THE GEOGRAPHY OF METAPHORS: TRAVELING, LEARNING, AND THE WRITING PROCESS

by

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Abstract

Writing takes practice, much like any other activity in life. Usually, I'm more than willing to jump into any opportunity to write, letting my thoughts fall onto the page. The whole idea for my honors project, originally, centered on curating a collection of different examples of writing to use in my future secondary English classroom. Spoiler alert: that didn't end up happening because life had other plans.

What my honors project has become is an exercise in reflective writing. I adopted an informal tone, as I wanted my writing to reflect my thoughts as they occur in my head; what is on the page is no one's voice but my own, as imperfect as it may be. Through my reflection, I have tried to synthesize my experience during my semester abroad by interspersing writing I produced while I was living in Ireland with writing from the months following my return to the States. Ultimately, I wanted my honors project to be an exploration into my psyche and what I have learned that will continue to affect me as I go through life, not an excuse for a wayward project gone awry.

With that in mind, here it is: my qualitative dive into introspection.

The Geography of Metaphors: Traveling, Learning, and the Writing Process

I started off thinking I could turn my whole semester abroad into some grandiose metaphor for the writing process. Perhaps not so shockingly, that didn't happen, or, at least, I couldn't see how it worked until I could look at my experience in retrospect. Sometimes you end up with a different final product than you anticipated at the beginning.

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The moment I found out that I had been accepted to study abroad at the University College Cork, my first thought was incredulity: *Is this real? Did they really pick me?* For the life of me, I couldn't fathom why I had been chosen for a position at such a competitive university. Soon enough, the initial shock and awe abated, as unadulterated excitement flooded my system: I was going to Ireland!

Having rarely traveled apart from summertime sojourns to the South to visit extended family, the prospect of having to prepare for living in a foreign country for an entire semester seemed momentous. I probably spent more time than is humanly necessary worrying about what I should pack, which led to hours of reading travel blogs and Pinterest suggestions on how to pack lightly. (Basically, it all comes down to figuring out the essentials.) For me, this meant clothes that could be layered and mixed, a select number of pictures of friends and family, and, of course, books. I knew going into the semester that I would go over with two suitcases (one checked and one carry on), and I didn't want to accumulate much more than that. First, I needed to get suitcases though. And then figure out my flights. Flights over the ocean. For hours. Alone. *Yikes*.

My friends, coworkers, and family were more than willing to listen to my worries and give me advice on how to handle everything: remember to breathe, always take pictures, don't

forget to study, don't be afraid to talk to people, don't worry about the flight over the ocean even though you've never flown alone before and can only actually remember being on a plane once before and blocked the memory because you were so scared. Things of that nature.

As thrilled as I was about the once-in-a-lifetime experience ahead of me, there was also an acute sense of sadness underlying my anticipation. The only other experience I can compare it with was when I was leaving high school and preparing to go to university for the first time – an awareness of the ending of an era of the familiar, followed by an impending swan dive into the unknown.

I've never handled change well. Whenever I was faced with a life-altering situation, such as a move across the country or a loved one's diagnosis with a deadly disease, I would panic. Full-on hyperventilating until I turn blue in the face and almost pass out unless my mom screams at me to break through my never-ending spiral of thoughts panic. (If that sounds unpleasant, believe me, it is.) Thankfully, as I've gotten older, I've learned how to better control my thoughts and break myself out of such episodes before I let myself go too far.

One of the (many) reasons why I was so nervous about my semester abroad was that I had the plan to keep a blog over my experience filled with posts of multiple examples of writing that I would complete in order to fulfill my honors project requirement. Well, that didn't exactly go as planned. I did write a few blog posts, but it didn't turn out the way I anticipated. Looking back at my first post, I was so optimistic:

> **Flying by the Seat of My Pants**
>
> **ON AUGUST 23, 2018**
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> Life has felt like a whirlwind lately, but in the best possible way. I've been spending nearly every waking minute getting ready for my upcoming semester

abroad. I'm finding it hard to believe that it will be happening so soon–in five days to be exact. What started out as a theoretical dream is quickly becoming my reality. No, it *is* my reality. I am going to Ireland for an entire semester. And I leave in five days (yikes).

People keep reminding me to not worry so much or focus on every single "what if" that passes through my mind. I'm really trying to go with the flow and deal with things as they arise; that's normally how I operate, and it has worked for me so far. This–taking the plunge to travel outside of the country for the first time *all alone*–is throwing me out of whack. In all seriousness, studying abroad in Ireland is the most crazy, exciting, bold choice I have made in my life thus far, and it is so out of character for me, the girl who is a self-described creature of habit. I don't know what to expect because I've never done anything like this before, and that is what makes me so nervous.

Planning for this semester has been quite the undertaking, as I've tried to be as meticulous as possible. I've checked my flight bookings about a hundred times (daily), and packed my bags multiple times (and that was just yesterday). Before I even began packing, I wrote out lists of what I thought I wanted to bring and "edited" as I went along. Of course, I made more "edits" while I was actively in the process of packing, and I finally feel like I'm in a good place through all of my trial and error.

Call me a nerd, but the whole process of planning this trip, especially approaching what to pack, reminded me of the writing process. Well, my writing process, that

is. You see, when I go about trying to sort out my thoughts for a piece of writing, I will do an initial list of every random idea I want to include, let myself sit with those ideas for a while, and revisit them to whittle away what isn't entirely necessary. Essentially, I'm left with a rough outline that I use to go into writing my first draft, but I inevitably continue to make changes while I write. I guess you could call my writing process a mixture of careful planning and flying by the seat of my pants. Maybe that's the best way for me to make sense of life: plan what I can and not be afraid to face things as they arise.

