

WHY EVERY HYPHEN SHOULD STUDY OVERSEAS

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I have been delighted to see more and more UPCI young people take advantage of missions trips around the world. The personal discovery that the world is big and full of differences and cultures cannot be replaced. Ask anyone who has traveled overseas, and they will tell you they ache to return again and again. A great way to satisfy that wanderlust is by studying overseas. The advantages and rewards of a prolonged, international, educational experience are innumerable and will impact a Hyphen's life in a deep way.

Study after study shows that those who study overseas are dramatically influenced and transformed by the experience. Most will admit they were nervous and hesitant at the outset of the idea, wondering if committing an entire summer or year or four years in another country was the best decision for them. Yet each returned home convinced the opportunity was the single greatest decision they had ever made and one of the wisest investments they could have paid into their future.

I myself studied in England when I was twenty-five. My master's program in Literature at the University of Essex was unique to anything I had experienced up to that point, and it changed me profoundly on the most fundamental levels. It took only a year to finish the program, and seven years later I still say it was the best year of my life. Having reflected on it repeatedly, I have come up with five specific footholds the experience provided, which have served me well ever since. I use the mountain-climbing term "foothold" because of its simple definition: "a position that is usable as a base for further advance."

EXPOSURE

I think it was my college anthropology class that first inspired the mental image of building a wall around a community in order to observe the repercussions of total isolation. It wasn't long before the insulated people slowly formed their own language, making it impossible for them to communicate with outsiders, and, due to the lack of interaction and exchange with other people, their ways of doing things and their progress eventually stagnated.

Similarly, there are several dozen isolated tribes existing in the world today. These tribes tend to be incredibly fearful of outsiders, so much so that they can be extremely violent. These communities actually lack immunity to common diseases, cannot read, do not have access to modern medicine or technology, and rarely wear clothes. This lifestyle is completely normal to them, and they have no desire to change.

But the moral of both these examples is clear: lack of exposure to different people and ideas will eventually result in complete disconnection and insignificance, if not total backwardness.

Even as active members of society, we can suffer from a lack of exposure if we are not careful. When we mingle only with those just like us, when we remain inside a tight-knit bubble, we stunt our growth and limit our potential. What's worse, we make it completely impossible to influence or impact the rest of the world because we have effectively disconnected from the vital exchange of contributing something of value to mankind and receiving something in return.

If public education taught me anything, it taught me how healthy and beneficial it is to have my ideas and lifestyle



challenged. While I grew and matured, I also adapted and changed. Adaption and change are vital to survival and perpetuation. Exposure helped me solidify and deepen the right, discard the incorrect, and emerge from those trying times a more capable person.

One of the first questions an employer asks in a job interview is, “What kind of experience do you have?” Exposure leads to experience, and experience leads to qualification. How could the apostle Paul, the most influential Christian of the first century and even today, be so good with people? I think it was due in part to his widespread exposure.

PERSPECTIVE

G.K. Chesterton prefaces *The Everlasting Man* with a summary of a book idea he had. (“Like every book I never wrote,” he said, “it is by far the best book I have ever written.”) The story is about a young man who leaves home in search of a giant. He travels a far distance and upon looking back toward home realizes that his cottage and farm, which he remembered being situated upon a slope, from his new perspective appeared perched upon a gigantic figure. While he was home, this figure was too close and too large to be clearly seen, but from far away, he could perceive all. This story, Chesterton declared, was a symbol of a great truth, a picture of the “progress of any really independent intelligence today.”

What did he mean?

The boy never knew he lived his entire life on the body of a giant, and, perhaps hearing rumors of giants or sensing there must be more to life than just his cottage or his farm, he set off on an adventure to find this giant for himself. It was only in his leaving home and looking back that he realized what he had been searching for was at home all along, but it took him leaving home and gaining a new perspective to discover it.

Chesterton calls this “progress” and the sign of an “independent intelligence.” When something is independent, it is free; it does not rely on or require others. It is self-sustaining. Chesterton argues that our intelligence, as well as our faith, needs to be free, rooted in truth, and wide awake, but so often it can remain sound asleep, hidden from our own view, obscured by the familiarity that surrounds us.

