

Dear Class of 1955,

My name is Molly Abbattista. This past semester (Fall 2011), I spent three and a half months studying at the Institute for American Universities, in the preposterously picturesque town of Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. Your generous funding through the Class of '55 Scholarship is part of what made this life-changing experience possible, and for that I am very grateful.

You've probably seen that phrase in other letters: "life-changing." To say that study abroad is "life-changing" is perhaps a bit hackneyed at this point; it would be more unusual if this kind of adventure had *not* had a profound impact on my life. But I think my experience might have been atypical: my life was certainly changed, and in enormously positive ways, but not in the manner I expected.

For example, I am not fluent in French. Neither was I truly immersed in the rich, intricate stew of French culture. Due to the combination of a disinterested host mother, a program composed entirely of Americans, and a town so full of tourists you were more likely to hear German spoken on the streets than French, my cultural experience in some ways barely skimmed the surface. My friends in the program and I termed the language skills we developed while there as "survival French," a sort of pragmatic intermediary between being stuck at "bonjour" and the (for most of us, wildly inaccurate) claim of "conversational proficiency." Of the people themselves, my main interactions leaned heavily towards that side of the French characterized by cards kept close to the chest. They often expect new people to prove worthy of interest before sharing any personal information or investing any sincere interest in them whatsoever. Unfortunately I was rarely able to live up to these criteria of worthiness, and for the most part remained a cultural outsider. Which is not to say that I didn't also encounter the French at their most expansively helpful and generous. It took six concerned Parisians to get me to my hostel in Montmartre, and a couple we met that night took us out for champagne to celebrate our arrival in *La Ville-Lumière*. If you look lost or they just decide they like the look of you, the French can be truly wonderful.

So that is the sum total of all that was not ideal, and it is a vanishingly small fraction of my entire semester. Outweighing all of that were three unique and beautiful things: the friends I made in the program, a constant exposure to experiential learning, and the insights I gained into my own character and my goals for the future.

You've never met a group of people like the 102 students who participated in this program last fall. Almost to a person, they are compassionate, funny, intellectually curious, and generally fascinating. They are environmental science majors and business students and art history fanatics and artists and renaissance (wo)men. From them I learned that people my age are involved in everything and interested in everything and that profit-driven rationalism does not have a stranglehold on the future. Also that the world is full of excellent people. The ones I spent particularly massive amounts of time with have also become excellent friends; we make a concerted effort to stay in touch, and

we are building a network that spans the whole country. One could go an entire lifetime without meeting such people, you know? I'm very lucky.

I have two experiential learning stories. In the sense I mean it, "experiential learning" is place-specific, Socratic, and directly relevant. As a whole, my actual academics lived up to this ideal to greater or lesser degrees, but my *History and Culture of Provence* class was the one that will stick with me. Beginning with the ancient *gaulois* tribes and continuing through the Neoclassical period, we traced Provençal culture art-historically for more than two millennia. More often than not, the monuments and art pieces we were studying were a bus ride away, if not down the street. Over the course of the semester, between class trips and independent expeditions, we saw Provence from the western border to the eastern coast. We stood in the Palace of the Popes in Avignon; we climbed Paul Cézanne's muse, Mount St-Victoire; we observed the Italianate sprawl of Nice and Cannes; we visited St-Rémy, where Van Gogh painted *Starry Night*; we touched the Roman *arc de triomphe* at Glanum; we studied the evolving architecture of the aristocracy in the walkable museum that is Aix-en-Provence. The information enhanced the experience of seeing just as the seeing anchored the absorption of information. I'm going to remember some of this stuff forever. It's a good way to learn.

But some of the miracle of learning was in *non-academic* settings. While my friends get honorable mention for being mind-expanding conversationalists, it was a conference in Northern Ireland – the Conference on Divided Societies – that stands out as the single most intellectually exciting part of this whole adventure. Seven other students and I flew to Londonderry to join other American study abroad students, graduate students of all nationalities, and many assorted adults for three days spent discussing global, international, and intra-national conflict and its resolution. I have never felt so much like a valued voice in a critical conversation. The conference was hopeful, energetic, and egalitarian. It made me think that we might be better off in America if we demolish all our lecture halls and replace each of them with a single soapbox surrounded by intelligent hecklers. And its location was shatteringly powerful. Talk about a divided society - for someone with little to no knowledge of the Troubles and the Irish religious struggle, suddenly being in the heart of all of it was like having a bucket of ice water dumped on your head. It wakes a person up.

As I was gallivanting all over Southern France and the rest of Europe, though, I was also learning about myself. These realizations will have - and have had - social, academic, and professional consequences. It may not be clear to people who are not inside my head (or who are not my mother, which is almost the same thing), why some of these realizations were so startling, but here they are: the epiphanies. First, at least at this phase of my life, I am an essentially and devotedly a social person. I love people and I am happiest when surrounded by them. Second, at least for now, I don't want to work abroad. Talking, reading, and thinking about the U.S. from a foreign point of view, far from making me want to move to Europe, has led to a complete fascination with all the various train-wreck incarnations of our domestic policy. There's suffering everywhere, but we don't have to send all of our good people to sub-Saharan Africa; some of them should stay here, too. Armed with these insights, I dropped both of my previous majors, picked up Politics, and

gave my senior year schedule a radical makeover. Third: I want to do big things, and my absolute belief that big things are possible is not actually that common. I've discovered that I don't want to work on the international stage, but I'm unlikely to be happy anywhere except the national stage (at least, while a distinction can still be made between them). This will impact my decisions about graduate school and my future professional life in as-yet mostly unknown ways. And keeping that pragmatic idealism from getting stomped out is going to be a job and a half, though an important one. The world is certainly unstable, but that doesn't mean it's unsavable.

Anyway, that's some of the story. Every time I think about it, or speak or write about it, I figure out some other way this semester "changed my life," and I may never understand the full scope of its impact. I just know that I saw some pretty amazing places and met some pretty stellar people, and that some things that were very confusing a year ago have magically become much more straightforward. And I have a LOT of pictures. Thank you again for your help in making this possible, and for your dedication to connecting Cornellians to the Abroad. It's, well, really important.

Sincerely,  
Molly Abbattista

