Beyond

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How to Unlearn Everything

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Stefano Corazzini was standing in the parking lot outside the *Duomo di Siena*, halfway into an impassioned speech about the origin of the city's cathedral, when it hit me: this was the first parking lot I'd seen since I came to Italy. I'd spent time in all the postcard regions – Florence, Rome, Milan, Venice, Cinque Terre, Lucca – and nowhere else had I seen a place to *store one's car.* Make no mistake, I was astonished. There was street parking, sure, and illegal spaces were fair game (cue the Audi I saw conveniently straddled across the median of a busy intersection during midday traffic in Florence), but an honest-to-goodness parking lot? Not a chance. So when Stefano finished explaining how the Black Plague killed nearly a third of the cathedral's workforce and halted construction for years on end, I had only one question for him.

"Where do you park your car every day?"

Several students laughed. Stefano turned to me. He was wearing a dark navy sweater with white horizontal pinstripes and a checkered button down underneath, with slacks resting on slightly worn athletic shoes. His outfit looked stifling under the sweltering sun, but he hadn't broken a sweat. Instead he smiled, grinned at me with the eyes of a scholar – skin pulled tight at the edges, lids perched above the pupils in a narrow slant – and raised a finger.

"You don't need to park if you never drive, *amico*."

Stefano does, indeed, drive. But not much. In his own words, he moves his car from its space on the street "just enough to avoid a ticket when the parking *polizia* come by each month." Anyone who's traveled through Italy will recognize the subtle art of *furbizia* at work here, that distinct cultural cleverness in the face of bureaucratic institutions which Italians regularly employ to outsmart the system. But there's something else going on here, too, something larger than Stefano or me, and it con-

cerns far more than intercultural discussions about cunning parking procedures. In fact, it might just be the key to revolutionizing how we approach international education.

What does it mean to study abroad? Is it a cultural experience? An experiment in independence? A rite of passage for emerging scholars? A definitive answer will probably always elude us. But I've had some time to think about it and, year after year, I've habitually come to the same conclusion: in many ways, studying abroad is an arduous process of unlearning everything you've ever known. This sounds easier on paper than it is in practice. To purposely unlearn what you know is to make a fool of yourself in front of others with great frequency and conviction. You must attempt to learn a foreign language by using it poorly. You must take wrong turns and get lost within cities you hardly know. Above all, you must ask questions about local parking customs at inopportune moments and receive surprising answers. You must do all of these things, and you mustn't be afraid to do them.

This is exactly what happened between Stefano and me: in a small but powerful way, our nonchalant cultural exchange at an ill-timed moment forced me to reconsider what public and private transportation looks like in different parts of the world. As an American, it was wholly unfathomable to me that anyone would drive so sparingly. My monthly car payments and insurance fees are reason enough to put thousands of miles on my dust-black Toyota Yaris each year. And yet, Stefano's story made sense. He lives in Florence, an immensely walkable town, and inner-city parking laws restrict drivers from using many of the town's narrow, winding roads. After all, why drive when biking or walking to work is much faster? And so, while my curiosity spurred a seemingly frivolous discussion, it provided me with the opportunity of unlearning an ingrained cultural bias.

This wasn't the first eye-opening conversation I'd experienced in Italy. By now I was having around-the-clock revelations, some small, others colossal, to the point where I'd deconstructed almost all of the pre-

conceived notions I'd formed back home. I was having embarrassingly enlightening moments on a daily basis, and I was thankful for them. Most of all, I was excited to unlearn even more.

Of course, as ambassadors of our own competence, the notion of unlearning goes against everything we've been taught. But if you can suffer this painful process, you will be gifted with the rare opportunity to relearn everything, too. You will relearn the definition of beauty as you stand atop the mountain trails of Cinque Terre, sipping freshly squeezed orange juice from a hillside vendor and gazing down at the seaside salt-blasted pastel homes that grip the edges of the Mediterranean. You will relearn how to drink wine by tasting it fresh from the cask in cellars that have been practicing the art of vinification since the Medicis ruled Florence. You will relearn how to converse using smiles and nods alone, and in doing so, you will come to cherish your native language and how it effortlessly tumbles forth from your mouth. But to do this – to do any of it – you must first unlearn it all, piece by piece, inch by inch.

Speaking of which, if you're going to unlearn everything, you'll want to start with inches… they'll do you no good in a world governed by the metric system.

If you're flirting with the idea of unlearning everything and don't know where to start, it helps to have a guide. Two guides are better than one, and three are even better than that – rewiring your brain takes an army of great minds to successfully accomplish. In my case, I enlisted the help of three guides who worked day and night to ensure that by the time I set foot on American soil once more, I didn't know a single thing.

My first guide was my landlord, Christina, who governed our flat during my stay in Florence. She retains a special place in my heart for helping me un-learn my American predisposition to excessive consumption. On my first night in Florence, much to Christina's consternation, my roommate and I short-circuited our flat's power upon arrival. We'd plugged in *everything* – laptops, phone chargers, TVs, blow dryers, personal fans, the washing machine, you name it – and within minutes, the

circuit breakers flipped, plunging us into a premature midnight. Christina wouldn't let us hear the end of it.

