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The Moral Ambiguity of Study Abroad

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It is hard to avoid moral guilt when you travel outside the United States today. Simply by crossing an ocean, you have spent more money than most people in the world will earn in a year -- more than some will earn in a lifetime. Being a tourist can mean not only pleasure, freedom, and extravagance, but also ethical dilemmas. And sometimes when you think you are connecting one-on-one with another person, you discover that a third element is involved: money.

Some tourists try to avoid encounters with poverty, disease, and other unpleasant realities of life in other countries. But a central part of many study-abroad programs is witnessing and learning about the disturbing challenges faced by developing nations.

Five years ago, when I was the field supervisor for my college's five-month global program on development in Egypt, India, Hong Kong, and Korea, my students and I faced a variety of ethical quandaries. For instance, how should we respond to beggars, such as the emaciated child in India who held out her hand and said, "Please, uncle, for bread"? Beyond her waited a dozen other children, some blind or crippled or suffering from what looked like a painful skin disease.

Our hosts in India told us not to give money to beggars. They said that sometimes Indian children are deliberately injured, to pull at the heartstrings and open the wallets of Western tourists. I didn't give much to beggars in India, but I felt guilty.

The students who went with me in January 1984 to study liberation theology in Mexico saw even worse sights. On one field trip, our air-conditioned bus drove slowly around one of Mexico City's enormous garbage dumps, which sprawled over many acres. Hundreds of scavengers, including children, made a living there picking through trash for anything useful: cans to recycle, say, or scraps of food.

I noticed that some of the garbage bags were orange. Those, our guide told us, were filled with hospital refuse like body parts and fluids, excrement, and used hypodermic needles.

The students and I rode back to our comfortable quarters in stunned silence. We sat in a circle on the grass and talked. Some of the students cried and asked, "What can I do about this? How can we go on living the way we do?"

We all felt ashamed. We wanted to do penance, to live differently. We wanted to help those people and end world poverty. Instead, we returned to our luxurious North American existence, and I, at least, didn't change my life at all.

Far less horrifying initially, but still troubling, was an encounter a few students in the global program and I had in Cairo, coincidentally on the morning of September 11, 2001. We had decided at breakfast to devote our free morning to field trips in small groups, and some of us chose to investigate Khan al-Khalili, an enormous covered market that had been in business since the 14th century.

As we wandered through the market's narrow lanes, a striking-looking man of about 60 stopped us. "Hello, are you enjoying Cairo?" he asked.

"Yes, very much," I responded and kept walking. I suspected that he wanted to sell us something, but his gravity and thoughtful dignity appealed to me. When he offered to take us to the spice market, "where tourists never go" and where we could take photographs, he insisted, "I don't want any money, I do this for friendship."

We followed him, passing mounds of fresh fruit and huge barrels and burlap bags full of freshly ground spices. We came to a shop that sold perfumed oils, and our guide suggested that we try some. Strangely, no shopkeeper was in sight. We all squeezed inside, and our new friend showed us the perfumes, putting drops on our wrists, reassuring us that he simply wanted to educate us about this fascinating aspect of Egyptian culture.

But after 15 minutes, the "education" became a sales pitch. We refused to buy anything and said it was time to leave. The guide-turned-merchant followed us, yelling so that everyone nearby could hear: "You Americans, you come here with your money and your cameras. You act like you own us. You take, take, take. You are disgusting and disgraceful. Why did you come here?"

Utterly humiliated, we hurried away. We wandered through the market a little more, but the episode had left us shaken.

In the afternoon, our students had classes at the American University in Cairo. Then several of us checked our e-mail messages at the university library and learned that the first plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center. That the incident at the market happened on 9/11 gave it an eerie significance, as if it were a metaphor for the alarm and insecurity so many Americans around the world felt that day, wondering: Why do they hate us so much? And who are they anyway?

A great deal of tourism and foreign study today is linked to sites of historical injustice and suffering, like the former Nazi concentration camps in Europe; the old slave port of Gorée Island, in Senegal; and the Cambodian memorial to the victims of the Khmer Rouge. Like my students' experience at the Mexico City dump, those "guilt trips" are a form of organized educational travel intended to show us human suffering.

Guilt trips are organized exactly like commercial tourism, and they can become simply a spectacle: a momentarily shocking vision of life that makes us feel guilty about our privileges and our lackadaisical responses to suffering, but that leaves us basically unchanged.

An educational program should do more than tourism. It should deepen students' moral sensibility, elicit their compassion, arouse their sense of injustice, and sharpen their understanding of world problems, including our society's role in creating and perpetuating suffering.

But we should not leave our students stuck in self-flagellating remorse; instead we must help them move beyond guilt to responsibility. We must convert their uneasiness and defensiveness into clear thinking about what we and they can do, individually and as a society, about huge problems that will take a long time to solve, or that may even be inescapable parts of the human condition.

In addition, we should ask whether our educational programs are helping or harming the cultures we visit. From one perspective, study abroad, like tourism, is a case of the mobile rich paying the indigenous poor to supply what they must see as luxuries. Tourism often injects the wasteful habits of a consumer culture into a society with unmet basic human needs. Yet the economies of many countries around the world depend heavily on tourism. That is certainly true of countries like Mexico, Egypt, and India.

Pico Iyer wrote about Cambodia in *Sun After Dark: Flights Into the Foreign* (Knopf, 2004), "Tourism was turning the children into parasites, yet the absence of tourism might turn them into skeletons."

There is a growing literature about tourism -- including probing anthropological studies like Edward M. Bruner's *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) and John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze* (2nd edition, Sage Publications, 2002) -- that can help students think critically about their involvement in the places they visit. The ethical assessment of our programs is complex and difficult. In foreign travel, is there an equivalent to shade-grown, fair-trade coffee that we should seek out and pay extra for? Should educational programs include a service component?

To wrestle with the moral ambiguity of tourism -- and of our educational programs -- is vitally important. One outcome of traveling should be to develop an uneasy conscience and a critical self-consciousness about our practices when we go abroad. So let us take our students to the garbage dump, share their feelings of guilt about what we see there, and think about the causes of human suffering and what we can do to relieve it.

At the very least, we should help students realize that different cultures have different expectations and values. When I reflect on my experience in the Cairo market, I see that Egyptians and Americans do not think the same way about buying and selling, and about the relationship between host and guest. A few dollars for an unwanted bottle of perfume would have been a small price to pay for that knowledge, and perhaps a tiny lessening of hatred in the world.

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