University of Minnesota

“Don’t Wanna Be an American Idiot”:

An Observation of the World’s Many People and Places

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7.8 billion people. 7,000 languages. 5,000 ethnicities. 193 recognized nations; yet, I know almost nothing about them. As a young “adult” born and raised in the American midwest, I can definitely say that I have not seen much of the world. Ever since I escaped from the womb, the place I call home has not changed in all my life: good ol’ Shakopee, Minnesota; a city with farms; factories; and for some reason, horse betting.

In my 18 years of existence, I never moved to a new home and never changed school districts; for the most part, the faces I grew up with have been all the same. Still, the city is more diverse than others around it. With a population consisting of various backgrounds ranging from Hispanics to Asians and Africans, there have been some exchanges that I found unique. Though, the people that I interact with, my peers, are just like me: American. That is what I mainly am.

Even my travels have not brought me far, only to the waterparks of Wisconsin and the cornfield that is Iowa. To those around me, the people who have seen the Ocean, my experience is rather lackluster; while they waited in airports, I was busy lazing around. A suburban boy is all I am and my visits to the Twin Cities can be counted on all twenty of my fingers and toes.

Although both my parents are refugees from Southeast Asia, my adoption of their culture has been minimal. To my shame, I know neither of their native tongues; but, at least I can recognize when I am in trouble. The only cultural activity that I participate in is the food; even then, I will not eat some things like chicken feet or duck.

Upon gradual reflection, I realized that my worldly perspective has been confined. Out of the Seven Seas and seven continents, I know only an insignificant portion; though, I remain curious. To better understand the world beyond my reach, I sought the stories of two teachers at Shakopee High School. The following will be about their journeys across the globe and the perspective of an oblivious American idiot.

2:30 pm. As the rest of my classmates hurry out the door, I wait alone in room Southeast 124. After ninety minutes of Engineering Design and Development, Mr. Hendrickson looks prepared to leave until he spots me.

"What are you here for this time?" he remarks with his signature sarcasm.

"I'm just here to cause trouble as usual," I reply.

"Of course you are."

Despite his comment, Hendrickson knew why I was there. A week prior I set up a time for an interview; after all, he is a busy man with a tight schedule. Perhaps it is this reason why he seems cranky all the time or perhaps it is his older age. Much to my dismay, however, his mockery is always justified from the *numerous* teaching awards and distinctions that gleam in the back of the room.

Every day in fourth block, Hendrickson greets me with a friendly insult. Still, in terms of knowledge and wisdom, he is one of the people I respect the most, and for good reason. Mr. Hendrickson has been alive for quite some time; for 30 years he has been a teacher and before and during those years, he saw much of the world. From his time in Europe to his travels in Asia and South America, his expertise is without a doubt, thorough.

I grab a seat by Hendrickson's desk, preparing for a long life story, and ask about some of his noteworthy experiences. With a brief sigh, he stares into the distance as if he was reaching into a vault of dusted memories. After a moment of thought, he recalls a time when he was younger—when he had a full head of hair. Growing up in the Wisconsin boundary waters, Hendrickson explains he was always a hands-on kid and frankly, a country bumpkin. He helped build cabins, canoes, and did other country-like activities such as fishing and camping.

One day, a family friend invited Hendrickson and his family down to San Jose, a city near the coast of California. During his stay, the 10-year-old assisted in the construction of a recreational trimaran, a multi-hulled sailing boat. I do not understand how, but the family friend liked Hendrickson so much that he invited him on a sailing journey: a voyage across the high seas from the hills of San Jose, down to the Panama Canal, past the many islands and nations of the Caribbean, up the vast Atlantic Seaboard, through the locks and channels of the St. Lawrence Seaway, over the five Great Lakes, and finally to the shores of Duluth, Minnesota.

While on his four-month-long expedition, Hendrickson explains he had an unforgettable encounter. “We got pulled over by a Panamanian gunboat. At about two in the morning, all their spotlights came up. We could hear them racking their machine guns as they were yelling at us to get on deck.” Luckily, the patrol quickly realized there was no threat. Even so, Hendrickson mentions, “Everybody was freaking out. I mean it scares the noise out of you when you literally have people 20 feet away with machine guns and .50 calibers. But at the same time, when they were done they just turned off their lights and were gone. It was interesting is the nicest way to put it.”