If you're wondering why I went off on a tangent to talk about writing after talking about getting ready to travel, please allow me to explain. This blog isn't going to be a typical travel blog; at least, that is not my intent. Yes, I am going to talk about experiences I have during my semester abroad, but I will also try to relate it back to my two majors: English and Secondary Education. I want to use this blog as a way to begin sharing my story with others, which is what educators do on a daily basis. Additionally, I want to show how you can use specific experiences to influence different types of writing. As an English teacher, I will be asking my students to attempt various forms of writing, but it can be hard for them to process how to begin relating their experiences in those formats. Hopefully, I'll be able to demonstrate my thought process through this blog. So, if you're interested in a little bit of everything, stick around!

There were a lot of events that happened during my semester in Ireland that affected my state of mind and made me realize that I needed to do something to actively take care of myself rather than soldiering on and burying myself in work like I normally would. Hopefully, by the

end of whatever this is – my new honors project reflecting on and synthesizing my experience--you'll have a better understanding of why my original plan didn't work, why that's okay, and what I learned along the way.

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"I'm proud of you," my father said to me as I hugged him outside of the queue for airport security.

Through the bleariness of my two hours of sleep, the one resounding directive pushing me forward was to make it onto my flight without losing anything, but my father's words gave me pause. I couldn't remember him saying that before, not in a way that mattered so much. The tears I had been holding back all night began brimming in my eyes as I hugged him tighter, my father, the gentle giant with the unreadable smile, finding strength in his steadiness.

"Don't forget to let us know every time you land and before you take off, so we know you're still alive," my mother reminded me, tears streaming down her face.

"I will," I promised, embracing her small frame one last time.

How can I leave her? What child leaves their mother when they know how much it hurts her? The guilty thoughts rushed into my mind, only to be pushed aside when I saw more people joining the queue. I readjusted my purse, gathered my carry on, and double-checked that I had my boarding pass inside my passport.

"I love you."

"We love you too, Carleigh Jean."

And with that, I turned and walked away from everyone and everything I had ever known to fly across the ocean to a foreign country full of strangers.

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As the first of my three flights began take-off in the predawn darkness, my father's words rang in my ears, my mother's expression stung my eyes, and I finally let my tears fall, just this once. Thank goodness the businessman next to me paid no mind to my crying, as I pulled out my headphones to listen to the CDs I'd listened to on repeat in my car that I'd been afraid I would miss if I didn't download them at one in the morning that day. From Kansas City I went to Detroit. From Detroit, Providence. After an eight-hour layover, I was finally on my way to Dublin. Sleep began to find me, despite screaming children, as I settled in for my first trip over the ocean.

As the plane began its descent, all I could think about was the checklist of what I needed to do in order to get to Cork: go through customs, collect my luggage, and find the Aircoach to Cork City Centre. Three things. I could do that. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I looked down at the country coming ever closer, marveling at the shape of the coastline and the seemingly endless expanse of ocean revealed by the sunrise. I'd never seen anything like it. Prairie as far as the eye can see, sure. Not water. Not in Kansas. But I wasn't in Kansas anymore. That hadn't really sunk in yet.

Going through customs was not as involved as I thought it was going to be. The lady working the desk asked me three questions: *Why are you in Ireland? Do you have your acceptance letter from your university? When will you be leaving Ireland?* All easy enough to answer, even in the haze of jet lag. Waiting for my luggage at the baggage claim was a test of my patience and resolve, but it eventually arrived. The next thing to do was to exchange my money for Euros. I didn't know what to make of the currency at first; it was so colorful, and each bill was a different size based on the value. I took a moment to make sure I had everything I needed before trundling out to the buses.

I could feel my heart thumping in my chest as I approached the ticket stand. My first transaction in Euros went well, and I was in luck because the next bus to Cork City Centre was leaving in just 10 minutes. I stood on the pavement, clutching my ticket, waiting for my body to adjust to the brisk morning air – a shock to the system after leaving the sweltering heat of August in Kansas. I sent my dad a quick text message to let him know I was alive before getting on the bus. Lack of sleep claimed me again, the rocking of the bus coaxing me to rest during the four-hour ride to my new home.

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The fact that I was going to be living in a foreign country an ocean away from everyone I knew and loved didn't hit me until I was finally standing in what was to be my room. In that moment, I felt a familiar sense of terror welling in the pit of my stomach, finding it harder to draw air in and out of my lungs.

Get a grip, I thought to myself. *If you can't handle one day without having a panic attack, how are you going to make it through the semester?*

Settling a shaking hand on the desk, I closed my eyes and pictured saying goodbye to my parents, imagining my father's steadiness and my mother's unconditional, inescapable love.

Make them proud. You can do this.

Putting myself in motion by unpacking and making my bed eased my nerves. I've found that distracting myself in productive ways helps me break free from negative spirals; that's how I talk myself out of panic attacks and keep myself from wallowing when I'm sad. *You can't let yourself do this right now; do what needs to be done, then you can deal with your emotions.* Not the healthiest, I know, but it's proven useful, like when I needed to get over my first major break up. Besides, when you're a college student and a Resident Assistant, there's no lack of

responsibilities you can wrap yourself in. With so many unknowns involved with figuring out life abroad looming before me, I couldn't help but resort to tried-and-true tendencies, no matter how ostensibly questionable their merit in the long run.