"Americans! How do you blow the power within ten minutes of receiving your keys?" From that moment on, we avoided her gaze like the Black Plague itself. We always looked twice before leaving our apartment, making sure she wasn't hiding in the dilapidated stairwell, ready to pounce on us from the shadows. This was, of course, an overreaction. Christina was simply trying to explain one of the many nuances of European living: electricity can be a bit fickle in cities built before the birth of Christ. In the end it was a valuable lesson, the first of many embarrassments that would prepare me to unlearn everything else — and, in an unlikely twist of fate, it was this incident that led to the connections which would help me become an occasional contributor to the Italian Studies Institute blog and now *BEYOND*. In many ways, I have Christina to thank for the very existence of this piece.

My next guide was Stefano Baldassarri. It didn't strike me at the time, but looking back, there are few people *less* suited to help you unlearn everything than the ISI Florence Program Director. An avid academic with a rich background in foreign language studies, medieval history, Italian literature, and more, Stefano is a font of knowledge, and he shares his wisdom willingly. Despite his impressive intellectual clout (or perhaps because of it), he helped me unravel much of what I'd come to believe, starting with parking principles. Over the course of my stay, I would seek his advice on a myriad of cultural subjects. Our conversations ranged from the metaphysical to the mundane: how do Italians create modern art in the shadow of cultural giants like Michelangelo and Botticelli? Has anyone fallen into the Arno recently? What does the slowly diminishing role of Catholicism mean for the future of Italian politics and cultural life? Why are there condom machines on every street corner in Florence?

Stefano answered my questions with humor and grace, and in doing so, helped me discover something incredibly valuable: there is no shame in discussing both the simple and the complex at once. This is, of course, a well-known fact among many Italians. Old friends and acquain-

tances alike spend their afternoons discussing everything from politics to pets at cafes and *gelaterie* in the span of one breath, switching effortlessly from subject to subject as if they're asking for a glass of water. It is not uncommon for a waiter and their patron to lament about the backhanded politicking that goes on among the Italian football elite before transitioning to a nuanced discussion about the state of the economy.

To an American steeped in the tradition of small-talk, it sounds a little bit like magic. In some ways, it *is* – this kind of conversational vulnerability will likely remain an enigma to myself and countless others who live stateside, and we will continue to be fascinated by it wherever we go. But were it not for Stefano, I wouldn't have learned that this parallel world of intercultural dialogue could exist at all. He was the first person to draw back the curtain, the first to reveal this proverbial *Land of Oz*, the first to dazzle me with a concept that will continue to intrigue me throughout my adult life.

My third guide was the brilliant and enigmatic Verdiana, our chaperone through the streets of Venice. Shaped by a city with a rich and complex history, her knowledge of Venetian culture was razor sharp, and her influence was instrumental in helping me unlearn both the esoteric and the practical. For instance, while I will never forget what she taught me about the composers and writers who once frequented the streets of Venice or the impact of tourism and pollution on the city's crumbling wooden foundations, I am still reminded of a very elementary lesson I learned about American punctuality while frequenting a Venetian cafe.

"*Perfetto, signore,*" the *barista* said, writing my order down in her sleek checkbook. An espresso and a croissant. I reached for my wallet to pay. The woman smiled and shook her head. "You haven't had your meal yet." Verdiana, who was standing beside me, laughed quietly.

"Coffee first," she chided me. "Pay after." *Pay after?* Imagine ordering a tall blond coffee at Starbucks and promising the *barista* you'll cough up the money after you've drunk it. I'd *pay* to see that conversational transaction play out in real-time. Nevertheless, that was the policy here: drink first, pay after. The cafe had cultivated a culture of mutual trust

between its employees and patrons; as such, there was no need to rush toward payment. Within these walls, prompt payment was considered uncouth and shady behavior. Lesson unlearned.

Parking, power and payment culture. They're not exactly the stuff of legends, nor are they the topics that keep most people up at night. But each subject, and the guides who helped me navigate them, were instrumental in allowing me to discover something about myself I'd never even known I *knew*. And for that, each of these interactions hold a special place in my heart, along with the countless thousands of other cultural, political, historical and practical themes I'd been forced to confront, examine, and reconsider while studying abroad.

Before you embark on an international education excursion of your own, I must admit: I've misled you. When I mentioned that I had three guides during my time abroad, that was a bold-faced lie. The truth is that I had many, many more guides than that. There was Emma, the bright-eyed ISI associate who showed me how to get lost in Venice; there were the bartenders at *I Visacci*, who coached me on the art of persuading your friends to pick up *il conto,* the check; there was the priest at Sunday mass who taught me to leave my cultural and religious biases at the door; there was the aging Florentine waitress who'd shown me humility by publicly berating me with a stream of expletives after I'd unwittingly insulted her restaurant's menu; there were the Armenian food stand salesmen who were gracious enough to sell me discounted kebabs when my credit card was rejected; and of course, there was the Australian backpacker, who showed me the plausibility of trekking the world on little more than a few thousand dollars and a week's worth of laundry. I was guided by each and every one of these individuals, and countless others. To say otherwise would be unfair, and likely impossible – for how does one invoke all knowledge without an armada of aides in their arsenal?

Yes, I was taught many things, some large and others small, but it was only through the help of the many people I met that I was able to do so. And perhaps *that* is the true meaning of studying abroad: more than a

process of unlearning, it is a process of forming connections with people who will irrevocably change the way you think, act, learn, communicate and create, guiding you toward a better understanding of the world and your place among its residents.

So, whether you're a college student seeking new opportunities, an ex-scholar looking at a master's program abroad, or a recent high school graduate who's lived their entire academic life in a five-mile radius (as I once had), I have some choice words for you: How would you like to unlearn everything?