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The Paths that Lead (text and audio)

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"The paths that lead"

, Professor of Hispanic Studies

Honor's Day April 16, 2003

Good morning honored students from the class of 2003, other Illinois Wesleyan community members and distinguished guests. This is a glorious time for you who have had the privilege of dedicating four years solely to learning and in the process have achieved great academic honors. I admire your achievements. But it is also a somber time. This spring our campus found out that our president Minor Myers is battling lung cancer; I'd like to dedicate this talk to him today and along with the rest of campus send him healing thoughts as he continues his difficult journey of recovery. In February our nation mourned the loss of seven space explorers, whose lives suddenly ended as they were returning home. And more recently still, the world is living the tragedies of war. Deaths have run into the hundreds; historical marks, architecture, and infrastructure have been laid to waste; and losses great and small both abroad and in this country continue to surface. In the wake of this military engagement and diplomatic failure, we, as citizens of a global community must talk and listen responsibly as we journey towards peace. Reflections on peace instead of war, on living in a global community, and on learning to replace fear with tolerance lead me time and again to journeys. Journeys that humble, journeys that engage, and journeys that enlighten. Journeys whose value is the journey itself. And as you drift in and out of my words today, I invite you to reflect on your own journeys traveled both near and far, literally and metaphorically.

Let's begin, then, with a story by Jorge Luis Borges. It is called, "The Ethnographer" and I have taken some liberties in translating his work, though knowing Borges' affinity for the art of translating and rewriting, I am sure he would approve of my amendments. Students who study advanced-level Spanish have probably read this story in our Intro to Lit class. It always provokes a lot of discussion both about writing and about our own life explorations.

"I heard about the case in Texas, but it happened in another state. It's about a single protagonist, though in every story there are thousands of protagonists, visible and invisible, dead and alive. His name, I believe, was Fred Murdock. He was tall like most Americans, neither blonde nor dark-haired, sharp featured and a man of few words. There was nothing exceptional about him, not even that feigned singularity that youth affect. Naturally respectful, he did not distrust books or those who wrote them. His was the age when a man doesn't yet know who he is and is ready to throw himself into whatever chance has to offer: Persian mysticism or the unknown origins of the Hungarian language, the hazards of war or algebra, Puritanism or orgies. In college he was advised to study indigenous languages. Esoteric rites survive in certain tribes out West. His professor, an older man, suggested that he make a teepee his home, observe the rites and discover the secret that the shaman revealed to initiates. Upon returning he could write a thesis and the institution's authorities would be sure to publish it.

Murdock leapt at the suggestion. One of his ancestors had died in the frontier wars; this old ancestral conflict was now a link. Undoubtedly he foresaw the difficulties awaiting him. He would have to gain their trust. He set out on his long adventure. For

over two years he lived on the prairie.... He would wake at dawn, go to bed at nightfall, he eventually dreamed in a language that was not his parents'. His palate grew accustomed to bitter tastes, he dressed in strange clothing, he forgot about his friends and the city, and came to think in a way that his logic rejected. During his first months of learning he secretly took notes that he would later destroy perhaps so that he would not arouse anyone's suspicion or perhaps because he no longer needed them. After a predetermined amount of time of moral and physical exercises, the shaman instructed him to remember his dreams and to share them with him at dawn each day. He shared repeated dreams with his master who finally revealed the secret doctrine. One morning, without saying goodbye to anyone, Murdock left.

In the city, he felt nostalgic for those first evenings on the prairie when, long ago, he felt nostalgic for the city. He made his way to his professor's office and told him he had found out the secret but had decided not to publish it.

"Because you swore not to?" asked his professor.

"No, that's not the reason," said Murdock. "Out there I learned something that I cannot say."

"Perhaps English is insufficient?" observed the other.

"No, it's nothing like that, sir. Now that I possess the secret, I could tell it a thousand different and even contradictory ways. I don't know exactly how to say this but the secret is precious and now, science, our science, strikes me as frivolous."

After a pause he added:

“And anyway, the secret is not as valuable as the paths that led me to it. Each person must walk these paths.”

The professor coldly said to him:

“I will inform the Committee of your decision. Are you going to return and live with them again?”

Murdock answered:

“No, I might never go back to the prairie. What they taught me applies to any place, anytime.

In class we would talk of narrative voice and Borges’ persuasive use of doubt that pulls the reader in and make us actively pursue the truth of the story and the mysterious secret that Fred discovers in his journey. We would discuss the contrast of specificity and vagueness, Borges’ delightful definition of youth, and the teacher/student relationship. Sometimes students raise aspects of the story I hadn’t planned on discussing or hadn’t even considered. And as any teacher will tell you, this is one of the thrills of teaching. When discussion moves in unexpected ways, when conversation rolls into new, unpredicted territory and students are responding to other students’ ideas, this is an intellectual journey I love being part of.