In this instance, keeping myself busy in whatever ways I could made sense. I needed to unpack and make my bed, and I needed to throw myself into the experience so I could figure out how I was going to live. The universe seemed to agree because one of my roommates, Evelyn, came back to the apartment in-between classes the moment I finished unpacking and was wondering what I should do next. Evelyn introduced herself, asked me about my trip over, and suggested places to go for groceries, towels, and other necessities.

"I know the jet lag is rough, but you've got to power through," Evelyn said. "Believe me, you'll feel better once you've gotten everything and really start to feel settled. Let me draw you a map of where to go, and we'll catch up more tonight."

Evelyn was right, the best thing to do was to dive right in.

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Present Tense

ON SEPTEMBER 9, 2018

I made it! I'm in Ireland! It took three flights, a bus ride, and getting mildly lost while wandering around the city with my luggage, but I made it to Cork. I'm currently all moved into my apartment, and my three roommates have arrived. Two of them, fellow Americans, had been here for two weeks before me, and the last one, an Australian, came a few days after me. I can honestly say that I could not have asked for better roommates, as they are pushing me to be more adventurous and embrace everything coming my way during my time here.

The past week and a half has been a whirlwind, so it's hard to believe that this is my life now–this *is* happening, as in *present tense*. Everything feels like it has been happening so fast. It still feels like just yesterday that I first landed in Dublin after a seven hour flight of screaming babies, bleary-eyed and trying to make sure that I had my wits about me for customs. At the same time, I already feel at home in Cork now that I've got a sense of my bearings. I know where multiple grocery stores are in location to my apartment, and I know how to get to the university (which is absolutely stunning–seriously, I didn't realize I signed up to go to Hogwarts). For me, these are vital, and everything else is being filled in slowly along the way.

Already I've been on two day trips to areas around Cork County. Last week I went with a group of students from the International Student Society to Kinsale. Our first stop was Charles Fort, followed by four hours to explore the town itself. Kinsale is known for its cuisine, and lunch did not disappoint; since the group of seven I explored with decided to wait before finding a restaurant, we had to walk a bit out of the way before we found an establishment with room, but the food did not disappoint. No matter where we went in Kinsale, I was struck by how vibrant and colorful everything was; the whole town was bursting with life. There was only one little snafu during our time in Kinsale, which was when an impatient driver tried to pass our bus while we were turning onto the road to go back to Cork. We ended up blocking an entire main intersection of the town, complete with a line of backed up tractors waiting to get by while we waited for the

situation to be cleared up (nothing serious, just a scratch and pushed in side-view mirror on the car).

Yesterday, two of my roommates and I went on a trip to Cobh and the surrounding areas thanks to a kind local who we had met previously in the week. He drove us in the rain and showed us around the area, telling us fun facts along the way that were quite informative. Cobh itself was the final port of call for the Titanic, and we were able to see the remains of the walkway that had been used. It is also home to the second deepest harbor in the world; apparently there had been whales there recently, which was a rarity. To escape the rain, we hopped into a coffee shop and warmed up with a pot of tea (definitely a habit I'm continuing back home in the States). After the weather cleared, we went to a local beach, which allowed me my first opportunity to get close to the Atlantic. It was my first time ever experiencing a pebble beach rather than sand, and the atmosphere was ripe with wind, rain, and choppy water. I constantly stood on rocks and just looked out to the world around me, trying my hardest to accept that I was truly standing there. Our last stop was a small cliff-side in a rural area that took my breath away. By the time we stood overlooking the ocean, I was thoroughly soaked, but I wouldn't have wanted to experience the moment in any other way.

As far as what I have wanted to write to capture the experiences I have had so far, there are so many things–too many for my mind to fully process. I'm not sure why, but the incident with the bus getting into an accident sticks out in my mind as being perfect material for a scene in a play. I can clearly picture it now being

acted out, though the words escape me. I could see it as the opening scene to a play taking place in the town of Kinsale, exploring the personalities of the characters. Currently, after just one visit, I don't feel confident capturing that without it seeming like parody, but the situation itself seems like it could fit well in a creative piece of writing. Alternatively, if I ever wanted to work on writing sensory details, any of the locations I visited yesterday would provide ample opportunity for exploration.

I've had so many thoughts running through my head since arriving here. Mainly, through talking with others from around the world and comparing our life experiences, more than ever before am I putting things into perspective. For the first time in my life I'm having to identify myself as an American and what that means to me as an individual, whereas previously it had been a given that required little to no thought. Also, I never realized how vast the States are in comparison to other countries. Looking at maps doesn't have the same impact as flying and driving. I'm not sure I can even put my thoughts into proper words. Hopefully I'll be able to sort them out somehow before I post next.

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For the first few weeks, I wanted to soak in every experience before even thinking about trying to put my thoughts into words. With so many new places to discover, people to meet, and skills to learn, I found it overwhelming to try to synthesize what I was experiencing every single day. Plus, I was so wrapped up in the idea of tying everything back to some convoluted metaphor

about the writing process that I felt like I couldn't even write at all. I was paralyzed, in a sense, by indecision, so I just kept going. I kept experiencing without pausing to reflect.

This was the first time in my life when I felt completely liberated. I had almost no responsibilities that I had to see to other than taking care of myself and going to class. No work, no daily assignments, no having others rely on me for emotional support as often as I had happen when I was as an RA. Such weightlessness left me feeling untethered and free to pursue whatever I chose for the first time ever.