An email pops up on Hendrickson’s left monitor; he clicks on it and continues, “To this day, we are convinced the only reason we didn’t end up going to jail is because his [Hendrickson’s family friend] daughter has white-blond hair and she came up on deck and they were like ‘oh, they wouldn’t have kids with them.’” He then clarifies the reason why the gunboat was there in the first place. At that time, Panama’s government was essentially a dictatorship. Paranoid about an American-backed insurrection, the regime heightened security measures including coastal surveillance. With a confident tone, Hendrickson rationalizes that his trimaran

would have appeared to be an enemy reconnaissance vehicle. The patrol must have thought they were CIA.

Besides this frightening incident, the rest of the trip went smoothly. “It was a great experience,” reflects Hendrickson, “I mean you learn to be self-sufficient, you learn that other cultures have a lot of things that are of value, you learn that you can’t be picky with food or else there isn’t food, you learn goofy things like when you catch a shark you don’t try to take the hook out of its mouth. Watched someone do that and they almost lost their hand.”

As I listen to this one short, specific moment of Hendrickson’s life and his recollection of it, I cannot help but compare my own past. If 10-year-old me were to embark on a similar journey, his corpse would be discovered on the beaches of Guadeloupe. I was stubborn, demanding, whiny, and an absolute moron that lacked any common sense. I never left the house or played outside, I was incredibly picky with food, and it was difficult to pull me away from the TV and game console; surviving for four months out in the open sea would have been unthinkable. Even now I doubt my capabilities would be enough. Yet, Hendrickson, at the age of ten, witnessed more of the world than I ever had. For some reason, as the story wraps up, I feel a twinge of humiliation. Is child Hendrickson better at life than me? Probably.

Though this is just the beginning of Mr. Hendrickson’s travels. After 4th grade, he moved to Minneapolis; compared to what he had known, the city was a steel maze.

“Once we moved to the cities, everything started to change even more,” Hendrickson expresses, “I went to a school that was very, very affluent so I didn’t fit in very well. But, that’s where I got involved in sports.”

With a slight smile—a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence—Mr. Hendrickson details how his time on the soccer field was the doorway to Europe. It all started when Hendrickson joined a

group of kids, a club I assume, who morphed into a summer team. Under the guidance of coach Buzz Lagos, Hendrickson played for three years with his teammates, a majority of whom later played professionally.

Hendrickson conveys, “It was pretty cool. You know for a country bumpkin—that basically what I was—it was very different for me but, that was the one place where I fit in.”

Oddly enough, Mr. Hendrickson’s sense of belonging took place in foreign lands. He and his team competed in Russia, Denmark, Sweden, England, Germany, and Ireland. At this point, I question if the term “country bumpkin” is still applicable.

After Hendrickson’s soccer and high school career, he studied abroad in Europe. Drifting from country to country on the international train system, Hendrickson explored a diverse assortment of places and cultures, ranging from Italy to Czechoslovakia.

“What were some interesting culture shocks or people you met on your trip?” I ask.

Hendrickson pauses and softly scratches his shiny, reflective head. I could almost hear the gears grinding his mind, rusted and creaking.

Nearly thirty seconds pass by before he says, “I remember sitting on a train from Austria to Hungary, in college, and the guy that was sitting on the train knew more about the politics in Minneapolis than I did. He lived in Europe, but they pay attention to the politics where their businesses are attached to. It was embarrassing that their grasp on our politics is so much more in-depth. I still remember him talking about how Europe pays attention to our politics because our politics drive their politics.”

Relative to the other U.S. metropolises, Minneapolis is a smaller city. I am surprised to hear that a European, a person across an entire ocean on a separate continent, knew about the events that were transpiring. While I dwell on the idea, it occurs to me that my fellow Americans

are probably unaware of any news twenty-five miles north of me, well at least before last year. To be fair, I am also oblivious of whatever is happening in Dallas or LA; naturally, I am utterly clueless about European politics. Impressively that man, with no internet, managed to stay connected to a completely different country, language, and culture. Soon, I begin sharing a similar sense of embarrassment.

"Any other neat interactions happen on that trip?" I inquire as his short description ends.

