the room and demanding full attention, possibly altering what I’ll be working on ...and maybe the future of the world! There’s always something to do and big ideas flying around.

On the way back to Boston I missed the train by seconds and had to wait for the next one. Taking the later train didn’t give me much time to get the Zen Center for meditation. I got there, was all set to go in with robe on and all, and I noticed a sign on the door that said something like “Do not come in during practice. For example, 7:30 is ok, but 7:31 is not.” It was 7:31. I took off the robes disappointedly and sulked about not knowing what to do. A lady doing stuff in the kitchen told me that if I went in just then, it would be ok because they would be walking, “But hurry! Go now!” she said. Ok, I put the robe back on and went in. They were not walking, they were sitting. It was completely silent. Every single person looked up at me as I entered - full attention - with the look that says “Oh no, he did something wrong.” A guy near the door got up and showed me out. He said in a calm and hushed voice “We don’t come in late. You can sit here until we start walking.” He unfolded a lone mat and cushion outside the door. “You’ll hear a clapping sound, come in then.” I said “OK.” He went back in without a sound.

So I sat there until I heard the clapping sound, at which point a few people

came out to go to the bathroom. I went in and walked around with them. They do walking meditation between the three half-hour sitting sessions every Tuesday. I appended myself to the end of the snake of walking robes. When everybody resumed their places, there was no spot for me, so I was stuck at the end in no mans land, popped out at the end, standing there not knowing what to do. The girl from California signaled for me to go to the other side, which I did and found a place to sit. The Zen Master came in, turned up the lights which were dim, and read a story:

Ko Bong was one of the greatest Zen Masters in Sung dynasty China. When he was twenty years old, his teacher gave him the kong-an: "Where was I before I was born, and where will I be after I die?" As he meditated on this kong-an, he came to feel like a traveler who had lost his way in a dark forest. "At that time," he later wrote, "I was altogether dazed by my own delusions."

Three years passed. Ko Bong struggled with the kong-an day and night, unable to achieve any degree of one-pointedness. Finally, in despair, he went to see the famous Zen Master Seorl Am. Ko Bong told him of his failure to penetrate the kong-an, and asked for his help.

"We have been told," said the Master, "that all beings have Buddha-nature. This is the teaching of all Buddhas, past, present, and future. However, when a monk came to Zen Master Jo-ju and asked if dogs have Buddha-nature, Jo-ju said, 'No!' What does this 'No' mean?"

Ko Bong was stunned. As he struggled to come up with an answer, the Master took his staff, hit him viciously on the shoulder, and chased him out.

So, in great pain, and weeping with humiliation, Ko Bong returned to his monastery. He couldn't stop thinking about the Master's question. What could it mean? What could it mean? Suddenly, like a flame in a dark room, an understanding was kindled inside his mind, and it spread until it filled his whole being. The original kong-an "Where was I before I was born, and where will I be after I die?" seemed obvious now.

The next day, as he was working in the monastery fields, Seorl Am came to visit. He said, "Good morning, How is your search coming along?" Ko Bong said, "If a man kills his desire to search, he will surely find what he is searching for."

Suddenly the Master grabbed him by the collar and shouted, "Who is dragging this corpse?" Although Ko Bong had understood the kong-an perfectly, he again was paralyzed and could only stare like a moron. The Master pushed him away and left.

Ko Bong was so troubled by this new failure that he couldn't sleep for days. Then, one night, his first teacher appeared to him in a dream, and gave him another kong-an: "All things return to the One; where does the One return?" When he woke up, he found that all his doubts and confusion has coalesced into one mass, which weighed on his heart like a huge rock. For five days he walked about

in a stupor. On the sixth day he wandered into the great hall of the monastery, where the monks happened to be commemorating the death of the fifth patriarch of the Lin-chi school. For the occasion, they had hung up a portrait of the patriarch, on which he himself had inscribed the following stanza:

Thirty-six thousand mornings
in one hundred years.
Don't you know by now
that it is the same old fellow?

As Ko Bong read the last word, a realization burst upon him. "At that moment," he later wrote. "I felt as if the whole universe had been chopped up into tiny pieces and the whole earth leveled flat. There was no I, there was no world. It was like one mirror reflecting another, I asked myself several kong-ans, and the answers were transparently clear."

The next day he went to see Seorl Am. The Master asked him, "Who is dragging around this lifeless body of yours?"

Ko Bong shouted "KATZ!!!"

The Master took hold of his stick. but Ko Bong snatched it out of his hand and said, "Uh-uh. You can't hit me today."

The Master said, "Why not?"

Ko Bong got up and walked out of the room.

Some time later, another Zen Master visited Ko Bong and said, "Congratulations, I hear you have attained the great enlightenment."

Ko Bong smiled and said, "Thank you."

The Master said, "Can you maintain this state at all times?"

"Yes indeed."

"While you are working or sleeping or dreaming?"

"Yes, even in dreams."

"How about in dreamless sleep, where there is no sight or sound or consciousness. Where is your enlightenment then?"

Seeing that Ko Bong couldn't answer, the Master said, "Let me give you some advice. When you are hungry, eat; when you are tired, rest. The minute you wake up every morning, ask yourself, 'Who is the master of this body, and where does he reside?' This will lead you to a final understanding."

So Ko Bong made up his mind to work on this question without interruption, even if it should drive him insane.

Five years passed.

Then he and a friend left on a pilgrimage to the north of China. On their way they stopped at an inn. Being very tired, the friend fell asleep immediately. Ko Bong sat in a corner and meditated. Suddenly, as the friend moved in his sleep, his wooden pillow fell

to the floor. Ko Bong heard the noise and his mind burst open and the whole universe was flooded with light. He understood not only his own kong-an, but all the kong-ans handed down by Buddha and the patriarchs. He felt like a distant traveler who has finally come home. At this moment of great awakening, he composed the following stanza:

The man who has come to this
is the man who was here from the beginning.
He does what he always did.
Nothing has changed.

