



Returning Home with a New Perspective and a Scattered Mind

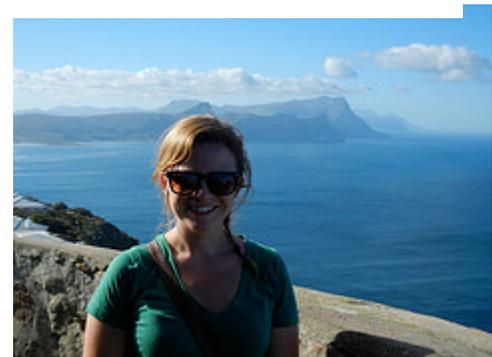
By Jennifer Lund | April 24, 2012

Ten weeks seemed like a long time when I first arrived in South Africa. Everything was exciting and different (though at times shocking) and I just wanted to take it all in. I remember feeling that even the simple things, like taking a shower or eating dinner, were different than at home. By the end of my ten weeks I had grown accustomed to seeing the kids with out shoes begging at every intersection, the businesses and homes being gated, and driving through townships where locals made homes out of scrap metal and cardboard. I knew that I would find myself saying this but the 10 weeks flew by! Leaving South Africa felt surreal, just like going there did before I left. I couldn't imagine leaving all of the people and places that had made it my home for the past ten weeks. In my final days in South Africa I was flooded with emotions and struggled to process exactly how I felt. Part of me was excited to return home where I could see my family and friends, eat all of the foods I had been missing, and go back to using all of the comforts of home – my car, cell phone, lap top, and washer and dryer – but another part of me was extremely sad to be leaving and I made sure to soak up every last minute of my trip.



My ten weeks in South Africa was full of experiences that I will never forget. There were times that were emotionally exhausting and mentally challenging. At some points I was homesick and asked myself what I was doing on the other side of the world, thinking that I couldn't wait to be back in Oregon. Of course, these feelings were completely outnumbered by the countless good times I had.

South Africa is a breathtakingly gorgeous country and is very different from what I think many people realize. The beauty of the land and the people is stunning but unfortunately it lies parallel to a lot of "ugly" things – high crime, an incredible disease burden, high unemployment, homelessness, corrupt government, and political disagreements. It is a country full of contrast - a mix of the first and the third worlds.



I went to South Africa hoping to figure out if I'd rather work in the field of Public Health or go into something clinical and I think I am actually more confused now. I had never considered medical school before but it no longer seems as unattainable as it once did. This experience taught me that I am capable of getting through it – it's just a matter of what I would rather do. Working in public health gives me the opportunity to change the way people think but medicine would give me the chance to have one-on-one patient interaction and allows me to hear each patient's unique story. Though I'm still up in the air over what route I want to

take, it doesn't bother me as much as it once did. I'm okay with not having my life completely figured out yet. One thing I know for sure is that I definitely want to travel more so I need to be in a position that allows me to do that!

Since I've returned home I have been very busy preparing for the new term, looking for a job, and spending time with family and friends before the chaos of school sets in again. I haven't had a chance to process the reverse culture shock yet. For the first few days I was home I remember feeling that we were driving on the wrong side of the road and people thought I was excessively paranoid because I had grown so used to watching my back while in South Africa. People want to know everything about what I did and saw while abroad and there's just too much to say – I figure that my stories are going to be told when something comes up that reminds me of a story. Since I've been home a lot of stories start out, "When I was in South Africa..." and that's when I realize, "Woah. I just spent 10 weeks in South Africa."

Something that I've been struggling with since my first few weeks in South Africa is what exactly to do with everything that I have seen. I knew all along that I would be returning to the U.S. where my life is much more comfortable than what I saw in South Africa and I could just carry on the life that I have known, write it off as not my problem. I've been contemplating what exactly is our obligation (for lack of a better word) or our responsibility as human beings to do for those that are far less fortunate? At times, I was overcome by this inevitable feeling of guilt for being born into better circumstances than so many people. Even after going to South Africa and seeing how it could be so much worse, I know I'll still be upset when my car breaks down or my team loses, but it won't be the end of the world – my scale is much bigger now and I have more perspective. I still haven't figured out the answer to this question but I have decided that it's important to remember how blessed I am to have been born into a life that allows me to do so much. I have the opportunity to thrive, not just survive. Also, it's essential to go back to the basics and appreciate all that I do have, rather than focusing on what I don't have. If you have a house with four walls and a roof or are living without a chronic, life-threatening illness, you have more than millions of people living in South Africa. I also realized how easy it is to pass judgment or make assumptions about others when in reality we don't know anything about their past, what environment they were born into, and what battles they've had to fight.

While in South Africa I met people who have changed my life with their stories I will never forget. I have fallen in love with the country and definitely plan on returning one day. I will be forever grateful to the amazing people I met who made being away from home so comfortable and enjoyable. I have had my thoughts challenged numerous times, my ideas about the fairness of the world turned upside down, and my priorities reorganized. Lastly, I learned what's important – I am healthy, able-bodied, and rich in all the ways that matter.