Mr. Hendrickson ponders for a moment and glances at his phone notifications. Quickly dismissing them, he recounts his visit to West Germany just as the Berlin Wall fell. While on his stroll, Hendrickson met a particular character: Václav Havel.

Not many people can say they have met a president of both Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, in fact, Václav Havel is the only person who fits the criteria; but at that time, Havel was known as a playwright and an anti-communist activist.

"We were walking down the street, and he walked right up to us, and he only been out of jail for like 2 days," Hendrickson vaguely remembers, "He was asking, begging for us to send books, history books because he said all of the history books were written from the Russian point of view. So the country, his students, had no idea what the real story was. He was an interesting guy to listen to and to talk to."

In the following years, Václav Havel would become the first president of the Czech Republic; he would pave the foundation of a nation and earn distinctions such as the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Gandhi Peace Prize. Mr. Hendrickson met that man, a man who would alter the course for an entire country, an entire people. I find that incredibly remarkable.

As I annoy Hendrickson for more stories, I notice that fewer details are being described. I look at the clock and realize that thirty minutes have gone by. For a teacher that arrives at school at 4 am, he must be exhausted; so, I conclude our conversation.

"Is that enough you need from my life?" Hendrickson smirks.

"Yeah, this should be good for now," I respond.

"Good. Now get out of here."

"Will do," I say as I head out the door.

Dissatisfied and wanting to learn more about the world, I contemplate who I should talk to next. With a person in mind, I make way to the 3rd floor Health Science Academy, to a room at the end of the hall.

In the corner of the dark, afternoon-lit classroom, Mr. Douds types at his desk. Noticing my presence, he stops whatever he is doing and welcomes me.

"Hey Cody," he nods.

"Hey, Douds you got a second?"

When we finish exchanging greetings I explain the purpose of my paper and request to know more about his travels. Before he begins, I can already tell that Douds has seen a fair share of the globe from the decor in his room: on one wall hang the flags of Ireland, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine; along with the Amnesty International flag, a large map of the world is pinned on the opposite wall; and at the front shelf, a "history buff" mug and other foreign trinkets sit on display. I expect no less from a social studies teacher.

Slightly leaning back in his office chair legs crossed, Mr. Douds summarizes his early life and the events prior to his travels. After high school, Douds was still an independence-seeking youth. To get away from his hometown of Plum, Pennsylvania, he enrolled in York College, an

institution towards the central region of the state. While pursuing an international relations degree, Douds took an opportunity to study abroad in London.

With a hint of nostalgia Douds remarks, “I remember that first trip from the airport to the school. We were in a cab driving and everything is on the other side of the road. Intellectually, I can wrap my head around this but, when it starts happening, everything is wrong. Every moment you think you are going to die. Every way you look is the wrong way to look, every turn, every instinct you have is the wrong way. On top of that, everything is much narrower. It is amazing how that impressed upon me the difference between that world and mine. I will never forget those experiences, those first couple of drives.”

As a midwesterner, I have yet to encounter a culture shock. Would something so simple seem that bewildering? Is the rest of the world that different?

Disrupting my thoughts, Douds reminisces, “Interesting story. I was traveling with a couple of friends. We went up to Scotland from the university. We arrive and the hostel we had hoped to stay at was closed, it was full. The guy [taxi cab] that had driven us over was like, ‘I got you. I'll take care of you.’ We were like uh oh. Here comes the scam, the robbery, I don’t know what we were thinking. He drove us to a friend’s house, this woman who occasionally put up people apparently. As soon as we got there, she came out, meet us at the door, gave us a key to her house, said ‘here you go. You can have this room here. There is a pub around the corner if you want to get some food and a drink. The doors open you have the keys so you are good. Let me know if you want to say another night.’ It was the nicest thing I have ever experienced in a foreign city where they didn’t know us from anybody. They take a couple of Americans into their house and gave us a key to their house on top of all of that.”

Personally, I could never imagine lending the keys to my house to random strangers. Even with my social ineptitude, I do not think this is normal in American culture. However, these were the types of interactions that Mr. Douds was hoping for; he wanted to explore the true hospitality of other cultures.

With the clothes and luggage on his back, Douds embarked on an adventure to the rest of Europe. Throughout this journey, Douds observed completely different ways of life and by avoiding the big cities, he immersed himself in local customs.