The story was finished. The Zen Master dimmed the lights and left us all to meditate in silence for another hour. My turn for a kong-an interview finally came. I had done this once before with the same Zen Master, in the summer. He remembered me. I bowed as is proper and sat on the cushion on the floor across from him. He said “did you bring any questions for me?” I said “Yes. How do I sit and meditate properly?” I sat in the position I learned. He said “hands like that, straight back, this is how your body sits, but much more important is” he pointed to his head “how the mind sits. Attention. Do not concentrate on, but attend to the breath. Give it your attention. Air comes in, abdomen goes up, air goes out, abdomen falls. Thoughts come, notice them and come back to the breath. Always come back to the breath.” “that’s it?” said I. “Yes. If it were interesting, what would it do?” “distract us?” I ventured. He said “It would get us all caught up in our thinking, which has nothing to do with being present in this moment.”

“How many interviews have you had so far?” He asked. “4 or 5.” “And What have you attained during those interviews?” I wasn’t quite sure what he meant, so I hesitated to answer and thought about it a moment. He saw me thinking and said “No, come on, what did you attain?” I suddenly recalled the game and hit the floor. He said “right, but it comes from here” he said, making a fist and pressing it into his abdomen. He knew my hitting the floor was just a recitation. He put a bell on the carpet in front of my and said “If you say this is a bell, you are attached to name and form. If you say this is not a bell, you are attached to emptiness. Is this a bell or not a bell?” I hit the floor. He said “And?” I picked up the bell and rang it, even though the bell is the signal for the next person to come in. “Good.” he said, then put a cup of tea on the floor in front of me and said “Cup or not a cup?” Again I hit the floor, again he said “And?” I took the cup in my hands and drank the cold tea in it. “Good.” he said, then put his Zen stick on the floor in front of me and said “Zen stick or not a Zen stick?” I hit the floor, “And?” I hit him with the stick. “Good.” he said, then put his Zen stick on the floor in front of me and the bell on the floor next to it and said “Zen stick and bell, same or different?” I hit the floor, he said “And?” I was stumped. He said almost immediately “Work on that. That’s your homework. Next time bring me a good answer.”

8.3 Zen Center Day 3

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 5, 2008 I woke up to my alarm at 5:00 AM again. Immediately I dreaded doing the 108 bows and chanting and meditating. I

considered not doing it and just staying in bed. I fell back asleep, but was woken up again at 5:10 by the guy walking around outside the rooms banging the wooden thing. Then I just got up.

While putting the robes on in the dark silent coat room with the guest robes I asked the girl from California - Lisa "Is it acceptable to not go all the way down to the floor when I do my bows? My legs are killing me from yesterday." She said "Oh yeah, definitely, you can do half bows." That's what I did. I noticed that some people were always going all the way down, some people alternating between half and whole bows, and some only occasionally doing a full bow. Aha! They are doing what they can, not following any patterns.

I decided to take the 9:10 train to Lowell today instead of the 8:10, so I wouldn't be rushed in eating breakfast and would have time to talk with people. I had a big bowl of cereal and made a pot of coffee for myself and Lisa and whoever else wanted some. I was introduced to the freezer, the coffee beans, the coffee grinder, and the location of the coffee filters. The conversation over breakfast around the big square wooden table was about politics and the current elections - Hillary's recent successes after a string of losses. Their knowledge of the situation was incredible, or maybe it just seemed incredible because I knew so little. One minute the room was full of lively people eating all kinds of stuff and conversing, and the next it was completely empty. It was incredible how everyone disappeared all at once in different directions at about 7:35. I was left all alone to finish my cereal and coffee in complete silence.

Waiting for the bus to work in Lowell I met a really old guy. We were the only two people on the platform. He looked at me and said "Well we've got a 10 minute wait." I said "Do we? I thought it left at 9:00" He said "It leaves at 10:10, in ten minutes!" I laughed and said "Oh yes! It's 10:00! I was confused, I thought it was 9:00." He said "Join the club! Wait'll you get to be my age!" After some smalltalk he asked "going to school?" I said "no, going to work." "You're a lucky guy." he said. "You've got something to do, something to live for. Not like me, I don't got nut'na live for anymore. The world is yours to take a bite out of it. You're in a position to make something of life." I asked "I'm curious what your take is on this: why take a bite out of it? Why make something of it? What's the point of it all? Is it purely for personal satisfaction?" He said "Boy if you can find personal satisfaction, then you've succeeded. Personal satisfaction is the most important thing, because it determines your happiness, day to day." We continued talking on the bus. He said "Boy you can't figure it out, nobody can. All those psychologists try to figure one person out and they can't do it - and they were all grade A students! So you can try to figure out how to live, what decisions to make ... can't do it! No chance! Hahaha! You know one of my favorite expressions is 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions.' I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, but at the time I thought I was right! I was goin-a school, then I met a damn broad! Then it all went straight to hell. You never know how things-a gonna turn out."

I told some people at work about some of the things I experienced at the Zen Center - they were surprised at the intensity of the meditation I described due to the persistent desire to get up and do something. One guy said "meditation's not supposed to be intense, it's supposed to be calm and peaceful." Another guy said "I don't know man, maybe you're diving too deep too fast. I'm not sure it's good to go from almost no meditation to doing it two or three hours a

day. I suggest you start at 5 minutes a day and gradually work it up to longer periods.”

Before meditation in the evening I asked the director if it is somehow dangerous to meditate too much, as in to go from nothing to full daily practice. She said “Oh no, not at all, I think any amount of practice is good, daily practice is not too much. It’s too much though when you’re practicing all the time and there’s no time to take care of your life - when it interferes too much with work and family. It’s too much when you are doing three month retreats in the mountains three or four times a year.”

After meditation I had a great conversation with the woman who erroneously told me to go into the meditation room late the day before - Beth. I told her about all the things I had been experiencing, and was relieved to hear she had also experienced all the same things. I said “Often when I am meditating I feel an incredible urge to get up and do something,” She said “Oh yeah, I get that too, I think everybody does. You know that’s a really great thing to bring up in an interview with a Zen master, because we can work with that, use it as a tool rather than try to get rid of it. That’s one of the key things in Zen. Actually I think this urge is one of the most powerful things in the world, it’s what drives people to act.” I also mentioned “Doing the ‘kwan-se-un bosal’ chanting I completely disappeared into the sound, and when I reappeared it was very disorienting, like ‘now I know that there is actually nothing there to hang on to at all - really nothing at all’ and was disturbed by it, so it was really scary and intense in a way. I know it sounds totally crazy...” “Oh no not at all!” she interjected, “It’s not crazy at all, you know I have the same experience sometimes, particularly for me it generates great fear of that state you described, which we often call ‘don’t-know mind’ - the fear of complete groundlessness. You know I brought that up in a question at a dharma talk once. I don’t remember what the answer was, but after the talk a bunch of people came up to me and said ‘yeah, I’m glad you mentioned that, because I feel the same thing, I can completely relate to what you said.’ That’s also a really good thing to bring up in an interview. Talk to a Zen master about that.”

