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Changing Flights

I fell in love with travelling before I ever even did it. The idea of getting out there, wherever there is, and seeing new people, places, and things consumed my mind from an early age. I lived, and still do, in the Franklin Park neighborhood on the outskirts of Chicago, which lies in the shadow of one of the largest airports in the country. Drive around the area for a while and you'll doubtless see signs campaigning for O'Hare to do something about the sound of the airplanes. If you talk to a resident about the issue, they'll complain to no end. I've always felt the opposite: I love the planes. I'd often sit outside at dusk and watch them soar overhead until becoming faint twinkles in the distance. I'd often dream of being on one.

The reason my family never travelled wasn't only the money we didn't have, but something deeper. My parents just didn't want to. My father especially felt this way: he's stubbornly remained in the exact same area he grew up in his whole life, to the point where I attended the same middle and high schools that he did (we even have the same name). He simply sees no reason nor feels any desire to leave. This is indicative of the attitude I think most Americans have towards travelling, which is that they think it's a useless endeavor, or a frivolous waste of time and money. If they do travel, it's usually domestic, and the entirety of the trip will be spent in some amusement park flavored by the intellectual properties of one corporation or another. Other cultures, such as in Europe, value travelling as a worthwhile experience. People over there travel constantly, and often to different countries. A lot of this has to do with

geography, and the fact that Europe is comprised of dozens of nations, all with vastly differing cultures, all packed together. This means travelling to new places is much more accessible, and as a result much more frequent. The United States, on the other hand, is relatively isolated. That fact alone, I think, has contributed more to the way Americans view the rest of the world than anyone realizes.

I was nineteen when I finally made my way onto one of those planes. I had been working full-time for two years since leaving my father's high school, and had saved enough along with my girlfriend Natalie to go visit her family in the Czech Republic (or "Czechia," as its citizens will begrudgingly admit it's called now). Along with her and her younger brother Daniel, I spent over two months in Central Europe, becoming acquainted with a culture I had previously only known the ghost of from interactions with her immigrant family.

Before I left, and after chastising me for throwing away all of this money I could've spent on a car, my dad genuinely asked me if they would have electricity there. If he had ever in his life left west Chicagoland and learned more about anywhere other than the United States, I never would have had the displeasure of responding to this asinine question.

As I say this, though, I can't help but feel a little guilty. I admittedly also had plenty of misconceptions about life outside the U.S. I couldn't help but share the attitude common with Americans that life anywhere but here is slightly more "third-worldish." That was all eviscerated the second I arrived in Europe and Natalie's aunt, who works at Teta (a chain of Czech drug stores, the name of which also happens to translate to aunt), showed me into the nicest apartment I had ever seen in my life. After a few days of exploring the town on a bus you literally didn't have to pay for, I came to the conclusion that the quality of life in the Czech Republic was vastly

different than I imagined. From that point on, I viewed this culture so differently than I had previously. This led to an understanding and connection with Natalie's parents when I arrived back home that was never possible before.

I regard my time in Europe as one of the highlights of my life so far. It was over two months of no responsibilities, the freedom to explore a place and to meet new people, and an opportunity to shoot some of the coolest footage I ever have. That being said, there were aspects of the trip I found difficult. Most of our time was spent hanging out with Natalie's family, which meant most of my time was spent sitting on the outside of conversations I couldn't understand. As the trip progressed, this began to wear me out, and I found myself longing for the sense of belonging I realized I had back home. I never felt it before, because I had never been without it.

So, on July 22nd, the journey I long awaited had come and passed as we touched down at O'Hare. Despite my dreams of leaving, my theoretical absence was always only temporary. I've always loved Chicago, but before I left, I wouldn't have been able to articulate why. In addition to providing an understanding of the rest of the world, my journey gave me a new perspective on my own home. It's impossible to understand the things that make a place unique or special, for better or for worse, without seeing somewhere else to compare it to. All the great things about our city and our culture stood out to me because they were lacking in other places. At the same time, all the negative things here that I had never even noticed were issues became sorely obvious. Like an astronaut returning from a trip to outer space, I had a complete change of perspective.

A few short months after the trip was over, I started my first semester back in school since high school graduation. I genuinely felt changed for the better. I've always suffered from

debilitating anxiety, much of which is brought about from social situations. Sure, some of it probably has to do with the way I was raised (which I won't get into here), but I also feel that anxiety and a general distaste for social interaction is almost a unifying trait of the modern generations. We absolutely hate talking to people we don't already know, and travelling helped me confront this by forcing me to communicate constantly with people in restaurants, train stations, and everywhere else. Many of them didn't even speak my language. At first, this kept me constantly on edge, but after essentially being locked in a room with my fears, I had to just get over it. I know for a fact that without this experience, I would have been terrified by the amount of social effort college requires.

The personal growth I went through in just two months was staggering compared to the two years prior in which I stagnated at my warehouse job. I feel I owe all the improvements my life has had since then to this one trip abroad. Many of the things I gained are things our society in the United States lacks, from an understanding of people different from us, and the ability to see the things that make us great and the rampant problems we ignore, to even just feeling comfortable connecting with others in public. Perhaps if Americans realized the true value of travelling, and the ways in which it can enrich one's life, we'd see our society change for the better. If my father is any indication, however, I don't see that happening any time soon.