

Becoming a Man of the World



Send him mail.



“Insight for the Young and Unrestrained” is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

A few months ago, I was living in Rosarito, Mexico while working about an hour north and across the international border in San Diego, CA. Every few days I would make the drive from one world into another, from a relatively impoverished third world but flavorful Latin America into a high class concrete jungle of angry white people and the stale odor of xenophobia. Every few days I’d be stuck for anywhere from 30 minutes to four hours at the international border attempting re-entry into my own country and having to convince whatever ill-tempered officer had been appointed to ask me the same line of uselessly interrogative questions about why I had been traveling in Mexico.

They’d ask for my passport (a requirement now just to step across the border). I’d have to give a lengthy explanation that I lived and worked there, but also still worked sometimes in San Diego. Although I was certain I was not the only person in history to set up this kind of arrangement, they almost always gave me the third degree about it and attempted to expose the holes in this “cover story” to my obvious drug smuggling operation. I noticed they gave me far less hassle on the days I was dressed nicely and well-groomed.

They asked me to open my trunk. They pounded the sides of the car and doors... for reasons I am not entirely sure of but I assume had something to do with listening for any spots which sounded like they were brimming full of cocaine (what does a metal car door full of cocaine sound like when you slap it?). Sometimes they’d bring out an officer with a little mirror on a long stick for seeing the underside of my car. Sometimes they had drug dogs.

One time, I forgot I had purchased a mango in Mexico which was still in my car. I foolishly confessed to having it, and rather than letting me do the sane thing and throw it away they sent me to secondary inspection for two hours, just to ensure that the singular piece of fruit was a fluke and I hadn’t been attempting illegal fruit importation.

I've traveled a fair amount and lived in other countries before, but almost always for months at a time. Something about experiencing a sudden and drastic change in language, architecture, skin color, and economic development every few days upon crossing an arbitrarily designated invisible line (made real only by armed officers and barricades) really shifted my understanding. I was reminded constantly of the ridiculous nature of international boundaries and imposed restrictions on trade and travel. I felt so empathetic towards the inhabitants of Mexico, who though in many ways perhaps richer in spirit than most Americans were missing out on easy and efficient access to commerce with their wealthier neighbors to the north. I remembered that the only reason class separation even exists is because of violently imposed borders like this one.

Travel is the single greatest activity I have known for the building of such perspective. I'm from a part of California where it is dangerously easy to become comfortably idle. My little beach hometown is a domed enclosure of narrow worldviews, willfully ignorant to outside affairs. Most of the people here seek to maintain ignorance over how other people do things, or even that other ways of doing things exist at all.

I can't help but feel mildly unsettled every time I return to my hometown in north San Diego county. I grew up here, so I always receive little tidbits of faded memories of younger years. I didn't exactly have the roughest of childhoods, but what really upsets me is having to remember how limited my understanding of the world used to be as a result of the sheltered culture I was raised in. Of course, I wonder too if I won't be saying the same thing about my present self a few years from now.

I remember as a child and teenager being only vaguely aware that a place called Mexico existed just 45 minutes south of me. I knew almost nothing about the people and culture there, except what stereotype had bled across the border in the form of legal and illegal immigrants and their offspring. I realize that the majority of San Diegans of all ages still now are probably just as ignorant of our close neighbor Mexico as I was in grade school.

I think too back to my six months in China as an English teacher and the experience I had with the locals, most of whom had no chance of ever leaving China's boundaries due to the restrictions imposed by the Chinese government. Until major policy changes happen in China, it is all of the world these 1.5 billion people will ever know. I was told that most of them don't ever even leave the city or province they were born in.

Even the information about other countries and cultures available to the Chinese through television and the internet is heavily censored by the government. To me, this explains why so much of Chinese culture is so rigid and dogmatic. They have no perspective, nothing external to compare their own lives with. This makes them extremely easy to control.

I remember the mother of the Chinese family I lived and worked with as an English teacher for her teenage daughter. This wealthy family had been fighting for years to save enough money and jump through the multitude of government hoops on both ends necessary to immigrate to the United States. With as many problems as we have to complain about here, witnessing so closely a mother and her children who lived better than almost all the other Chinese locals but still so willing to fight to come to the U.S. really ingrained in me a new respect for those more enslaved than we are.