At first, I reveled in this newfound sense of freedom. I spent my days exploring the city, on my own or with my roommates. In the afternoons and evenings, I would go to class, my sole constant responsibilities; since I usually had one class a day, I would throw myself into preparation and try my hardest to take away all that I could, even from the courses that may not have captured my interest. Never before, not since I was a child, had I so much time on my hands. I could read for pleasure, take time to actually give cooking a try, and make plans to spend time with my friends. Life felt almost too good to be true, focusing on my interests and goals, but it wasn't long before the sweetness soured.

There's one event that cuts you to your core no matter where in the world you are: the death of a loved one. My great-uncle passed away unexpectedly while I was in Cork. I'm no stranger to grieving family members, but I had always had the support of my close friends and parents to help me get through. In Ireland, all I had was myself. Yes, I had my roommates and some friends, but I didn't want to burden them with my grief during a time in their lives when they should be focusing on learning about the world around them and themselves. I didn't even have the comfort of the tedium of a job to look forward to, just the ever-present ache of loss and the knowledge that I couldn't be present to support my loved ones as they mourned. I couldn't

even make it to the funeral because there were no flights that would get there on time, not that I could have afforded one anyway. I didn't know what to do to mourn, not on my own, so I took a step back to figure out what I needed to do to rediscover a sense of normalcy. It took a while to feel better, but I got there eventually.

Disjointed

ON SEPTEMBER 29, 2018

It has been three weeks since I've posted anything, and that feels strange to say. What's even weirder is being able to say that I've been in Ireland for a month now, *a whole month*! A lot has happened over the first month, especially in the past three weeks. I'll try my best to describe my thoughts and feelings about some of the key experiences. I would've done so sooner, but I couldn't find the right words. Everything I came up with sounded disjointed and all over the place; like I was trying to hold water in a sieve, I couldn't connect my ideas. I'll try my best now.

First thing's first: classes! Yes, I really do attend them, I'm not off gallivanting for an entire semester (even if that sounds tempting). I'm taking four classes this semester: Exploring Irish Traditional Music, Modern Irish History for Visiting Students, Introduction to Anglo-Irish Literature, and Of Monsters and Men (Old English Literature). So far, I enjoy them all, but the literature courses are by far my favorites. They are also the only courses that meet more than once a week; my music and history courses occur once a week in the evenings in two hour blocks. The biggest difference I've noticed between my American courses and my Irish

courses have been the timetables; I'm used to courses occurring on Mondays/Wednesdays/Fridays or Tuesdays/Thursdays, at the same time on the same days. My courses here, at least the ones that meet more than once a week, occur at different times depending on the day, and one course has different classrooms depending on the day as well. Luckily, navigating UCC's campus isn't too difficult. It also doesn't hurt that it feels like I'm walking through Hogwarts every time I go to class. Seriously, look at this place:

Despite having to walk 45 minutes to campus, I look forward to going to class purely for the aesthetic. The subject matter of what I've been learning about has been interesting as well. Most of what I'm learning about I have little to no prior experience with, so I never know quite what to expect when I go to class. One thing that has struck me as different, at least in my experience, is having only male lecturers. I've mainly had the opposite, having mainly female professors. This isn't a bad thing by any means, merely an observation that I found interesting. Each lecturer I have is incredibly brilliant in their specific field, and I have the highest admiration for the passion they show through their instruction; you can tell that they have an honest love for what they teach and take pleasure out of sharing their knowledge with others. One day, when I'm in my own classroom, I hope to be just as passionate.

When I'm not in class, which is surprisingly often, I've been filling my time by reading for pleasure, exploring the area around me, and finding new recipes to attempt. My Australian roommate, Franny, and I joked that we feel like

housewives because of how much time we spend doing seemingly “domestic” tasks; this coming from two girls who are used to working multiple jobs on top of going to class and generally having no free time apart from sleeping. Basically, we are ladies of leisure, of a sort, for this semester.

Another difference between Ireland and the United States I’ve noticed is the availability and affordability of healthy food. Back home, to buy fresh produce, you had to be willing to cut off an arm or sell a kidney (at least as a college student). Here, it’s so easy to stop by the English Market on my way home from class to pick up fruits and vegetables to prepare that night. I actually look forward to cooking now; it’s relaxing and a highlight of my day, as opposed to being an inconvenient necessity. I would so much rather cook something at my apartment than go out, which is both healthier and more affordable. I’ve talked about this with many people, and they are shocked to hear about how fast food is cheaper and how difficult it can be, financially, to have a healthy diet. I guess that highlights one of the flaws of how society is structured, that pursuing a healthy lifestyle, to some, is more of a luxury. (I say this with the full understanding that I come from the position of someone who had the privilege of a middle-class upbringing where this was not an issue with which I had to struggle, but that doesn’t mean that I cannot see how the issue exists.)

Anyway, I continue to be amazed by the fact that I’m really living in Ireland. That I’m living in a place where I can walk for an hour away from my apartment and get to a castle. How insane does that sound? Well it’s not! I did that! I walked to a

castle casually on a Saturday morning, and a week later I hopped on a bus for twenty minutes to go explore Blarney Castle. Yes, the same one with the stone. There have been so many moments since coming to Ireland that have felt surreal, but walking the grounds at Blarney took the cake. There was so much to see, so much history everywhere you looked, so much to learn…All I could do was walk around in silence marveling at the world around me, imagining how it had changed throughout the years and what it would have been like to experience those changes. I could have spent the entire day there and never tired of hearing stories.