Regardless of where discussion begins or ends I make it a point to return to the stages of Fred’s learning process, the transitional marks that speak to the secret itself. On the prairie Fred changed in very concrete ways. His sleeping hours, the language he spoke, the food he ate, the way he dressed. His way of thinking evolved even to the point of a different dream world and he began to understand and live life in a way he

had previously never considered. This series of life transformations speaks directly to studying abroad. And let me make clear that studying abroad takes many forms and is not limited to a semester in college but includes all sorts of studies at any time of life. As Fred says, what he learned could be applied anywhere, anytime. Anyone who has spent a semester or two abroad will surely recognize the changes Fred experienced as their own climactic moments of frustration and validation. How many remember that anxiety of the unknown, the humility and pride of learning to communicate in a different language, the amazement of new landscapes and architecture, the thrill of meeting people and exchanging ideas with someone who you may never see again, or with whom you plant the seeds of a life-long friendship? When Fred explains that, “the secret is not as valuable as the paths that led me to it” he recognizes that the journey itself is often more significant than the destination.

Not that closure and reaching one’s goals should not be appreciated and celebrated. Walking across the quad on May 4th, receiving your diploma, embracing friends in congratulations and love. These rituals will not be forgotten. But the four years here of defining your values, considering your culture, and pursuing a specific area of study will influence your life choices far more deeply. While the symbolic piece of paper handed out to you marks the product of your studies and may very well get you into graduate school or your foot in the door at some multinational firm, it is the knowledge acquired during this four-year journey that will give contour to your ever-unfolding identity. And the journeys beyond your comfort zone, into worlds unknown,

enrich your understanding of who you are and who those many others are that share our world.

As anyone here who has studied abroad as part of his or her IWU experience will tell you, it is life-transforming. Study abroad is for achievers. It takes planning, hard work, courage, and a strong will.

I'm not quite sure exactly when Illinois Wesleyan students began to study abroad. In preparing for this talk today, I had fantasized about digging up old manuscripts in our archives and reading about trips in the 1850s and 60s when students would sail to Europe and beyond and pursue course studies in Paris, Alexandria, and other age-old centers of learning. As it turns out though, I was about a century off. "Travel Courses" are first mentioned in the 1952 *Bulletin*. These first official study abroad courses did not sprout from the traditional areas associated with study abroad like our diverse language programs and international studies. Rather, the departments of Religion, Art, and Theater were the first to offer summer study in the Holy Land, Egypt and Europe. Later, in the 1964 *Bulletin* a "Junior Year Abroad" section was added and read, "The study of the culture and heritage of the old world is strongly encouraged and recommended by the University. Students may expect full cooperation and encouragement from the faculty and administration in formulating plans to study abroad" (51-52). So, back in the early days students would do independent planning and seek administrative approval for their studies. For example, between 1965 and 1967 James Brown and Maren Fujimoto successfully petitioned the Dean's council to study in

Vienna their junior year; JoAnn Peterson and Larry Haverkamp, for studies in different parts of Mexico; and Ralph Day for studies in both Ghana and the Philippines.

Throughout the seventies and eighties Illinois Wesleyan endorsed a handful of affiliated programs for study in roughly a dozen countries. In the mid-nineties we created an official Study Abroad Office, expanded the number of affiliated programs and provided special arrangements for IWU students at universities in Europe and Asia. Finally, as the new millennium arrived so too did the first in a series of Illinois Wesleyan's own study abroad programs. As director of the Fall 2000 London program I am happy to see that almost all of the students from that first program who are graduating this year are being honored today. Since 2000 and hopefully for many years to come, the Director of the International Office mentors all students who study abroad in hundreds of different programs in countries around the globe, both those who leave campus and those who come here to study from afar. Approximately 20% of our student body choose to leave campus and explore other part of the world and in spite of global conflicts or perhaps because of them, those numbers continue to increase.

Those who have had the opportunity to study abroad agree that they have developed a new sense of self reliance. When you study abroad you encounter customs, standards of living, people's perspectives and approaches to life that differ from your own. Unexpected challenges are part of reassessing your values and redefining who you are. As your interpreter leads you through remote villages in rural China, as your field work carries you to the hills of the Himalaya, or as you confront the intimidating

public transportation systems of London, Paris or Madrid, you inevitably attain a higher tolerance level and a refined appreciation of the word “flexibility.”

I wrote to study abroad alums and asked them to share testimonials of their learning experiences. Some answered the question, “why study abroad?”

“The most important question I think of in studying abroad deals with my values. How can I build my values and understanding of the world unless I am able to compare and contrast with people that are completely different from me?” Wilson Muscadin, London, 2000.

“Studying abroad puts so many things in perspective, both personally and professionally. You begin to realize that not everyone in the world lives as you do, and that there is not one right way to do things. Everyone lives differently as a result of their history and culture and studying in another country allows you to have a sneak peak at the culture *and* be a part of it. I think everyone would agree that the global citizen of today has the responsibility to gain this perspective” Rachel Dziallo, Madrid and Paris, 1999-2000.

“The people I met were some of the most amazing people I now know, both Americans and natives to the different countries I visited. They changed the way I view the world. It shows that people really can be different and live together, even get along. People can’t even realize the rewards of studying abroad unless experiencing it for themselves, so my best answer to the question “Why study abroad?” is “Why not?” Rich Berthold, Madrid, 2002.