Sometimes we do not really know what we believe until we are removed from our “normal” and forced to continue conducting life. When we place ourselves on the outside of our beliefs and peer in, we can start making some self-realizations, gaining knowledge from the perspective that perhaps feels new but is simply a deeper or transformed version of what we understood already. It is only then that we really start to stand on our own and think for ourselves.

I stood in line at a British bank for thirty minutes. When at last I was next in line, the teller left for his fifteen-minute tea break. Only then did I realize how right and good American customer service is. It wasn't until I experienced the European emphasis on rest and relaxation that I realized how unbalanced and harried the American work ethic is. It wasn't until I caught a cold and couldn't smell or taste anything that I realized how much I appreciate those two senses. It is nice to enjoy something, but even better to enjoy it with a sense of perspective.

Totally removed from North American culture, or from Christian culture, or even Western civilization altogether, being a North American and especially a Christian will become imbued with a deeper, more personal, more well-adjusted meaning.



COMPASSION

Studying overseas can increase your capacity to love.

We fear what we don't understand, and sometimes that fear manifests as criticism and judgment. But broadening our experience can inspire an appreciation and enjoyment of people or things that never would have existed before.

For example, most Indian curries look less than appetizing, but after I ate my first chicken korma, I eagerly acquainted myself with as many Indian dishes as I could. Now I love Indian food and have influenced others to love it too.

It's easy, probably even natural, to be put off by appearance, smell, or reputation, but experience and acquaintance with something different or unusual so often debunks our initial misperceptions. This is especially true with people. The more we rub shoulders with other people, no matter where they are from or how different from us they may seem, the more we will recognize the fragile but wondrous humanness we all share. It is easy to connect after that.

Historic figures like Jesus, Mother Teresa, and William Wilberforce would not have been as effective or influential without their compassion. It propelled them to action on behalf of people the rest of the world rebuffed. And then they managed to change the world's mind.

The less afraid of others we become, the more open to others we can be. The more we experience life with a different race or culture, the more we come to understand that race or culture. The more we understand, the more we can sympathize. The more we sympathize, the more we love. The more we love, the less we fear. And then our influence can begin.

HUMILITY

I recently read a sign that said, "Teenagers: tired of being harassed by your stupid parents? Act now! Move out, get a job, pay your bills while you still know everything." A teenager may smirk, but independent adults can only chuckle. They have already learned that the more you experience of the world and people, the less you realize you know.

Our survival instinct shows us we are capable of more than we think and are more fragile than we ever imagined. This can lead to a wonderful humility, and humility makes us teachable. The realization that we do not know everything is the beginning of growth and maturity.

In a posture of humility, we grow wiser. The truth we possess becomes more welcoming and loving, less confined by just our culture or denomination or family history. The broader our minds become through experience and exposure, the more welcoming we can be of truth in all its forms—not just forms that are familiar or comfortable to us.

God's truth, like the laws of nature, is everywhere and it underpins everything. It manifests in different ways, but we experience it everywhere we go, whether the other side of the world or outer space. Like the universal laws of nature, God's truth applies universally. It is our everlasting responsibility to recognize and appreciate it in all its forms. A humble attitude will help us.



DEPTH

Finally, experiencing the world and all its complexities can add depth and complexity to us, and this makes us more interesting, adaptable, and versatile. Life is complicated; there are generally no easy answers or pat formulas. Not everyone lives the North American Dream; our everyday, standard comforts are unattainable luxuries in some parts of the world. These realizations can lead to a profound sobriety and earnestness that makes us both better citizens of the world and better Christians.

With depth comes stability and longevity. The sooner our faith acknowledges life's thorniness, the sooner it can become robust enough to face it with balance, common sense, and hope. Depth offers peace when the road gets bumpy. The world is desperate for hope and peace and is attracted to those who possess these qualities.

More often than not, students today are pursuing higher education. Undertaking a portion of that education overseas is a rising trend in the world, and Apostolic students should be among that number. Aside from making graduates more attractive to employers, these footholds will make us more influential Christians. And really, that's the point. Our education and self-improvement should not be ends in themselves. It is all about making ourselves expedient and useful to One who once lamented that laborers were few.