I've been having a lot of ideas popping into my head lately that I've contemplated pursuing in creative writing. Getting started is always the biggest hurdle for me, pushing myself to start putting words on the page and see where they take me. Even if the end product is less than desirable, the act of writing can be therapeutic, or so I've experienced.

After this past week, I feel as though I need to find a way to retreat and deal with my emotions in a healthy manner. I found out that a family member passed away, and I wasn't able to attend the funeral. Trust me, being an ocean away never feels more palpable than when loved ones are in pain and there is nothing you can do about it. Writing, for me, is helpful when sorting out my emotions. Especially hard ones. Like now. But that's about as deep as I want to get about that in this particular blog.

> Life, like words, can feel rather disjointed. That's the best way to describe how I feel lately too. I want to be out enjoying myself and taking advantage of the ample opportunities on this once-in-a-lifetime experience, but I also want to take quiet moments to reflect and sit with my thoughts and emotions. That's what writing does for me, so I guess now's as good a time as ever to try to get back into the rhythm of it.

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They say tragedy strikes in sets of three, and this proved to be true. Not only did my great-uncle pass away, one of my best friends almost died from complications after giving birth, and one of my friends and former coworkers committed suicide while I was in Cork. Grief compounded upon itself, a building storm that left me stranded in the flotsam. In the wake of each event, happening in such quick succession, I was at a loss for what to do. I tried reaching out to my friends and loved ones back home, but the six-hour time difference proved difficult. My roommates and friends I had made tried to be there for me, but they had their own semester experiences they were crafting; I would never have asked them to put their lives on hold for me, so I had to figure out what I needed to do to pull myself out of my own personal depths. What I found that helped me the most was taking time for myself to process, finding supportive individuals to keep in my life, and remembering to continue looking for authentic joy.

To process, I needed to let myself be comfortable with being alone and doing things specifically for my own benefit, such as cooking or cleaning. By focusing on a single task at hand, I could limit my thoughts to the moment I was in. This allowed me to take stock of my emotions and realize when I was or was not okay. For me, recognizing that I'm not okay can be difficult. I don't know if it's pride or some lingering notion of having to feign strength for others'

benefit, but I don't like admitting when I'm struggling. When it's apparent that I do need help, to me, that's when I know that I need to reach out to others in order to talk through my thoughts and feelings.

Finding supportive, understanding people is important to me because I'm not going to open up to any random stranger. I want the person with whom I talk to understand that I'm not looking for them to shoulder my burden, merely to listen to what I have to say. Maybe it sounds like I'm looking for a therapist, but I'm really looking for a friend. Thankfully, I was able to find individuals like that both in Ireland and back home. Being abroad helped clarify who were positive influences in my life that I should continue to welcome. If I'm making my thought process about relationships between friends sound simply transactional, that's not my intent; rather, over the years, I've come to recognize the importance of being able to understand who has grown apart from you and who you continue to grow alongside. Trying to hold on to one-sided or destructive relationships only hurts everyone in the end.

Through spending time with and talking to others, I was able to get my thoughts off my chest and feel reassured through the emotions with which my friends empathized. Knowing that others could understand how I was feeling made me feel less alone, as it seemed like my inner humanity was reflected in them. Yes, talking with others is important, we can all agree on that (I hope). I could never articulate *why,* though.

For me, understanding why has always been of critical importance. I guess you could say I never grew out of my "why" phase as a child; you know what I'm talking about, when a child continually asks "Why? Why? Why?" to everything, perhaps out of honest curiosity or possibly just to see the reaction such repetition elicits. In my case, I wanted to be able to better understand the world around me in order to make sense of my place in it. I always thought that by knowing

why things happen, why things are the way that they are, why people act the way that they do, I would have some grand revelation about the order of things. I guess you could say I was trying to find a sense of reason and balance in the chaos and unpredictability of the universe. I'm still trying to find that.

Nothing in life has left me feeling more lost and confused than grieving a loved one. The sudden absence of a once seemingly constant presence is difficult to comprehend, let alone accept. Factoring in the physical distance of being wholly removed from the situation, I was left reeling. The only things that helped me were talking to others or, to put it more generally, expressing my thoughts. In doing so, I was actively searching for reconciliation with myself over my new reality.

Perhaps dealing with so many difficult experiences while abroad for the first time was more meaningful than I originally thought. In feeling everything so deeply from my heightened emotions, it made me appreciate what I was experiencing to a different degree. With the knowledge of the fragility of life so close in mind, seeing how others went about their everyday lives and learning about cultures different from my own instilled in me a sense of universality. Despite how fleeting it may seem, we all go throughout our days trying the best we can to make meaning for ourselves. We have done so for thousands of years, and we will continue to do so for however long the human race exists.

I apologize if it seems like I've gone off on a rambling semi-philosophical tangent, but these are my reflections on my experience abroad. I learned that we're all trying to make it through life in the best way that we can, and we must allow ourselves grace in order to do that. While I wanted to be able to carry on and complete my honors project while I was abroad, what I needed was to focus on finding my new sense of normalcy in the reality after loss. In taking a

step back from blindly marching forward through forced drudgery, I was able to reconnect with myself, with others, and with the world around me.

