



Fall 12-5-2017

Studying Abroad with a Mental Illness

Meghan E. O'Donnell
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge>

 Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

O'Donnell, Meghan E., "Studying Abroad with a Mental Illness" (2017). *SURGE*. 313.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge/313>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge/313>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Studying Abroad with a Mental Illness

Abstract

Whenever anybody asks me about my experience studying abroad, I lie. I tell them that it was transformative, that I returned a more confident, learned, and enlightened person. I tell them all of the things I wish were true, pretending that all of the dreams I had about how studying abroad would affect me were actually the reality of my experience. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

anxiety, depression, Gettysburg College, mental illness, Social Justice, Study Abroad, travel

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement

Comments

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com. Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

STUDYING ABROAD WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

December , 2017



Whenever anybody asks me about my experience studying abroad, I lie. I tell them that it was transformative, that I returned a more confident, learned, and enlightened person. I tell them all of the things I wish were true, pretending that all of the dreams I had about how studying abroad would affect me were actually the reality of my experience.

I don't say to them that I failed. I don't say that the terrible anxiety I thought I had learned to manage at Gettysburg reasserted itself violently when I left campus and kept me from pursuing experiences that I should have pursued. Who wants to hear that I felt so completely overcome by worry while I was abroad that I barely left my homestay after six o'clock at night, fearing, irrationally, that I would be lost forever in the dark, unable to find my way back? Or that the idea of making trips outside of my daily trek to my classes, even to the park that was just ten minutes from my homestay, filled me with a sense of debilitating panic? Or that I lay awake many nights

during that time, hating myself for being brought down by the nameless, faceless terror that is characteristic of my mental illness?

Nobody wants to hear that.

My story with mental illness began well before I went abroad. A little more than a year ago, I published an anonymous post on Surge about the mental health crisis I had after my freshman year.

Writing it was an incredibly painful experience for me. I had to relive a period of my life that was so terrifying that it seemed as if death was the only escape. It was difficult to put into words just how devastating those few months were, how much of myself that I lost during that time. How do you describe what it feels like to live in a nightmare that your own mind created? How can you adequately explain the sheer horror of feeling imprisoned and tortured by something that you can't see? How are there any words that can somehow give shape to an invisible pain? It was, and is, impossible.

When sophomore year began, I had to figure out how to manage my mental illness at college. I knew that my classes, my job, and my choir rehearsals would keep me relatively busy and that I wouldn't have as much idle time. And since free time is when my worst thought spirals would come, I looked forward to the ability to be perpetually busy. This didn't fix everything, of course. I had to consciously learn certain strategies to help me get through the day. I learned that meditation really worked for me. I learned that I needed to keep to a strict routine and that I thrived when I threw myself into my schoolwork because it kept my mind occupied. Campus, where I had meetings to attend, work to do, music to learn, and classes to enjoy, became a haven for me.

It remains that way.

Just as I'd finally gotten a handle on how to be okay at Gettysburg, I left to study abroad. It had always been a dream of mine and I was thrilled to have the opportunity to be immersed in the language that I had studied for eight years. I was nervous, of course, but as I prepared for the experience, I focused on the image of the incredible world I was about to discover. And while I was there, I did see amazing things. I saw medieval castles and quaint seaside villages and wide, tree-lined boulevards. My language skills improved and I met some wonderful people.

But I miscalculated my ability to handle my mental illness while I was abroad. I assumed that I was past the worst of it since I functioned relatively well at Gettysburg, and that it wouldn't become debilitating like it did after my freshman year. I thought that I had "strategies" to deal with my anxiety and I never realized that the sense of equilibrium that I had established at school was actually incredibly tenuous. I didn't want to believe that I could again feel as terrible as I had that first time I broke down. I wanted to pretend that my mental illness was under control. And it wasn't, really.

The truth of my experience isn't pretty because mental illness isn't pretty. You can't sum it up in a few vague words about adventure, cultural immersion, and global community. Instead, I feel like a failure. I am not a fearless international traveler and I am not a thrill-seeking adventurer. I am nothing but scared. Fear defined those four months. Fear defines me. And I hope that someday, I won't feel like a failure for the way I lived my experience abroad. I hope that someday I won't feel like a failure because of my struggles with mental illness.

I've had to let a dream die. It's possible that I'll never be the adventurous, self-assured person that I hoped I would be when I was younger.

And I may never come to terms with that.

Meghan O'Donnell '18

Blog Manager