Even in a post 9/11 world, it seems people born in the United States have more freedom to travel than those born in any other country in the world. Our mix cultural influences is part of our reputation as a nation (the best part), and is responsible for much of the progress we made in our heyday. Individuals who travel and willingly immerse themselves in different cultures experience more personal growth and maturation than those who only ever experience reality and human civilization under one particular shade. With what I've seen so far in my travels and witnessing of human control, I'm still left stumped by this question: why don't Americans, who have the rare luxury of doing so, travel more?

Adopting a more global perspective on humanity has changed the way I identify myself. It's easy to feel stifled in any one location. It can be hard to find a way to fit in with your immediate surroundings. Whenever I start to feel flustered in this way, I remind myself how big the world is and still how very little of it I've yet seen. I remember the places I've been and the different ways people have responded to the kind of person I am. Some cultures welcomed me. Others treated me like a cancer.

Because of travel, I understand how many different ways there can be of approaching life. I understand how easy it is to get stuck only viewing the world through the filter you were raised with. It makes so much of what we struggle to uphold and pass on to the next generation seem so petty and counterproductive. In some ways, culture is a blessing. In other ways, it is a disease. Experiencing many radically different cultures firsthand enables anyone to pick and choose the best aspects of each and disregard the rest. This is an education no classroom, professor, or book can give you.

Economic opportunity looks different for a citizen of the entire world than those who still only align themselves with one nation. I hear non-stop whinings locally about the shortage of jobs for young people in the U.S. I ask my peers: then why are you still looking in the U.S.? If it's so hard to break into business here, where is it currently easier? Why not go there? While it's true that we live in a time where more restrictions than ever in American history seem to be weighing down upon us and drowning out production and opportunities, we also live in an age of amazing technologies which if used correctly can more than make up for the lack caused by interventionism.

With the right amount of determination, you can get on a plane to just about anywhere you

would want to go in the world today. It might still be a cumbersome and obstructed process, but think of how it was for our ancestors lacking the travel technology we have today. Men of the past flocked to the new world of America for the entrepreneurial opportunity it afforded them like no place else. If indeed that well of opportunity has run dry, then maybe it's time we reached out to seed developing parts of the world which would welcome the mindset and skills we were so blessed to be able to develop here in our privileged conditions with easy access to information and tools of production.

We are social creatures, inescapably seeking modes and patterns to guide our behavior. But there is a thin line between embracing your cultural surroundings and being controlled by them. Basing your actions on how you think others might react or other arbitrary standards of social acceptability is weak and limiting. At the end of the day, either we shape our environment, or our environment shapes us.

Deep down, I suppose the biggest aversion people have to exploring new lands and cultures has nothing to do with crime, money, or time, but a fear of themselves. It has to do with the fear of maybe realizing that reality is bigger and far different than what they thought it was. And if reality is that much different... what does that say about you? Who are you really when you strip away all the arbitrary and culturally inherited aspects of your psyche? What many people fear most is that they are so much more than what they have trained themselves to believe.

I think that is why it is extremely important to travel not as a tourist or vacationer, but to really allow yourself to be immersed in new cultures and live the lives of other people. I lived in the same town for the first 18 years of my life. I learned more about myself in the first year away from it exploring a new and utterly different lifestyle in a totally different place I never knew existed than I did in all my schooling combined. I haven't slowed down since. Whenever I start to feel depressed, worthless, or unproductive, I remind myself how big the world is and how little of it I've yet explored. Even the worst, most terrible and painful of my experiences have changed me and contributed to character growth in ways like nothing else could have.

There's so much more out there for me to see and contribute to my personality. It's mildly terrifying, but also endlessly exciting for me to think about. That, and the thought of having my own kids to raise someday and teach them everything I will have yet learned, are what keep me going everyday. Mediocrity and normalness are my kryptonite, and the idea of a world so large that I will never get to experience it all in one lifetime keeps me perpetually charged and ready to act.

To those who have yet to travel, I say: take the plunge. It will change you in ways you cannot yet possibly imagine. Again, maybe that's what scares you. But there is no gain without risk of the unknown. If you're like me, once that door has been opened, you won't

know how to stop. I was fortunate enough to have a helping hand on my first expedition beyond my comfort zone. Seek help from those who can give it.

A global perspective, or awareness, or consciousness, or whatever you want to call it can only be accomplished when more people have become more aware of the larger picture of human life on this planet. Only then can we abolish and replace the petty compartmentalized nation-states of the world with true individual liberty and create a world where we are complete citizens of ourselves and reality, without the limitations of a culturally imposed local identity. Go forth and explore.