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Word Search

ON OCTOBER 7, 2018

A friend of mine brought an interesting concept to my attention the other day, the idea of having a word to describe a particular experience. We were discussing what it felt like to be studying abroad since they had just begun settling in; they were having some doubts about their decision to leave the United States, so I asked them why they had wanted to study abroad in the first place. They told me that their whole experience leading up to studying abroad could summarized in one word: resilient. I don't want to go into the nitty-gritty of their whole experience since that is not my story to tell, but "resilient" is an apt description of how they had to be considering everything that happened; it represents how they have grown as an individual and how they hope to continue to grow.

I couldn't stop thinking about the idea of having a specific word in mind to describe a moment or specific period of time in your life. Do you choose your own word to reflect what you want to experience? Do you realize what the word is after you have lived through it? Does the word describe how you feel, what you learn, or something unknown that the universe reveals to you? Is the word anticipatory, intentional, and forward-thinking or is it definitive, reflective, and realized after the fact?

To try to wrap my head around the concept, I began asking people around me what their words were. My roommate told me that the word she would use to describe her semester abroad would be “necessary,” which struck a chord with me. “Necessary” seems to be a nice middle-ground, occupying the grey area between anticipatory and definitive–explaining a specific intent and volition in pursuing this defined period, yet leaving space and breadth for the experience to unravel as it will. A word completely fitting and representative of who she is as a person and where she is at this moment in time.

After a fair amount of contemplation, I can’t decide what my word is for this experience. I’m realizing that I didn’t enter into this semester with any particular expectations, but that’s how I tend to operate; it’s easier to have little to no expectations so that the possibility of disappointment remains low, so I can focus on the surprising aspects that bring me joy or leave a particular impression rather than focus on the negatives. Maybe that seems backwards, but it’s how I’ve learned not to get my hopes dashed time and time again. Plus, how could I ever anticipate what I would experience on a semester abroad having never traveled outside of my home country before? Why try to build up expectations when I could go with the flow and see where that takes me?

I guess that makes me a woman in search of her word, like Elizabeth Gilbert in *Eat, Pray, Love*. There is a certain excitement to the prospect of not yet knowing what my word is; I fully believe that I am in the process of searching, not just deciding to remain wordless. What I’ve decided to do is keep track of what words

I feel represent each day for the next week. I want to note also whether I choose them at the beginning of the day or at the end of the day, which I assume will mean that they are either anticipatory of reflective. This may be a silly exercise, but I'll let you know my thoughts at a later date.

If you have any words that you feel represent a specific period of time in your life that you would like to share, please feel free. Alternatively, if you have a word you feel defines where you are at this current point in your life, please feel free to share that as well.

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A Word's Worth

ON OCTOBER 21, 2018

Last week I posted about being in search of my word. Each day I decided to set aside a specific word, so here is the sum of a week of words tailored for my life. Allow me to explain why I chose each word to be representative for that particular day.

Monday – "Composition"

To begin my week, I felt like I needed to tap into my creative side, so I looked over the list of writing exercises given to me by one of my professors and chose one to pursue. For the exercise, I had to visit a local art gallery and write a poem inspired by one of the paintings found there. I'm not normally inclined to write poetry of my own volition, but I enjoyed the exercise. For whatever reason, I've

noticed that writing poetry, for me, feels like trying to interpret a fever dream; everything seems hazy and half-formed, and my natural instinct is to go for free-form rather than any given structure. Having little realizations about my writing process is always interesting to me, as it seems like an introspective glimpse as to how my mind works.

Tuesday – "Organization"

When I woke up, I felt like I needed to spend time getting my life organized. I spent hours updating my planner and sorting out what I needed to get done. I looked up recipes for dishes that I wanted to make for the rest of the week, made up a list of groceries, went to do errands, and cooked a pot of soup before leaving for class. All in all, a productive day, which is what I wanted when I chose "organization" as my word for the day.

Wednesday – "Recovery"

Waking up, I realized that I had caught the cold that all of my roommates had been suffering from. I coughed all night and day, so I spent time taking care of myself: drinking tea, taking medicine, using my inhaler–the essentials. Going into the day, I didn't know what to expect, but I listened to my body and took measures to recover so that I could feel better sooner rather than pushing myself too far.

Thursday – "Youth"

Since coming to Ireland, I've been struggling with feeling too old for my years. I'm used to being the youngest in my friend group, but that is not the case here. By waiting to study abroad until my senior year, being 21 makes me one of the oldest people I meet. I don't know why I've been allowing myself to feel 'ancient,' but I decided that I needed to change my mindset. Years from now, I'll be looking back on my life and wishing that I was 21 again, I'm sure, so I might as will enjoy my youth while it lasts. That doesn't mean I want to go crazy and act irresponsible. Rather, I want to worry less about I feel like I should be doing with my life at the moment and focus on enjoying where I am without losing sight of where I'm going.

Friday – "Embrace"

The day started off rough, but I was determined not to let anything get me down. This was the day that I experienced my first proper Irish downpour on my walk to campus, which is what led me to the realization that my raincoat is not meant for driving rain. Luckily, I always leave with plenty of time to spare since it takes 45 minutes to walk to campus, so I decided to stop in at my favorite coffee shop to take a break from walking in the rain. After warming up, I made my way to class, accepting my status as a drowned rat. My friend agreed to run errands with me after class and walk back to our apartment complex together. The weather had let up to a mist rather than a rain, so we decided to make an afternoon of going through city centre. Our afternoon turned into an impromptu movie night in my apartment, which is exactly what both us needed. We put on our comfiest

pajamas, cooked pasta, painted our nails, and watched ridiculous horror movies. I had no clue what my word for the day was going to be, but it came to me after I made the conscious decision not to let any outside influences affect my mood for the day, embracing everything rather than bemoaning it.