We also talked about what it’s like to move into the Zen Center. She said “There are so many little subtleties about living here that take more than a few days to pick up. But the thing is, it’s OK to make mistakes. It’s the Zen way of life - learning by experience. You’ll find that the way to learn to live here is just to observe what other people are doing and do it yourself, or to learn what to do in a certain situation by getting into the situation and being forced to figure it out. Rarely does anybody tell you orally how to do things, only when it’s functionally necessary or you ask about it directly. So actually making mistakes is a big part of it, and what’s great is, people here don’t hold it against you when you make mistakes, they don’t even look down upon it. It is viewed as a learning experience, so they try to help you learn.”

Lisa, came back late and knocked on the front door, so Beth and I went and opened it for her. We had a brief but wonderful conversation. She asked “How’s your commute going?” I said “Oh just fine. I’ve begun to look at it as not time I am forced to waste but open time, for reading or doing stuff on my computer. So it makes the whole thing much more bearable, much more manageable.” “Genius! That’s great! How is your stay so far?” She asked. “Well it has been pretty intense. Some kind of strange trip. It was kind of uncomfortable being here in the beginning.” she nodded and said “For me too.”

It's always like that, adjusting to a new place and learning how things work." I continued "but today and yesterday I am really feeling the love! The people are all actually really wonderful when you get down to it!" She said "Yeah! me too! It really is a great community."

Lying in bed I was in a great mood and considered: maybe I really would like to live here. But what about the commute - that sucks. And meditating is often hellish, that kind of sucks. But maybe all that shittiness, all the shittiness that pervades life, isn't really shitty after all - we make it shitty and can learn how not to. Maybe learning that fact, learning how to live it, then living it, is the whole point of Zen. Hmm...

4 comments:

Student Nurse said...

Hey Curran, I think I met you one day at Eggroll. Anyway, I saw your blog linked through Adam's. I really liked reading about your conversation with that man on the bus.

simpletonic said...

i agree with the nurse...that conversation with the man was wonderful! Curran your day-to-day life seems so exotic and interesting. Sounds like you're really taking a bite out of it.

peace to you, friend!

mbs said...

Hi Curran - I read some of your blog. So interesting - Ive been thinking about a lot of the same things that you have.

I love some of the things about Buddhism. Here are the parts I like and think I understand. The wheel of suffering - some people (most?) spend their lives chasing things that are empty and this causes suffering. In Buddhism I think they call them the 8 worldly dharmas. Things like money, success, pleasure. Okay - a more official list: "gain and loss, fame and defame, praise and blame, pleasure and pain." They say that this chasing never ends - they call it the wheel of suffering. So maybe those things are empty goals? But arent they natural human instincts that formed over the course of evolution? Or maybe they were useful for keeping humans alive and reproducing back in the day, but harmful now? Maybe they are misleading goals? Maybe they are just byproducts of life things that you cant force, but hope to have. I like the mindfulness part of Buddhism - being in the moment and feeling the current moment - otherwise we just miss it completely and I find peace in that - no stress about what isn't happening right now - I can worry about that later. I love the Dalai Lama - having compassion for others is what brings connectedness and joy.

Heres a great quote about feeling more by Christopher Alexander amazing guy, an architect (of buildings) who actually influenced parts of computer science - like patterns - "A man is alive when he is wholehearted, true to himself, true to his own inner forces, and able to act freely according to the nature of the situations he is in.

To be happy, and to be alive in this sense, are almost the same. Of course, a man who is alive is not always happy in the sense of feeling pleasant; experiences of joy are balanced by experiences of sorrow. But the experiences are all deeply felt; and above all, the man is whole and conscious of being real... This state cannot be reached merely by inner work. There is a myth, sometimes widespread, that a person need do only inner work, in order to be alive like this; that a man is entirely responsible for his own problems; and that to cure himself, he need only change himself. This teaching has some value, since it is so easy for a man to imagine that his problems are caused by 'others'. But it is a one-sided and mistaken view which also maintains the arrogance of the belief that the individual is self-sufficient, and not dependent in any essential way on his surroundings."

4dam said...

Inspiring as always. I'm thinking of swinging by some thursday after work for the Intro to Zen Meditation.

Chapter 9

April

9.1 An Incredible Day

SUNDAY, APRIL 6, 2008

Today was one of the most amazing days I have had in Germany. I feel deeply that the whole thing was worthwhile, and the friends I have made will be lifelong. We took a trip to Dillenburg.

In the morning at 10:07 AM I was woken up by sweet Agnes coming for breakfast. More people came a few minutes later, each had brought something to eat. Chris and Matt were there - the two new American exchange students from Illinois, Ebru from Turkey was there, and a friend of Agnes came too, a German girl called Anja. Agnes made some kind of delicious Indonesian egg garlic thing, we cooked croissants and brewed a nice pot of coffee.

Chris and Matt decided to join the exchange student trip to Mainz instead of coming with us to Dillenburg. We all thought about maybe doing that instead, but decided to go to Dillenburg and part ways. They left a little earlier than Agnes, Ebru, Anja, and I.

Anja asked “Why are we going to Dillenburg?” Agnes and I told her about how on Easter, she and I had nothing to do after breakfast so we took random trains in random directions and ended up in Wetzlar (which is a really nice place actually). The last stop of the train we were on was Dillenburg, so during that Wetzlar trip we asked ourselves “What is in Dillenburg?” and discussed it for a while - the mystery that it was - and speculated about what might be there. We decided to one day take a day trip to Dillenburg, still not knowing anything about it. When explaining it to Anja, the point came down to the notion that the path is the goal - that the experience of embarking on a mystery journey in the German countryside with friends was more the point of the trip than to see Dillenburg.

