

What I Remember By Anna Levy

A few years ago, I conducted a workshop during a weekend retreat for teenagers about the power of personal writing. During our two hours together, I used several exercises to help them access the creative truths that were unique to only their lives. One of them, entitled "I Remember," is a version of the popular stream-of-conscious prompt "I Am," in which writers complete that sentence over and over for a certain amount of time. The results, as always, were beautiful: complex and distinct, they offered up a version of students' lives that was both completely individual and yet somehow universal.

That experience came back to me as I tried to find words to communicate the power of my six weeks in Europe this summer. The truth is, I have struggled to do my trip justice when friends and family have asked about it. How do I explain all of the adventures, the people, the food, the challenges, the unforgettable moments that defy categorization? No essay could summarize it. So, to that end, I won't try to tackle the significance of all six weeks. Instead, and in no particular order, I'll offer you, as my long-ago students offered me, simply, what I remember.

I remember taking a three-hour nap upon arriving in Ireland, despite advice to stay awake in order to adjust to the time difference. I remember the gelato on a side street in Florence, where I had three different flavors because I couldn't narrow it down to just one. I remember floating along the river in Cesky Krumlov, stopping for beer and bratwurst and what was, perhaps, the smelliest bathroom in the entire Czech Republic. I remember how wonderful it was to come across Karver in the train station in Lucerne, as he stood at the monitor trying to figure out when Erin and I might arrive.

I remember watching the World Cup in various corners of Europe - in coffee shops, in public squares, in bars - while passionate fans roared around me. I remember strolling through the Van Gogh museum, completely absorbed, for four hours on the day after I'd stood - unbelievably - in Anne Frank's bedroom. I remember dancing in the kitchen with my classmates in Vienna, and learning that one of them had been soothed by Michael Jackson's music as a baby. I remember running along the banks of the Seine one morning in Paris, the smell of croissants and butter and chocolate in the air.

I remember the train ride from Prague to Berlin, miserable, trying to grab a purse-snatcher and then sweating through several hours without air conditioning. I remember a guest speaker at the Flow Haus giving us the question, "Where is a person?" when even a heart can be replaced. I remember the fireworks in Florence, high above that regal city, bursting behind a copy of Michaelangelo's David. I remember seeing the real statue a few days later, gasping, understanding finally what made the man a genius.

I remember the food: ethereal banana mousse in France, gnocchi that melted on my tongue in Italy, schnitzel and dumplings in Austria. I remember the harmony between the tomatoes, mozzarella, and basil on a panini bought from a roadside vendor so vividly that I swear I can taste it even now. I remember the

wine spritzers in Vienna and the slight variances on coffee that made it an entirely new experience in every country. I remember my embarrassment, during a long day of exhausting travel, of eating at McDonald's, and the comfort that emerged somewhere between the Happy Meal, the cool manufactured air, and the background of American music.

I remember getting lost many times, and learning to appreciate the resulting adventures. I remember the water taxis in Venice, and watching an Eastern European woman in the back of one putting on layer after layer of lipstick. I remember running between trains in Milan, desperately trying to understand the Italian woman speaking French to me. I remember the bright blue walls in Sir Toby's Hostel in Prague. I remember walking in the Swiss Alps, surrounded by breathtaking scenery, gnome statues, yodeling men, and cows wearing actual bells.

I remember pulling out my journal in museums, writing down the pieces of art that I'd never before heard of, creating a list of the things I loved. I remember climbing the stairs on the Eiffel Tower and the feeling of vertigo on the way back down. I remember watching people pose in different ways, according to nationality, for pictures: Americans with big smiles, Russians with sultry bedroom eyes, Chinese looking straight ahead, and serious.

I remember the Brazilian man who told us about God during dinner. I remember the cherries at a hostel in the Czech Republic, freshly replaced each morning. I remember my gratitude for a chilling thunderstorm in Switzerland after four sweltering days in a tent in Florence. I remember the first overnight train, and the realization that six - six - people were going to share that small space. I remember rolling along that same train through the Italian countryside, marveling at its beauty and wondering about the people living there. I remember the music festival in Paris, and the cheese shops, and the hot chocolate at Angelina's, thick and creamy and pure.

I remember standing in Viktor Frankl's apartment, seeing his bed and where he worked, talking with his wife and soaking in her wisdom, understanding that I was in the presence of greatness. I remember the concentration camp, which disgusted, appalled, and deeply saddened me, and which has stayed with me ever since. I remember the silence on the bus afterwards, and I remember feeling such love for my classmates, all of whom are compassionate, caring people who are working for something better.

I remember how Dublin felt like home by the time we returned, as our last stop before flying back to the United States.

I remember saying goodbye to Erin, grateful she had traveled with me for six long and wonderful weeks.

I remember feeling pure joy at seeing the people I love upon returning, led first by my brother Sam, who greeted me at his restaurant in New York with the huge smile I've loved all my life, and an even bigger hug.

I remember how grateful I am to Wake Forest, and to this department, for giving me the experience of Vienna and the excuse to travel to Europe.

I remember how fortunate I am.

I remember that this world, and its people, are more beautiful than words

could ever capture.

I remember. I remember. I remember.