Saturday – "Weather"

Rain proved to be a constant, but that didn't deter me from going on a tour of the Dingle Peninsula with my Canadian friend. The bus had multiple issues, the road was bumpy, we were soaked through to our skin, but we made it. And boy was it worth it! I have never been to a place that felt so unreal. It's no wonder that multiple movies, such as *Star Wars*, have been filmed along the peninsula, as it looks and feels like a different world entirely. I wanted to choose 'weather' as my word for the day due to its multiple meanings: 'weather' as in the rain and 'weather' as in coming safely through a storm. The latter meaning seemed fitting, following the trend of words of acceptance from the past few days.

Sunday – "Sorting"

Again, this was a day I wanted to devote to productivity, namely getting my life sorted. Like most Sundays, I spent the largest portion working on schoolwork– reading for my literature courses and looking at what I needed to do to prepare for the week ahead of me. After that, I focused on cleaning the apartment and getting laundry done, the necessities of life really.

Conclusions

After choosing a word to represent each of my days for a week, I can't help but notice that most of them have to do with focusing on self-care and adopting a healthier mindset. All-in-all, I think this is showing me that I am moving into a positive time in my life, and it's also showing me the power of how your outlook can affect your mood. I don't think that I want to continue having a specific word for everyday of my life for the duration of my semester abroad, but I have a general word that I want to continue to pursue: "self-discovery." This is something that seems self-explanatory and inevitable, but it's one I want to embrace regardless. Self-discovery is important to me, as I feel we constantly evolve as humans–stagnation, to me, is synonymous with death. Anyway, I want to learn more about who I am in this moment while also keeping in mind who I want to become. This is something that cannot be forced, which is why I want to appreciate the brief glimpses I get along the way.

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Pulling my hat down to cover my ears, I take a seat on the bench overlooking the canal. Yellow leaves drift in the breeze, finding new homes along the cobblestones or navigating the water amongst the swans. Hardly anyone is awake, so the morning is my own.

I have an hour before I can enter the Anne Frank House, my main reason for coming to Amsterdam, apart from the art museums. Looking at the building's façade, as well as those surrounding it, I find it surreal that I am sitting in a place where history took place. Of course, you could argue that anywhere you are is a place with history, but this is a place that has stuck in my mind ever since I first read Anne's diary back in elementary school. It was hard to imagine the events of WWII taking place; for someone so far removed by time and space, reading about

the war and the Holocaust felt more like fiction than fact. The echoes of reality are haunting, knowing what had happened to people who had lived here.

Chill fingers dance along my spine, and I turn back to the water. This is the first time I have felt like myself since my great-uncle died, finding myself through wandering the corridors of art museums and learning about the lives of those who have come and gone. I've realized that life, the world, everything is so much bigger than I ever anticipated. Being one in billions doesn't make me feel small or insignificant in the grand scheme of things; rather, I'm thankful to be a part of it, able to experience the ephemeral glory of existence

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A Bit of Inspiration

ON DECEMBER 21, 2018

One of my professors this semester gave us the opportunity to choose between writing an essay or completing an alternative assessment. There were three papers in total that we could have written over the semester, but two could be fulfilled by completing alternative assessments instead. This meant that we had to write at least one formal essay, but we could choose which topic we wanted to pursue based on the unit: poetry, drama, or fiction. I chose to write the first essay over poetry, and I also completed the two alternative assessments.

For the first alternative assessment, I worked with a partner (who ended up becoming a close friend) to create a recording of a radio play by Samuel Beckett. Not only did we produce an actual recording complete with sound effects, we also wrote an accompanying playbill of sorts that explained how we made the

recording and what we took away from the play. I liked this assignment because it allowed me to explore new techniques of making meaning from a dramatic work. I've never been in a play, so taking on the role of a character was an interesting experience for me, and I've certainly never made a recording before. Working alongside a partner made the experience that much more meaningful because we were able to learn from each other's prior knowledge and enrich the final product, picking up new skills along the way. I know how dubious group work can be, but this project worked out well.

The other alternative assessment was to compile a creative writing portfolio from six given writing prompts. This assignment appealed to me because it allowed me to explore various types of writing. Plus, the prompts given by my professor were largely focused on making meaning of the time spent in Cork, which allowed me to reflect on certain aspects that I might not have recognized before. One such prompt was to write about a walk through Cork in as much detail as possible, including some historical information about a specific building or location along the way. Here is my response:

> *The bus from the Dublin airport lets me off on Patrick's Quay, the same place where I first set foot in Cork back in August, the start of my semester abroad. The atmosphere of the city has changed since then, as evidenced by the cool raindrops kissing my face in welcome. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I pause at the edge of the Lee, trying to make sense of how I was in Amsterdam, wandering the canals and losing myself in the footsteps of*

history at the Anne Frank House, a mere matter of hours before. Reflections of streetlights wink from the river's surface, rippled by the rain, all sense of stillness slipping away in the perpetual motion of the night.

Few people walk along the sidewalks, the rest of the city tucked away from the midnight hour. Only taxi drivers and lonesome travelers make their way through the streets, finding solace in the warmth of familiarity waiting for them at the end of the long road home. I pull my scarf and hat from my backpack, my only protection from the elements, before heading on my way. My path isn't long, and it's one I've cut many times before: follow the quays to Lower Glanmire Road as far as Kent train station.