So with this in mind we set off. It was raining, and we had to run like hell to catch the tram. When we got to the train station, we happened to run into the group of exchange students who were going to Mainz. Chris and Matt spontaneously decided to come with us to Dillenburg instead of go to Mainz, because the exchange students were mostly Brazilian people who only spoke with each other in Portuguese, which sort of stifles integration and might make for a boring trip.

Reunited, we took the train to Frankfurt. I was sitting next to an old couple, and the guy asked me in thickly accented German if we were arriving in Frankfurt soon. I said no and clarified where we were. He had a great smile when he understood something or made some point. He told me he had never been in Frankfurt before, so we got talking and it turns out they were from Greece. I told him about our trip to Greece, and his eyes lit up when I mentioned the island Serifos. I love these little gems of humanity that one comes across when traveling.

The train ride was beautiful, especially near Gießen. The weather was mostly cloudy, but sometimes the sun would break through and illuminate the rolling fields and distant green hills. By now we all know each other quite well, and we really resonate well as a group. It was interesting to see Anja getting to know everybody - it was a perfectly organic process of integration. The language flowed freely between German and English, topics branched out into other topics, lots about expressions and words in German and in English which came up when we tried to express something.

Dillenburg turned out to be a nice small city in a very hilly region. We walked up one of the hills to the old castle, and from there we could see tons of houses packed together in the valley and hills in the distance. It was really cold and the sky was purely dull white clouds. We ate our leftover croissants and toast with jam and tea (we had brought two thermoses of hot water) at the top of the hill.

After the two hour train ride back to Darmstadt, Ebru hosted a dinner party at her apartment. Lots of various people came from various countries and brought various food which was cooked and mixed all together. Agnes made a delicious Indonesian peanut sauce, some guy from Turkey made spicy corn, a German guy brought Leberkse - a Bavarian thing that looks like a piece of toast but is cheese-textured meat that tastes sort of like sausage. We laid out blankets on the floor and ate buffet style, listening to Ebru's wonderful Turkish music and drinking rak - the Turkish drink of choice.

After dinner was dancing. The Turkish people there were dancing especially well. The music and the traditional dances were really part of them and were very natural. I was loving the whole Turkish mood, and so was Matt. The whole party had an incredibly warm vibe.

After the party, a few people stayed for tea. After everybody left it was just Matt, Ebru, and I. We had a gem of a conversation about how we have all considered changing the direction of our lives since being in Germany. Matt is also a programmer, and he said "You know, I really wouldn't mind never having to deal with debugging or semaphores or any of that ever again! I would be perfectly happy learning languages and getting to know different cultures." We discussed further about how we love the experience here because everything is new, but the newness of things eventually wears out. Also about some really cool aspects of doing computer science - like the satisfaction that comes with deeply grokking some system or process, or getting something to work elegantly and being proud of your achievement.

I shared the conclusion I've come up with for myself after being in Germany for a while - follow my needs and interests moment by moment, chaotically alternating between activities. In the long term, a coherent structure of activities forms and evolves organically, and life is well balanced and healthy. The most feasible and worthwhile activities bubble to the top and provide substantial

rewards.

During that conversation I felt like we were really relating to each other deeply, sharing and investigating together the uncertainty of our place in the universe. I think the three of us will remain friends for a long time.

4 comments:

simpletonic said...

curran, I love your outlook on life. keep on sharing it!

Ebru said...

I think so :) Thank you for that day and also the other nice times we spent so far... and a pity today I missed the train :(with best wishes

Justin said...

“follow my needs and interests moment by moment, chaotically alternating between activities. In the long term, a coherent structure of activities forms and evolves organically, and life is well balanced and healthy. The most feasible and worthwhile activities bubble to the top and provide substantial rewards.”

The true words of a mad poet. Keep rapping you mad hatter.

snim said...

Hi Curran,

I stoped by to say hi. I am sorry that I missed a chance to meet you that day in Cambridge.

A big hug,

Snim

9.2 Katzenbuckel

MONDAY, APRIL 21, 2008

One Saturday we went to the Odenwald Katzenbuckel - a big hill in the forest south of Frankfurt. This trip had been Dave’s vision for a while. We finally organized it and went. Dave and I sort of freaked out the night before the trip, because we did some last minute research and found out that the buses to Katzenbuckel only run every 3 hours or something ridiculous, and that it would be a really really long walk from the nearby town of Eberbach - about 5 kilometers through hills. We decided at breakfast to go anyway, and just see the town if it wasn’t possible to go to the Katzenbuckel.

We invited a lot of people, but somehow most of them thought that it was canceled and didn’t show up. We ended up with motley group of 8 people, which was just fine anyway - Dave, Mikko from Finland, two girls from Poland, a guy from Sweden with a great deadpan sense of humor, a German girl, and Caitlin.

The train ride was beautiful. Going southward into the hills and forests. It was a quieter Germany than I had seen before. We arrived in Eberbach and

decided to hike the 5 kilometers out of the quaint town through the green hills. It was very exhausting for many of us (except one of the Polish girls, who told me she routinely climbs mountains in Poland). We arrived at some old tower with a nice view and ate some food, then went onward to the Katzenbuckel - the highest point in the Odenwald.

We walked through many variations of forest. Some tall straight trees, some clearings, some pools of water, some thick pine trees. We passed some strange breed of construction workers on the way. Finally we arrived at the top of the Katzenbuckel and ate some cheese. We could see from the tower other hills far in the distance, even the Taunus mountains north of Frankfurt. This quiet wooded German vista is heavenly.

We walked down the other side of the Katzenbuckel, saw some horses, walked through the woods, saw some wild boar (the girls went “awww!” at the baby boars), and took the train home through the hilly green fields at sunset, all exhausted.

9.3 A Day in the Life

MONDAY, JUNE 9, 2008

I am eating my eggs and toast and coffee with sounds of birds and a cool morning breeze coming in through the window. It’s very quiet, all the German students are still sleeping or already gone to class. Looking to my right I see green plants covering our building, and the light from the white sky. On the windowsill there are some almost empty bottles of tequila and rum, and full bottles of vodka and wine left over from some party I hosted. There is a big red salad bowl on the table who lost it’s owner. My speakers are still on the table from when the walkway outside my flat was filled with happy people dancing to loud bulgarian music late at night. There’s also some Ceylon tea on the table that Laura gave me as she was packing her things. She’s back in Italy now, I look forward to visiting her there a month from now!