One of my favorite study abroad suggestions is about souvenirs, that special something you want to bring back with you: “Get a tattoo when you’re abroad—one that represents where you’re studying” Brian Calhoun, Granada, 2001.

Some students wrote about academics. “At first I thought my course load seemed really light. I mean, eight hours of class a week. This is heaven, I thought. But then I checked out the reading lists. For my first two classes I had to read between 50 and 400 pages a week for each one” Rebecca Stolinga, London, 1998.

Others wrote about “academics” outside the classroom. “One day I got brave enough to go to the store and buy some food.... I walk up to the counter and calmly ask for “soo-ka.” The young lady behind the counter shoots me a strange glance and I see some of the clerks look over. I figured my accent must be off and I did what everyone does when you feel someone doesn’t understand in a foreign language—I repeated the same word only louder: “soo-ka.” ... At this point several shoppers in the store stopped to watch. After a few more loud “soo-kas” and much more pointing basically directly at the woman, she handed me my juice and I was off, confused and disheartened that I hadn’t known as much Russian as I thought. It was not until later when I asked my resident director for help interpreting this intercultural situation that he told me that the word for juice is pronounced “soak” and the word “soo-ka” means “whore”. I can guarantee you that I have not forgotten the words for juice or whore in Russian.” Rich Kurtzman, St. Petersburg, 1996.

Anyone who has studied abroad knows that getting lost is a rite of passage, a character builder: “I proceed to my appointed point on the nifty little map of the airport

terminal to where I'm supposed to get 'picked up' and 'transferred' to the hotel. There's no one there. The desk that I'm supposed to report to immediately if this happens is conveniently unattended. ... I met these people who did not have a sign anywhere and after 45 minutes they determine that I'm not their problem. I return to the information desk; this woman recommended the bus...she gave me all the "(mis)information" I needed to get to the hotel. Later I found out that we should never take the bus as it is so unreliable. I hop on the bus. I'm hungry, tired and trying to smile. After an hour I ask the driver which stop I have to get off at... the driver immediately looks at me funny and says—right now. I am stunned and hop off the bus with everyone else, every other person of European descent that is. Immediately all 5 of us open our respective maps and try to figure out where the hell we are. Because only a couple of us even speak the same language, we play telephone tag trying to figure out where we are going.... Thinking something was amiss, I walked into a store, backpacks in tow and with this piece of paper and gestures asked which way on the street the hotel was. I was, of course, going the wrong way" Kevin Brennan, Bangkok, 2002.

As I continue to teach at a small, liberal arts institution, I grow more aware of the learning experience beyond the classroom. I believe deeply that all students should study abroad. And here, I am not alone. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* John Marcum writes, "More than 70 percent of high school seniors think it's important that their college offer study-abroad programs"(B7). This experience teaches students about the world and its people and helps them gain more mature perspectives on their own role in both their local and global communities. Our mission statement holds that

we want Illinois Wesleyan to reflect the ethnic, racial and cultural diversity of the world. We also agree that we are still far from this mark and while we continue to make efforts to accomplish living in diversity, the second best way to make campus more diverse is for students to go out and greet that diversity themselves by traveling and studying in other parts of the world.

Studying abroad *is* a character builder. You learn to trust in the goodness of others, respect differences, and care for people, history, culture, and language that is not your own. You share stories, listen, and think anew. I could go on and on about personal journeys I've undertaken with my best friend and life time partner Chad Sanders. I could talk about the powerful ways a traveler affects the lives of those he or she encounters like Dorotea, one of my favorite characters from Cervantes' *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Instead, I will finish today with the words of another adventurous woman who dared to explore the worlds beyond. Laurel Clark of the Space shuttle Columbia, wrote a brief e-mail to her family and friends the day before Columbia was to land. "I have seen some incredible sights: lightning spreading over the Pacific, *the Aurora Australis* lighting up the entire visible horizon with the city glow of Australia below, the crescent moon setting over the limb of the Earth, the vast plains of Africa and the dunes of cape Horn, rivers breaking through tall mountain passes, the scars of humanity, the continuous line of life extending from North America, through Central America and into South America." She continues writing about her research, the challenges and successes of her journey, and the gratefulness she fills for her extraordinary opportunity.

For those who have returned and for those who have not yet traveled to other countries, I might add, you don't need to wait to go to another country to apply tolerance and open-mindedness in your journeys and day to day life. As you travel take time to speak to the natives, take time to listen. Taste unique foods and avoid the dull, unadventurous, and I may add, unhealthy restaurant chains. Support local businesses, indulge in the regionalism of wherever you may find yourself. Fred's secret is lived in a thousand ways. In a brief exchange of culture that may last a semester or two, students, many of you, have learned that we are all just humble visitors. As we struggle for peace in a world that desperately needs it, may you all choose paths that lead to greater tolerance and respect, to responsible citizenship, and to a heightened appreciation for the global village in which we live.

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