



Just after my flight arrived in Kathmandu two Januaries ago, I eventually found myself walking through an all glass hallway full of silence, a strange contrast to the racing my mind was doing. I remember, before I exited that room, seeing a seemingly endless crowd of people outside just beyond the glass, and somewhere I saw an arm sticking out beyond tops of heads with a sign that said the name of my school. As I opened the doors into this new world, I met the man who held that sign, and he proceeded to bow and utter the Nepali greeting "Namaste," meaning, "I bow to the God within you." He put a necklace of flower pedals around my neck, smiled and introduced himself as Hem, and then led me to a Suzuki taxi, with plenty of room to see the road beneath my feet through the holes in the floor. We rode through

Kathmandu, dodging children, chickens, goats, water buffalos, and trucks and cars driving directly at us, on our way from the airport. We drove on whichever side of the road would get us to our destination, all while trying to stay on the safe side of the cliffs, on our way to the program house. There was no thing around me which was familiar except for Hem's warm smile. When I look back, I remember feeling some strange sort of ecstasy.

There was a lot going on in this memory. What strikes me the most, however, is that this is an example of being introduced to perspectives and social forms completely foreign to me. The way in which life was socialized and conducted on a day to day basis in Kathmandu, was like nothing I had ever understood before. As a result, the assumptions which I had carried with me in the back of my mind since I was young were no longer valid.

When we are young, our minds are mostly un-blocked, in the sense that thoughts come and go freely. However, as we get older, it becomes necessary to understand a set of cultural values and norms in order to interact in the society which we are a part of and which surrounds us. We do this for purposes of social survival. As a result, we develop a set of perceived of rights and wrongs, truths and untruths, as codes in a cheat sheet for how to act in certain contexts. It is from this foundation of codes that we in fact tend to act less based on our own thought processes— as this would be too clumsy and time consuming for each social interaction—but rather from our assumptions which become like instinct to us. I point this out not to argue that these assumptions of social norms are a fundamental flaw in our society. However, I would argue that they can limit the mind. This is because through this building of assumptions we tend not only to assume the most basic of social actions and ideas, but in fact we assume many of our beliefs and actions throughout our lives. Consequently, when we believe ourselves to actually be thinking, opening our mind, and challenging the norms of this society through our own creative thought, in fact we may be thinking very little.

Peter Swiatek



However, the mind is not necessarily trapped in this cycle of assumptions. One of the ways we may begin to escape this cycle is to experience new perspectives. As humans, we do not seek out new perspectives just for the sake of doing it. Rather, we seek them out because whether we think it or assume it, we believe new perspectives to be of some value to us.

What is this value? These new perspectives can allow us to challenge our assumptions held which we could not understand or be aware of otherwise. Therefore, if the accumulation of assumptions of cultural norms and objective rights and wrongs is to move further from the process of critical, creative thought, then it is by breaking down these assumptions further—as

opposed to accepting what has been instilled within our mind from outside of us— that we may get closer to allowing ourselves to create and to think with an open mind. In short, unthinking these assumptions is in fact what allows for us to think creatively and independently in the first place.

When I first arrived in Kathmandu, Nepal, the social survival tools I had accumulated through growing up in the US no longer applied. I knew almost nothing of how to act in Nepali society, and it would take me a significant while, along with some embarrassing blunders, this time of baselessness for which is when we can truly our previous assumptions and when we can challenge the developed', 'backwards Nepali when we may think critically of young African males, or we prefer not to admit to avoid having been socialized to deal adequately with its inequalities, and the images We can start to think are experiencing new



rest of our assumptions no longer make sense, the only thing that does is to continue to pick away at the layers of assumptions which have been piled onto us from our ever more invisibly stratified United States society.

before I would settle in. Yet it is how to act on a day to day basis make headway towards challenging opening our mind. This is the time stereotypes of the rural, 'under-farmer'. Similarly, this is the time towards preconceived assumptions Ghanaian women—stereotypes which holding, but are almost impossible in a complex society which has yet racial, gender, sexual, and other which serve to perpetuate these. critically during this time when we perspectives because when all the

Why is this process of breaking down the layers of culturally-specific assumptions valuable? For the individual, it is through this process, I would argue, that rather than limiting ourselves, we may rather allow more of our own potential to be realized, not only in terms of logical thought, but also in terms of creative thought, imaginative thought, emotion, and love.

As for the overall society though, I would argue that this process of opening is just as, if not more, essential. This is because it is through the process of beginning to confront the assumptions which confine our thought that we are better able to contribute and participate in a discourse including all voices in society towards social change. Aren't these the qualities which we want to instill in our young generation? Don't we want our leaders of international businesses, governments and aid organizations to find better ways of giving those, whom we have historically 'othered' and marginalized, agency in their own development? Don't we want our future academics, not to go through school in order to arrive at the conclusion that they are the holders of answers, but rather only parts of a larger social dialogue?

It is through this process of opening our minds through the experiencing of other perspectives and forms which I argue we can in fact produce these types individuals in our forthcoming societies. Study abroad can be one of the vehicles in realizing the beginning of this process. However, study abroad is neither sufficient nor required for this process to happen. It is not sufficient because upon returning home from the abroad experience, we who have studied abroad must remember that we do not hold all the answers for this society. Rather, it is only that study abroad has perhaps started, or accelerated, a lifelong process (though for someone who has the privilege of higher education, and especially considering the middle to upper class demographics our of Muhlenberg College, I would argue it is a moral responsibility) of challenging the assumptions of that which we take for granted as true and best. Further, study abroad is not compulsory for this process, because that would imply that here at Muhlenberg we do not have the tools with which to begin to open our mind. However, this would be to ignore the many opportunities here, whether in the performing arts, in classes that we previously would have avoided, or in walking south of 15th street, all of which are other ways of allowing the new perspectives of the forms around us to influence our mind to understand the world in new ways.



Study abroad is worthwhile both to us as individuals and to the society of which we belong because it is a vehicle through which new perspectives can challenge our mind to open up and to be more critical in our thought. For this reason, if it is financially and academically feasible, I would strongly encourage students to take this opportunity. Despite this, I would also encourage the faculty, staff, and students here at Muhlenberg to consider that study abroad is valuable not inherently, but rather for the opportunity it provides for us to open our minds. This opportunity is not something which must be waited for, but rather, if initiative is taken by individuals and a community, can be found in a number of places we previously would have ignored.