The coffee pot is still filled with tea from last night when Agnes, Caitlin, and Marissa came over before the football (soccer) game. I’ll have to clean that. My beer bottle from last night is on the coffee table. It accompanied me through the Germany Vs. Poland match of the Europameisterschaft - a crowd of Germans crowded around a projector screen in our courtyard, eating grilled sausages and steak, drinking locally brewed beer, and screaming passionately at the football match. Caitlin said hearing German screamed reminds her instantly of all those Holocaust films she saw in school. Germany won the game, and the crowd of drunken students began screaming in glory and dancing around. Some guy lit fireworks, it was wonderful! There was a sweet girl from Vietnam there who thought my German folk dancing imitation was hilarious, we danced together for a while, then everyone went home. Agnes and our friend Victor from Russia came over and we watched TV for an hour or so, then went home to bed.

My flatmate Jenny just popped in and out. She came in with a bunch of bags and I said “Hallo!”, trying to sound German. She said also “Hallo!” and went on silently into her room. It’s always a bit awkward, we rarely have anything to say to each other, and when we do the conversation is short lived because it takes so much effort to communicate. It’s like that with all my flatmates, but they are really nice people, and we live together just fine. Jenny came back out

with some basket and said smiling “Muss mal Milch kaufen!” (I need to buy some milk). I said “Ah!” and nodded, then like always “Tschuess!” “Tschuess!” (the polite German word for “see ya later”).

Off to my Programming Massively Parallel Processors class. As I walk to the tram I pass Peter’s moped. Peter is a chill American guy who has lived in various interesting parts of the world because of his parents’ missionary work - Turkey, Iran, Germany. He comes often to our various events. I took the tram to Rosstrfer Platz and walked the few minutes to the Fraunhofer institute - through the calm streets of shutterless German houses, past people on bikes, an old woman in traditional Arabic robes and a black scarf covering her face. In the Fraunhofer building where my class was there were two guys raised up in a giant spider-like machine washing the slanted glass ceiling. The guy controlling it lifted himself until he hit his head on the glass, then the two guys started cracking up laughing, wobbling up and down in the air.

Matt arrived at just about the same time I did, so I accompanied him to the cafe in Fraunhofer to grab the usual delights of coffee and Fanta. Professor Goesele enlightened us to the nature of CUDA in his usual relaxed and direct manner. It was as inspiring as always. Afterwards my head was bubbling with visions of parallel algorithms.

After class Matt and I had lunch at the Mensa (cafeteria) and happened to run into Sam from England and Mickael from Finland. We ended up talking about our various summer travel plans - I’m going to Italy and Amsterdam next month, Sam’s going to go somewhere crazy for his 21st birthday at the end of July, Matt is going to some place in Germany with some old friends of his from a high school German exchange.

After lunch I didn’t have much time to get to a meeting with two classmates of mine. I walked briskly through campus, past all the nerdy looking people, past the entrance to the beautiful Herrengarten park, up the university steps with a view if a big old church in the distance, and into the Bistro of the Computer Science building. I got myself a coffee and a Fanta (parched from the spicy Asian food of the Mensa) and went upstairs. There were students at every table with their laptops or books out. I thought we had planned on meeting on Monday at 2:00 to discuss our Optimizing Compilers project, but the guys weren’t there. So I waited for 45 minutes or so and worked on programming some ideas I had about shared memory access patterns for cellular automata in CUDA while sipping my coffee.

They never came. I left the Computer Science building and walked through the neighboring Herrengarten - past the old guys playing giant chess, people laying in the green grass, a couple cuddling on a bench, a guy feeding ducks bread, a bronze statue of a naked man, and the great big trees. I kept walking through Karolinenplatz - a wide open cobblestone area surrounded by grand old buildings - up the street past the newly constructed super modern conference center called Darmstadtium, up past the Fraunhofer to good old Rundeturmstrasse 10, where I work. Looking up I saw the big white rectangular bulge on the top left of the building which is the legendary Encarnao’s office - towering over everyone around, a fitting abode for the grandest boss of them all.

I went up to the second floor (the third actually, because the numbering starts at zero, just like it ought to!) into my office and was greeted as always by my two colleagues. I sat myself down and implemented my cellular automata dreams in my CUDA card equipped Ubuntu box. I actually have approaching

deadlines for three very large projects - Optimizing Compilers, Computer Vision, and the final project for PMPP, so I should have worked on one of those things, or our project at work, but I couldn't resist the temptation to realize my vision. I think this tendency will be the death of me, but also the life. After a few hours a 900X900 Conway's Game of Life was running at 600 frames per second. Holy shit! What power! What incredible potential for useful simulations!

I had to tear myself away from the incredible machine to go meet Thomas, my tandem partner (we improve our German and English by talking over dinner every Monday at 7). Last time he came over I had nothing good to eat and felt ashamed of my lame pasta or whatever it was, but this week I got some of Agnes's legendary peanut sauce from the Asian food market. It was nice 20 minute walk home, as usual - past my favorite graffiti of lunchladies with cakes. Thomas didn't show up for a while, so I went over to the other side of the courtyard to see what Agnes was up to. She was also about to cook dinner, and her Korean flatmate Heena was also there. I invited them to come to my place to eat all together, so that's what we did.

Thomas came and we all ate dinner together - basmati rice, carrots, corn, fish, and some broccolli covered in glorious peanut sauce mixed with a bit of spicy Sambal. My flatmate Ivan also ate with us. He's a quiet guy and normally stays in his room, it was nice that he joined us for once. I wanted to speak English, because last week Thomas and I spoke only German, but the ratio was such that the language always gravitated towards German. Thomas is going to spend next year studying abroad in Vancouver, and he still tends towards that characteristically German thing of substituting the 'S' for the 'TH' sound. Oh well, we can speak English next week.

After dinner Ebru came over! She moved to Freiburg last week to do chemistry research. She just came back to Darmstadt to visit for a day. She'll be catching her flight from Frankfurt to Turkey tomorrow. We had tea - Ebru, Agnes, Ivan, and I - and watched the Italy Vs. Netherlands match of the Europameisterschaft, which is causing HUGE parties these days. Ebru fell asleep on the couch, I guess she had a tiring day of travelling. Agnes and I looked at the world map in my room and talked about all the place we want to go. Ebru and Agnes left, and I played guitar for a while before going to bed. It was a nice day.

