

10-10-2010

Forget the Umbrella - Culture Shock

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Recommended Citation

Agosti, Rachelle, "Forget the Umbrella - Culture Shock" (2010). *2010-11 Postcards*. Article. Submission 12.
http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/intl_postcards_1011/12

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Journals from Sevilla, Spain - Center for Cross-Cultural Studies

2010-10-10 Forget the Umbrella - Culture Shock



Pati and Hayley wandering down a typical southern Spain street

Rain sounds the same as it crashes into the pavement and roofs of Spain as it does in Oregon. It smells the same as it just begins to fall. It feels the same as I splash through the puddles and it soaks my hair because, unlike every single Spaniard, I don't have my umbrella. Not that I want it, because I'm a Pacific Northwest girl through and through. Rain makes me laugh and smile rather than grumble and frown. Tonight, racing through the downpour from Plaza Nueva, the center of the city, to Triana, the barrio where I live, I decided the important things were the same wherever you went. You end up just as soaked with Spain's rain and your rotten cotton jeans take just as long to dry off.

I see culture shock as like a walk in the rain without an umbrella. You have to simply throw yourself into the experience, knowing you're going to get soaked, knowing there are going to be constant differences. At some point, it may be uncomfortable. You might want to find somewhere to take shelter from the downpour for a while, a phone call to your mom or a favorite Disney movie. But sometimes you'll be so exhilarated by the challenge and wonder of the differences that you'll go skipping through the rain and puddles laughing for no other

reason than because you're having the time of your life. And if that metaphor made no sense to you, then perhaps I'm still on a euphoric rain cloud.

We were prepared for culture shock. After orientation meetings, information packets, and our own online research we felt thoroughly prepared to be shocked. Yet it didn't happen. I haven't spoken with a single student who thinks they've experienced culture shock. Perhaps it is one of those things where the more prepared for it you are the less likely you are to actually experience it. Or perhaps we were so well prepped that we knew how to deal with it without negative affects. Regardless, there was never any shock. For me, culture "shock" has been a process of learning what the different norms are and how to live within them.

There are plenty of basic differences that you get used to quickly by necessity. Lunch is at 2pm and is the largest meal and dinner is at 9pm. Sevillanos don't eat a lot of beef, so you're likely to get a hamburger that is literally a burger made of ham. Still yummy, though. Most shops close between 3 and 5pm for the siesta, so you can't plan on doing any errands during this time even if it seems particularly convenient. 70° is considered cold and your señora will insist you take a jacket. Everyone dresses nicely, which means jeans without holes are perfect but no Sevillanos wear sweatshirts. Ever. Anyone who dislikes soccer is crazy, so be prepared to watch a fair amount. A smile is an invitation, not just a polite greeting, so you can't smile at random people in the street. All stores except el Corte Inglés are specialized and you can expect to spend lots of time wandering into random stores looking for what you need. Nobody goes puddle jumping (perhaps because they are wearing nice, expensive shoes unlike us silly Americans).

Navigating through these differences hasn't been too difficult, although it can be frustrating at times. For example, when you're out of shampoo but the only free time you have is the siesta when all the stores are closed or when you want to smile at the people you pass on the street because you're having a good day and want to share the happiness. Yet these surface differences haven't been shocking or very hard to become accustomed to. They just take a bit of time and patience.

I am just beginning to understand the deeper differences between our cultures which are also numerous. For example, religion may be important to people, but it doesn't interfere or interact with their other beliefs such as politics. Thus, the creation/evolution debate doesn't exist here, because they don't see why the belief in God should interfere with the belief that humans and monkeys evolved from a common ancestor. One can be devoutly Catholic and still believe in a woman's right to choose abortion.

Within all of these ideological or basic differences, there are numerous similarities that provide a comforting backdrop and give me the sensation that the gap between our cultures isn't quite as large as I feared. My host parents have the same little habitual "fights" that my mom and dad have. Everyone is worried about the economy. The government is always making things seem better than they are. Women wear high heels even though they hurt. They even have a saying similar to "beauty is pain". News reports are depressing. Running through the pouring rain still leaves me chilly and soaked.

But that doesn't mean I want my umbrella.

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