Along the way, I pass St. Patrick's Catholic Church. I'm not sure why, but I always feel heartened when I make it to the church. Perhaps it's the vibrant green of the doors, an unexpected burst of joy in the bleakest of weather, or maybe it's the charm of the ornate architecture amidst all the brick and mortar stonework of the surrounding buildings. Since 1832, the church has looked over the souls of the city, just as my older brother of the same name as Ireland's patron saint has looked over me since my birth. The proximity of St. Patrick's reminds me that no matter how far from home I may roam, there will always be ties binding me to the places and people in my life, stretching across distances, whether they be visceral or imagined.

> *I know I've reached my final destination when it comes time for stars to guide my way. In a very literal sense, there are stars in the pavement outside my apartment complex, the "Showbands Walk of Fame." Each star carries the name of a band that played at the dance hall that used to reside in the same spot. Decades ago, people danced the night away in the place where I now go to rest my world-weary bones. Sometimes I lie awake at night trying to imagine the stories that have played out at Arcadia Hall and all its predecessors, how my own now mingle with those of the past, absorbed into the transient, inescapable void of time, space, and memory.*

I'm rather pleased with my response to this prompt, as it made me think more closely about the world around me, directly around me, with which I interact on a daily basis. Also, I have to say, I thought about this prompt a lot no matter where I went; the question 'How would I describe what I'm seeing and experiencing right now?' would pop into my head at the most random of times, causing me to sit back and really drink in wherever I was at the given moment.

Three takeaways I've had since my last post, which have been inspired by completing these alternative assignments:

1. As an educator, I want to allow my students the opportunity to explore through alternative assignments so that they can learn new things that they might not otherwise come across and showcase their personal talents and interests.

2. Writing can be a cathartic experience that allows me to further reflect and process my life experiences or ideas. I already knew this, but it was more deeply impressed upon me.

3. Not all writing has to be shared, and that's okay. I can't tell you how many times I wrote and re-wrote for the prompts for the creative writing portfolio, but I was too scared to have my professor read them, let alone share them on the internet here.

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What does this have to do with being an English teacher? What does this have to do with the writing process metaphor I mentioned in the beginning? What is the point of this? Well, if you'll allow me a chance to try to explain my thoughts, we'll see where that gets us.

As I head into my final semesters before becoming a fully-fledged secondary ELA teacher, I want to keep in mind that my students could be facing difficult situations of which I may never be aware. My professors in Cork had no idea that I was struggling during what was supposed to be the most carefree, joyous times of my life. No matter what age my future students are, anywhere from 12 to 18 years-old, they could be going through the trenches and looking for somewhere peaceful when they come into my classroom. I want to let my students know that I care about them and their mental health.

School is stressful. It doesn't matter what grade you're in, how involved you are, or whether you are the teacher or the student – school is stressful. It's important for us to acknowledge that, both with ourselves and with others. Pretending like stress isn't harmful or doesn't exist only hurts everyone in the end. Over the years, talking about mental health has been recognized as vital, especially within schools. Still, too often, there can be an overwhelming

feeling of societal pressure to press on and pretend like you're fine, even when you are not. It's like there's still some collective fear of cracking the veneer and letting the world see the imperfections that lie within. We've all heard that it's okay to not be okay, but how many of us fully accept that as it applies to ourselves?

I don't like asking for help because I don't want to seem weak, but understanding your limits and leaning on others in times of need makes you stronger. Knowing yourself is important, especially when it comes to challenging times, such as grieving a death. It has taken me a long time to gain an understanding of who I am, my limits, and what helps me to move on in a healthy manner. Reaching out to others doesn't make me any less of a person, so it shouldn't hurt my pride. Humans aren't meant to survive on their own; we are a community-based species. Calling upon the connections you've built within your support system is only natural in times of need.

One of the periods of life that can feel the most tumultuous is when you're going through middle and high school. Everything is changing on a daily basis as you grow and develop physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, etc. As a secondary teacher, I'll be right there with my students as they go through the worst of it. What can I tell my students? That they are not alone even if it feels like they are and that they can talk about what they are experiencing. Obviously, not every student will want to talk to me about their lives, and that's fine. As long as I can help reduce the stigma around talking about mental health and be willing to speak from my own experience, when appropriate, I can work to cultivate a caring, supportive classroom environment.

What I can tell my students I learned from studying abroad is how to have patience with myself and how to forgive myself when things don't go right. I had high expectations going into my semester abroad: I was going to have this awesome honors project where I wrote a ton and

curated a collection of products that I could use as examples within my own classroom. That didn't happen, and that's okay. What I did and what I learned over the semester will serve me better as I go throughout life, even if it wasn't what I expected in the beginning.

To bring things back to my grandiose metaphor of life being like the writing process: sometimes what you end up with is better than what you had originally intended. As you write or go throughout life, you don't remain in stasis; you continue to change based on what you experience. Rather than railroad yourself onto a track that goes nowhere, give yourself the freedom to take detours that will lead you to unexpected destinations. Just because it's different doesn't make it worse, and there's no telling what you'll learn and experience on your journey. You can't revise your life, but that doesn't mean you should avoid mistakes. It's better to have ink on the page to show that you tried rather than hold yourself back for fear of ruining a blank page. You'll never find your story if you don't write.