4 comments:

4dam said...

Nice to see an update from you. I should be posting the same, but it seems too much is going on. Cheers.

9.4 Italy!

FRIDAY, JULY 11, 2008

After weeks and weeks of relentless programming for three projects and studying for exams, I finally have no work to do for a little while. I decided to take a trip to Italy!

Today I got up, took the bus from Darmstadt to Hahn, and flew to Forli, Italy. It was raining and kind of cold in Darmstadt. Surprisingly I slept through the bus and the flight. Before I knew it I was in Italy! When I arrived it was

incredibly hot outside. Laura met me as planned and drove me to her house in Russi, a small town near Ravenna.

It was wonderful to see Laura again! We were all smiles during the drive. We got lost in peach fields. She stopped and asked a woman working on some farming machine how to get to Russi. She answered in smooth flowing Italian. The old man with her stopped working for a moment to look on. We drove on very narrow roads through all kinds of different crops - grapes, peaches, corn, kiwi.

We eventually made it to the house, a nice huge house. I met her sister's husband, who was working on remodeling the first floor. He couldn't speak English, so it was one of those awkward nod and smile moments. Laura made me a wonderful thing to eat with cheese and tomatoes and fresh basil from the plants outside. After I finished we went outside and ate some fresh plums growing in the front yard.

We went for a bike ride around the area as the sun was going down. The sky was smooth. We could always see big hills in the distance. It's a beautiful and quiet place. Laura was telling me she loves it there, but it's hard to have a social life because it's so quiet. We rode along a narrow road. I thought it was a bike path until a few cars drove by and we had to step to the side. We got stuck waiting for a train gate to open. Laura expressed her frustration that these gates are automatic, and sometimes it takes a half hour or more for the train to actually come! After a few minutes we just went under the gates and through.

The buildings are all so old here! Riding on our bikes we passed so many buildings that just had a look that said "I'm really old." It was beautiful! All these green fields and old buildings and wide open spaces. You could see far away, lots of fields and sparse houses.

After the bike ride I took a shower, then we ate dinner. Laura made pasta and we ate with her sister's husband. They would speak in Italian and Laura and I would speak in English. Sometimes I could understand words here and there, because they some words are similar to English. After dinner Laura took a shower and I had a cocktail with her sister's husband (I know it sounds strange to keep saying 'her sister's husband', but I forgot his name!) It turns out he can speak some English, enough to communicate at least. He told me he was moving his office into the first floor, and that he works in the heating business, selling heating systems.

After dinner we met up with Laura's friend and went into Ravenna. We saw lots of old buildings churches and ancient streets. There were tons of people out at night, and we kept running into people that Laura knew. Laura's friend was hilarious, we all had a great time together. Once I told her something she had never heard; "If Peter Piper picks a peck of picked peppers, then where's the peck of picked peppers Peter Piper picked?" She cracked up laughing for a solid 5 minutes. On the way home (at 2 AM) we stopped at Dante Alighieri's grave. We then went to a bakery and got some fresh canoles and cream filled donuts.

1 comment:

Justin said...

You have made such wonderful friends during your year abroad!
You are very lucky to get such a personal introduction to the Italian

countryside.

I still find it hard to believe that Europe has 10 times the population density of the US. Why are places like Italy and Germany so beautiful and green and open, while the US seems used and abused? I might just be crazy. Have fun!

9.5 Florence!

SATURDAY, JULY 12, 2008

Today Laura and I went to Florence. We drove to Faenza and took the train from there to Florence - Firenze as they say. The train ride went through the hills that we saw in the distance during our bike ride yesterday, all covered in crops or forest or little old houses.

There is way too much in Florence to see in one day. The first thing we saw was Santa Maria Novella, a huge old church. We walked through the narrow streets to the Arno river with its many bridges. It was a hot day, and the sky was perfectly clear. The water looked very dirty, filled with green algae. In the distance we could see the old bridges, a pile of old beautiful buildings on the other side, and hills off in the distance.

Later we went to the Uffizi. That was unbelievable. There's so much there! It's impossible to really see it all in a few hours. Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, really touched those paintings we saw today. That's ridiculous! Time telescoped. The distant past, spoken of in history books, became unified with the present world in which I am now actually living. A wonderfully energetic old British tour guide led a group around. She was great to listen to, a real entertainer. She knew everything about these paintings, and talked about the content and the history behind things.

The most intense part was when she was talking in front of Botticelli's Birth of Venus and La Primavera. She got fairly deep talking about the meaning behind each part of La Primavera, and how it was influenced by Plato's philosophy of love. All of a sudden I grokked the fact that the Greek mythology was really the guiding force in people's life back in the day - the kind of thing fathers would teach their children as they come of age to illustrate a real point in life. This woman had such a strong voice, and she said everything with such passion. Seeing the meaning of the painting as a signpost of how life was, and still is, and really what it is to be human, I almost cried there in front of La Primavera.

All the ancient history that happened around here had been a fairy tale to me until I came here to Italy. All these guys like Julius Caesar and Plato had been just figures in boring history books that we were forced to read in prison, but now I see that they were really really real, and really changed the course of history. The tour guide was talking about how in Florence the church banned people from learning Greek or studying Plato and Aristotle for hundreds of years, and how it was such a culture shock for people to finally be exposed to them. She said of Botticelli and other artists of the time "They were all drunk on Plato!"

We ran out of time and had to rush through the end of the Uffizi. We walked around the city, towards the train station. We passed a bustling narrow market with huge African guys selling fake Rolexes and old women selling jewelry and

all kinds of strange characters walking around. All the streets were beautifully lit by the sun descending in the sky. We walked again to the river, through a sketchier part of the city. There were people sunbathing on the half-dry dam in the river.

We made it home exhausted. I finally met Laura's mother! She prepared us rice and vegetables for dinner. She was so sweet, trying to make me feel comfortable. I'm starting to be able to understand a tiny bit of Italian, for example I know if they are talking about cheese. I can say thank you - grazie!

