



It's the little differences...

By Aaron Beerman | November 10, 2011

Like many other interns who have made that long journey home from a foreign country, leaving behind co-workers, friends, and a home, as it were, I was at first at a loss for words to articulate the significance of my experience. It's been several months now since I returned from my internship site in Cape Town, South Africa and the stage of adjusting to the surreal novelty of changing Rand back to Dollars and driving on the righthand side of the road again have long past. Only now has the significance of the journey has finally started to sink in.



I think that in virtually any experience a person has in life, it is often the things that we have not previously been acquainted with that stand out most and have the most profound effect on how we relate to it. When living in a foreign country almost everyday offers something completely new: adjusting to different living arrangements, navigating social and cultural dynamics that you have never encountered, hearing new accents, and other little differences that make a place 'foreign'. In retrospect, it was those things that had the most indelible impact on who I am and how I dealt with returning home. Even though South Africa is not as markedly different from the US when compared to a host of other foreign countries, the differences that do exist are brought into even greater contrast due to its suggestively similar, westernized context.



One of the first things many travelers notice as soon as they drive out of the Cape Town airport are some of the truly paradoxical elements that make this country characteristically one of a kind. In particular, one can't help but notice the mind bogglingly, dilapidated, and poverty stricken Townships which are just minutes away from some of the most affluent coastal communities in the world. Prior to coming to South Africa I would have never thought that such social extremes could exist in such close proximity to each other. Having had the unique opportunity to work at a refugee center there enabled me to spend time with a cross section of the population and see the equally surprising cordiality and respect between people of different races, irrespective of such inequalities. Seeing these things has completely changed how I look at racial and economic inequalities in the world, and especially at home.



There are also a host of little things I once took for granted which my time in South Africa has given me a new appreciation for. Like most Americans, I rarely took a train or bus, prior to living in Cape Town unless I absolutely had to. For nearly three months without a vehicle I was by and large limited to the rail and mini buses when I was in there and as a result came to the surprising realization that public transportation actually has a lot to offer. Instead of sitting alone in my car in a traffic jam on my way to work, like I usually would at home, the train gave me a unique opportunity to spend my commute conversing with average South Africans every day. It also gave me time to get mentally prepared for work and get things done I would not otherwise have had time for. My time on the train also enabled me to really recognize that time and people don't run like clockwork and are not predictable. When I first arrived, every morning I would consistently arrive at the train station on time but soon discovered that the only thing that was consistent was the inconsistent train schedule. Most days the train was late or it would be too full to even squeeze myself into. Usually I was satisfied to wait for the next train when it was full, but I was shocked to discover that patience (or perhaps self-preservation) is apparently not a universal quality when I routinely saw people of all ages, including school children, clinging to the side of the high-speed commuter trains when there was not enough room inside.



Coming home I find that these were the kinds of things that have had the greatest influence on me. It is much easier for me now to reevaluate my perspectives on things which I would otherwise have taken for granted. Prior to my internship I really did not have the same appreciation for things such as public transportation, language barriers, or the impact of racism in the world. Having had this incredible opportunity to live and work in South Africa was one of the most rewarding and enlightening experiences of my life and changed how I perceive the world and myself.