
2015-16 Field Notes

Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person

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Person to Person in Austria

Tor Strand
Linfield College

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Tor Strand
Vienna, Austria
October 1, 2015

What do you Value?

When I sat down to interview my host mom about cultural differences between Austria and the United States, I had to give her pre-warning that I would not be offended by anything she had to say. This disclaimer in itself proves that the U.S. image in Austria is, at best, precarious. When I told her this she laughed, and said, “I know you don’t represent over 300 million people, as I do not represent all nine federal states of Austria.” This being the obvious case, she went on to give her opinion on the cultural mindset and ideals of the United States, while I offered what I have observed and gleaned so far during my time in Vienna. In a compare and contrast conversation we were able to conclude some similarities and differences between both of our complex cultural societies.

The first thing Barbara told me was, “to me, the U.S. is culture-less” to which I was somewhat surprised, though soon I realized that she did not so much mean culture-less as in “without culture,” but instead that our culture was hollow, gilded, unstable, or fake.

“What is it that Americans value?” I asked her.

“Money. Money, money, money,” she paused. “There are many more things in this world, many things that money cannot help you with, and I believe Americans sometimes forget this.”

How could I argue with her? In America we are pushed by television, movies, and magazines to believe that the more monetary prowess we have, the better off we are. The larger the slice of pie, the happier we will be. Grab life by the horns and take what you can get...blah blah blah. It is essential for one to take a step back and examine the influences being inflicted

upon oneself. We are pulled in many directions by advertisements, friends, family, colleagues, etc. and it is easy to move like a magnet, attracted one way and then another, but this is not healthy. Instead one must stop and ask themselves two simple questions: What is it that I believe in? And, why do I believe it? From here we move forward, these questions transcend culture, and without question, transcend wealth.

We discussed education, and the emphasis on certain academic programs in Austria and in the United States. Barbara insisted that the U.S pours much more funding into math and science compared to Austria, where there is a stronger focus on art and music. We both agreed that whether one becomes a painter or a plumber, they are nevertheless essential for a healthy society, and that on the whole, it is necessary to value all professions. Therefore the idea that Austrians exceed Americans in music and art (which they do), and the idea that Americans have some of the top science and math programs is not a critique of either country, only a mere difference in taste.

We discussed the military, where Barbara repeatedly used the phrase, “global police force” to describe the United States. She exclaimed, “The American Military does great things for the world, unless they don’t like you.” To generalize Europe, which I am not fond of doing, but can confidently remark, it is the general consensus that the United States acts with a unilateral sword when it comes to international affairs.

Barbara and I expressed opinions on other issues that separate Europe from the United States such as culinary differences and perhaps one of the easiest observed distinction: language. In Europe, is it commonplace to be able to speak three languages — almost always two, your mother tongue and English, but usually three — whereas in the United States our public schools do not begin foreign language teaching until our children's overripe ears reach high school. The

list goes on. Yet, in conclusion, speaking through these issues, and living in a foreign land, has given me a much broader view of the world. In America, we waste, we can be hollow, gilded in greed, we can be entitled, and frankly, we can be downright ugly with our political agendas.

Nevertheless, the power America possesses is great, it is still a land of opportunity and as such, it creates a chance for myself and all the rest of us, under the red, white, and blue to help move the world forward in a positive direction.

Barbara Nemenz: My host mom

October 1, 2015