After dinner we went to an Irish folk music concert. We arrived late so we got in for free. We parked and walked towards the stage, and eventually realized we were coming in from the side, not through the entrance where they were checking people. It was a funny situation, Laura's mom was saying indignantly "scusa, blahblah. Scusa, blah blah blabla" as in "Excuse me, but I simply will not sneak in from the side through this field like some crazy person." But eventually Laura said "blahblahblah finito blahblah" as in "Come on Mom, they're almost finished! I'm sure it's no big deal!" Her mom laughed and we all went on and snuck in through the side.

That was no joke of an outdoor concert - the bleachers and the field and the dance floor were all packed with people watching a hopping Irish folk band, with fiddle and drums and bagpipe and all. Laura and I danced with all the wonderful Italians doing an approximation of an Irish jig. It was a wonderful time for all.

1 comment:
Justin said...

Curran! I am so happy to hear that you finally made it to Florence. The woman was right, they were all drunk on Plato. Let's drink Plato sometime together!

9.6 Marina di Ravenna!

SUNDAY, JULY 13, 2008

Today was a lazy day. We woke up late and had a breakfast of bread and cheese and figs and fresh fruit from the neighbors and real espresso. Laura and I drove to the beach and met up with some of her friends there. We went swimming, the water was warm.

At 6 there was happy hour. Music started blaring from the restaurant/bar/club on the top of the beach. Everyone was calling them "establishments." They run all along the beach, these so called establishments. Apparently this is a very Italian thing - to have bars along the beach and huge hour-long parties every Sunday. The music was loud so it was hard to talk to people. There were macho guys everywhere with no shirts on hitting on all the hot girls in bikinis. It was interesting to see but I really didn't enjoy it.

After happy hour we had dinner at a quieter place on the beach. I had Pizza Quattro Stagioni, it was really good. The drunken philosopher had fried fish, which he had mused about earlier. He said "You shoulda try some of my fried fish, because I think you will have a mystical experience." Laura's friends were really great to hang out with. Especially the drunken philosopher!

1 comment:
Justin said...

Drunken Philosopher? Could you offer some more explanation.

Your described breakfast makes me envious, not to mention the warm water and Italian beaches.

I am glad to hear that you got some rest and repose – you’ll need it!

Hope to see you when you return to the States.

Curran said...

The drunken philosopher was an associate professor in sociology at a University in Bologna who enjoys getting drunk. His English was hilarious because it was in some ways primitive but also infused with very precise academic words. Somehow the word “geek” came up, and to clarify his understanding of it he said “Ah yes!, ‘geek’ means passion for comprehension yes?”

A song came on “lick my pussy and my crack” and I had to explain to everyone what that meant, because they didn’t understand it and asked. The drunken philosopher said “Ah! Yes, people don’t like but it’s the essence of humanity what we are talking about! I like presenting people the facts.” Then his girlfriend said something in Italian, evidently holding him back, saying that it’s not appropriate or something. He leaned over to me snickering and said “I hear this licking and I say we have something to talk about! But she says to be quiet.”

He was just a really hilarious guy. He was drunk indeed, but I got a sense that he was nevertheless very wise. On the walk to the car he said “I don’t like old people, they always say about something oh when I was young blah blah and I just want to say shut up, you’re old!” Ah it was a fun time.

Justin said...

great to hear! Thanks for the clarification.

I don’t know what to think about the old person comment. Maybe he’s right, maybe not.

Curran said...

Yeah, me too. It struck me as kind of harsh. Sometimes they have something valuable to say, and sometimes they’re just being crotchety.

9.7 Venice!

WEDNESDAY, JULY 16, 2008

Today I took a solo trip to Venice. Laura and I had bread and cheese and figs and espresso again for breakfast. Laura drove me to Faenza to get the train, and she went to work for the day. During the 3 hour journey to Venice I read the entire Wikipedia article about it. I accidentally stamped the return ticket

instead of the ticket to Venice. The ticket checker looked at it and started talking Italian, so I pulled out the other ticket and he pointed and I said “Aaaah” like every stupid tourist would. He was very nice and just wrote something on the ticket and went on his way.

There are no cars in Venice. Only boats and foot traffic. I arrived and walked in a random direction. I got lost and found a bakery which sold canoles for one Euro. There seemed to be only Italians around there. I went in and said “Una canoli grazie,” which was probably wrong but good enough, and the woman said “Si si” and got me the canole. “Una Euro” she said. I paid and enjoyed my canole while walking through the streets among the graffiti covered falling apart buildings.

I followed the signs through the winding streets and over the bridges to Piazza San Marco. There is an unusually large number of mask stores. There was a sea of tourists at the Rialto Bridge, which had a lovely view of the river with boats and gondolas floating on by.

It suddenly started raining hard. I ended up trapped in a tunnel under some building with a few other tourists. Eventually the storm let up. There were dark clouds in the sky, so everything looked a bit more pronounced. There were lots of Americans and Germans touring around. I eventually made it to San Marco, and it burst out raining again. There were a bunch of sketchy guys running around like chickens with their heads cut off selling umbrellas to all the desperate tourists.

San Marco was beautiful. All the buildings in Venice were very intricate. I walked to the sea and could see San Giorgio Maggiore in the distance. I ate the pears I brought with me and sat watching the tourists. There were pigeons everywhere. I took a different route back to the train station through the city. It was a bit overwhelming - at every corner the buildings you see are old and beautiful, and canals are everywhere, each with its own consciousness-invading uniqueness. It was a lot to take in, and got tiring after a while.

I still had an hour when I got back to the train station, so I walked the opposite direction to the sea. This area of Venice was run down. There were not many tourists around, only those who looked lost. The buildings were all falling apart. The only boats out there were the water buses (vaporetti, used like subways), which also looked pretty beat. No gondolas here!

On the way back to Laura's house I stopped in Bologna for a few hours. The sun was setting and the creepy people of the night were seeping out of dark corners. I saw the few sights to see, and there were no other tourists around. I quickly walked back to the train station, not comfortable exploring any more. The most beautiful thing I saw in Bologna was a statue of a woman and a horse at the entrance of the Parco della Montagnola.

I took trains to the station in Russi, and walked back to Laura's house at about 11:00 at night. I was pleasantly surprised that she had prepared some food for me! How sweet! We sat and ate and discussed the day and the trip and life. Early the next morning we got up and went to the airport in Forli. I thanked Laura tremendously and we parted ways. The flight over the alps back to Germany was a vast expanse of half shadowed snow covered mountains flowing into occasional green blue pools speckled with civilization. All in all a great trip!

