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Ireland: The Happiness and Heartache Continues

*"So peaceful and calmly this place it seems to be,
Yet I stare at it sadly for it's thru a picture I see
this land far, far away from mine
I watch the clock in patient time
for someday soon I'll touch the sand
of this calm place called Ireland."*

~ This Place Called Ireland, Chantal O'Connor

After spending 9 months away from the US without getting home sick once I never thought it possible to feel such gripping heart ache over a place, but now its something I experience everyday. Every time I hear an Irish tune or drink a cup of tea; every time I hear the rain outside my window or catch a glimpse of the black shamrock tattooed on my ankle; every time I lace up my ghillies to dance or see a picture of those green hills, I can't help but think of Ireland and sigh. My experience abroad was beyond and above what I expected. In studying abroad I discovered what happiness is and in doing this I found a new home and a new niche. But my Ireland journey has not ended; it is an experience that is still active in my life.

Many a philosopher have said that true happiness is hard to find, but that it is found in completely immersing yourself in the present moment. In Ireland I found peace and happiness in this way. One of my favorite stories to tell people is about our trip to the Aran Islands. On these extremely Irish and very rustic islands we spent the evening in a little Pub where the musicians were a couple of old Irish men on accordion and guitar.

After a few jigs some of the girls told me I should go up and dance with them so I did. Now I get to tell people that I danced in a wee Pub on the Aran Islands with an incredibly traditional Irish ensemble. This story still amazes me; I cannot believe it actually happened because at the time I was entirely immersed in the moment at hand. I was not thinking about tomorrow, or the things leading up to that moment. Looking back on all of my experiences in Ireland I realize that this was my secret to finding a home there. Every moment I cherish from Ireland is one in which I was living in the moment. It took me awhile to reach this frame of mind because I am someone who usually over thinks everything. Before, I would always draw from the past and look to future consequences when doing anything, and it was hard for me to let go. Slowly the Irish taught me to stop worrying, stop thinking; because, as they always told me, “aw sure, you’ll be grand”. By the end of semester two I was happy. Everything I did I look back on now and realize how completely immersed in it I was at the time. In this pure joy I found that Ireland had become a home to me. “Home is where the heart is.”, and my heart was and is in Ireland.

. I flew out of Ireland on May 30th, 2007. It was one of the worst traveling experiences I have ever had. At the Dublin airport; might I mention one of the worst and best places in the world to me now, we drank a final pint of Guinness, said our final goodbyes, and gave our final hugs and kisses. We entered the security gates with red eyes, runny noses, and only 20 minutes to get through Customs. The eight hour flight to Chicago was bearable with friends to lean on, but there I said goodbye to them for the summer months. It was then on to another 4 hour flight home to Washington State. Somewhere along the way to this flight I lost my passport, and sometime in the process of finding it I decided I could not take it anymore. As the security lady miraculously

handed my passport back to me I burst in to tears, tears full of relief, fatigue, and confusion. The whole flight home I listened to music and burst into tears at random (the people sitting next to me probably thought I was crazy...). Looking back on this disaster of trip now, I find it all pretty funny. I did have a lot of time to think on my trip home and I have had a lot of time to think since. This is what I've come up with: I am someone who is used to having to leave; say goodbye. As of lately I never really found it too difficult. I am not saying that I am not a compassionate person; I am just not as emotional as most and find it easier to detach myself from things. Ireland was different for me. People I talked to before leaving said: "of course it will be hard to leave; it was like a year long vacation for you" or "its time to come back to the real world now". What I was feeling and what I still feel seems to be beyond that. It seems that in Ireland I found my niche; I found a place I fit into better than anywhere else in the world. The easy-going life, simple faith, love of tradition, and blunt sarcasm and humor of the Irish was....well I think I just described myself to a T.

My integration back into the United States has been hard to say the least. I left the green hills, constant rain, and pints of Guinness at Maynooth to come back to tumbleweed covered hills, 100°F heat, and glasses of wine at my home in Washington; both good but both very different. I thought that after returning to my home I would slowly lose what I had gained in Ireland and that things would eventually return to “normal”, but anyone who has had an amazing study abroad experience knows that this is not true. The experiences in life that really change us are the ones that are always there; the ones that shape who we are constantly. Ireland is something that is always with me. One of my fears in returning to America was that I would loose that experience, forget

who I was in Ireland. But I have come to find out that it is impossible. Ireland is something that changed me for the better and forever; and it is one of those rare experiences that will always be with me, constantly shaping who I am.

Writing this kind of essay and explaining my experience to other people is so frustrating. There is so much to say but I don't know how to express it. On top of that, there are very few people who actually understand how it feels, and no one can quite understand exactly how *I* feel. Before Ireland, I remember that when people told me how much their experience abroad changed them, I did not completely take them seriously. So I do see why they cannot relate, but it does not make the experience any easier. So I do my best to deal with it. I spend time with those that can relate; I look at pictures, listen to songs, write journals, and search for new ways to express myself and my experience. In this way also, my study abroad experience is continuing.

So the journey continues; the happiness continues and the heartache is still there. Sometimes I wonder why I did this to myself. Why did I throw myself into a culture and then rip myself away? It hurts, and it often makes things in my life more difficult. Then I look at the person I have become and the happiness I found, and I realize just how much the good outweighs the bad. I have discovered what true happiness means for me and that is something some people search for their whole lives. I have found a new place to call home; a place I fit into perfectly; a place I may return to some day. Finally, I have gained an understanding and an experience that I carry with me always; in this way my Ireland experience continues.