9.8 Onward

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 7, 2009 Greetings! It's been a while since my last post, I know. It's because I've been experiencing the slowdown of time which occurs when one moves from a transient lifestyle to a more permanent one. Things happen more gradually here in Lowell than during my time in Germany, so it's hard to tell what is of significance these days. I'm still learning and growing but the progress is far less obvious.

Returning to my dusty old life in Lowell has been a huge disappointment. However, it's still just a part of life, with it's seemingly random assortment of moments. There are still beautiful moments, in which I say to myself "golly gee, I'm sure glad I'm doing this." There are also many horrific moments, in which I feel like my soul is being ripped out. It's the ubiquitous signals that our American culture is superficial and not quality-oriented but profit-oriented, and that so many people are living in misery because of it.

There are also moments in which I'm satisfied not by what I'm doing but by genuine gratitude inspired by a fleeting perspective of an existence far worse than my own, experienced by millions of people this very instant.

I was in a bookstore one day reading about service oriented architectures and sipping a delicious cafe latte. Because of the latte I had to take a shit. One of the stalls had no toilet paper left. As a result there was a long line of boys and men patiently and not so patiently waiting to satisfy themselves.

When I got back to my table there was a woman wearing tons of makeup obviously disgruntled with her duty of taking out the trash from the big trash can with a door manufactured by the billions in some factory engraved with the infuriating words "Thank you!". I got up and said to her "Excuse me, I'm not sure you're the right person to ask about this, but, there's no more toilet paper in the mens bathroom over there, and there's a big line."

The woman was already pissed off before I opened my mouth. To her I was yet another pain in the ass customer about to complain about some trivial inconvenience. She replied with uncensored sarcasm "Oh great! Just what oye need, another thing to do! Well, 'tis the season! Oy've been wrkin ten hours today. I wish oye ad the luxury to sit around sipping cwaffee and staring at my compyooda." Yeah she was pissed. I smiled and nodded as she looked away and begrudgingly went on emptying the trash can. I went back to my book and coffee.

What an asshole. What a saint. What a symbol of America. What a disappointed person. What do you get when you try you're best but don't have the luxury of opportunity? Why are some people miserable who have had all the opportunity in the world? I can only speculate about what her story is, but regardless it was a collision of incompatible island universes.

There I was, an innocent college student trying to figure out something so I can get some semblance of satisfaction from my current experience at the university. I got a coffee because I could, and it's something I enjoy. A frustrated woman with the crappy job of taking out the trash takes me for a snob, and I make her already miserable day worse.

There I was, a spoiled boy who had just come back from a regal trip to Europe that only snobbish intellectuals can have. Of course I had a coffee because I had gotten used to luxury, taken it for granted, wasted money like it meant nothing just to satisfy my selfish desires. I got worked up about an

insignificant detail like a stall missing toilet paper, and took it upon myself to show an overworked underpaid woman trying to make a decent life for herself just how low she is in comparison to my elite class.

You see the dichotomy here? Why are social classes the way they are? What brings about such a disturbing conflict of two equally valid realities? I suspect it's borne of divergence of cultures over the centuries.

Cultures seem to evolve much like organisms do, obeying Darwin's "survival of the fittest." Fitness in the cultural realm inherits the baseline requirement that it's human participants must survive and reproduce. Additionally, for the culture to live on, it must be maintained across generations.

In a world of warring cultures, these two conditions (participants survive, and the culture is passed on) are not enough. The culture must be constantly spreading itself, much like a virus. Thus we have a third requirement for a successful culture - it must encourage it's participants to get other humans to leave their current cultures and join it.

Families were the first cultures, then tribes, then villages, then various trades. Then religions. Then the various forms of governments which centrally manage many villages and cities. Since then, multitudes of cultures surrounding modes of government have been battling it out. In considering the issues of trades and religions as cultures, it becomes clear that the evolution of cultures is deeply entangled with the survival of man.

Our particular culture, in America, looks to be composed primarily of capitalism, democracy, and Christianity. We are no longer in the theoretical world where everything is beautiful and curious but this is real reality. People are living and dying, are happy and are mostly suffering. From my experience in Germany, I'd venture to guess the dominant cultural influence there is mostly capitalism, democracy, and Christianity too. However there exist also remnants of a culture in which people are taught to have dignity. To insist on quality. This cultural element seems to be lacking in America, and this saddens me to no end, because "American" is supposedly "me."

Capitalism and democracy flourished and nourished generations, up to what we youth know as "the world," the emerging global society. Apparently there's nothing better in terms of cultural fitness, because capitalism is in fact the glue that makes globalization possible. It is the escort of our future global culture.

But come on, it's fucking horrifying! Look at all the poor people in the world who are just suffering and dying by the millions because the capitalistic culture as a whole has deemed it, albeit through countless layers of indirection, to be morally right. It's no individual person who is to blame, lo and behold, there is nothing concrete to blame at all.

What is to blame? Darwin? No, he was a messenger. Capitalists? Aren't you yourself a capitalist? How are you able to read this right now? The Jews? No! The Mexicans? No! The Christians? No! Any particular society? No!

God? Is God to blame? Well, what do you mean by God? By God do you mean the omnipotent invisible man in the sky who's going to love you forever if you take Jesus Christ as your lord and your savior? Or by God do you mean the totality of reality itself?

Who's to blame for the evil-ness of a lion eating a rabbit? Nobody, It's just a fact of the ecology that exists. Both of them are just trying to get by. It seems there is a common theme of evolution on the level of galaxies, solar systems, species, genes within species, cultures, and cultures within cultures. It's the

way reality has evolved, and will continue to evolve - emergence of evolving and competing entities.

We're a part of it, "the system," just as much as a person dying of Aids in Africa or the neurotic American businessman who indirectly caused that person to die through decisions he made that were the best he could make at the time.

I suspect that through understanding this emergent structure of evolving cultures (which implies an understanding of psychology and history), we can discover the paths of causality (both societal and psychological) which cause suffering in the world.

Perhaps the way to live, the ideal way of the human for which many are searching, is to live in such a way that contributes to the de-evolution of those societal and psychological structures which lead to misery for many people, including oneself. Perhaps that's the goal, the correct life of a human.

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