"Every day was unique," Douds claims, "There was no 'oh boy, humdrum.' It was every day something brand new was happening, something exciting, even things you wouldn't think of. A church that no one even takes a second look at in Europe is a building that in the U.S. would be a landmark of sorts. But over there, it's just another building. That's why traveling is so much fun. No matter where I was in the world, something happened that made it memorable. As opposed to here we go months without any recollection of anything that happened."

Sadly, I find truth in that statement. Although I am not the adventurous type, there is not much Minnesota has to offer in terms of geography or places to visit. Well, there is the northern part of the state, but driving there takes around 3 hours. In Europe, you could cross into multiple countries—each with its unique features and people—with the same amount of time.

Pulling the discussion back on course from our banter, Douds summarizes, "It was always positive. I don't know if I had any bad experiences on that trip. Everybody that I ran into was nice."

So far, I listened only to the advantages of traveling. In some way, I am a tad envious that both Douds and Hendrickson had the opportunity to roam the globe. Though the rational part of

my brain—believe it or not, it is functional—begins to analyze their travels. Surely not *everyone* benefited from their wandering. Someone had to get the short end of the stick. Right?

Soaring the skies and arriving at unknown, exciting lands is a popular interest among vacationers and curious adventurers. With the tremendous size of the Earth, there are many cultures and places to explore; however, while difficult to recognize, tourism heavily influences local communities. Whether intended or not, there are definite consequences of travel—both helpful and destructive.

As sightseeing and vacationing become increasingly prevalent, governments around the world are expressing concerns over environmental safety and preservation. An influx of visitors requires additional maintenance; to less affluent regions, this causes a strain on limited resources, something that cannot be prolonged. Unfortunately for countries like Nepal, this issue has only gained urgency. Despite being the Goddess Mother of the World, Mount Everest is overflowing with garbage and even human feces. The article "Trash and Overcrowding" indicates the amount of litter and organic waste on the mountain is "in the tons." Left behind by irresponsible climbers, trash buried under the snow is affecting the environment and the surrounding population. Watersheds that stem from the mountain are now contaminated; combined with an absence of proper sanitation, the important water source is "dangerous to the health of the local people" ("Trash and Overcrowding"). For nearby residents who rely on insufficient infrastructure, this has become an obstruction to everyday life.

The Nepalese government determined that this excessive negligence of nature is unethical and problematic. To relieve the mountain of filth, clean-up efforts are underway; yet, the summit remains open to the public. Ideally, access to Mount Everest would only be available to a select few. However, tourism is a vital economic activity. Leslie reports, "Nearly 1.2 million

tourists visited Nepal in 2018, bringing in more than $700 million in sorely needed revenue to one of the poorest countries in Asia". Nepal simply cannot afford to suspend earnings generated from tourism; from sherpas to cooks, many job opportunities would be lost for a great number of locals. Other countries find themselves in a similar predicament where crucial income is made at the expense of the environment. As a compromise, nations like Egypt are introducing ecotourism and environmentally sustainable methods to the industry such as preserving national parks (Pérez). Likewise, Nepal is seeking cooperation with travelers and is encouraging them to take care of the ecosystem, though laws and regulations have also been put in place. Regardless, nature is fragile; resource consumption, erosion caused by traffic, and even carbon emissions are all aspects to consider. With protocols in place, countries will still have to proceed carefully and retain the balance between the economy and the natural world.

Financially speaking, government undertakings could be funded with tourism-related commerce. While a recreational activity, travel is one of the world's greatest economic engines; in 2019 alone, travel expenditures accounted for 10.4% of the global GDP (Nyasha, et al. 3). By no means is tourism insignificant; the money it yields can determine livelihoods and the success of entire communities. Since visitors need to be satisfied, various products, services, and establishments are provided (e.g. transportation, housing accommodations, food, and paid guidance). As a result, regions establish a flourishing economy that supports local projects.

Similarly, these earnings can be funneled back into the community. A district with higher income provides residents with more economic opportunities. For example, Montana's tourism industry has been broadening in recent times. Nickerson and Grau specify, "In 2015, nonresident visitors to Montana spent $3.6 billion in the state, an increase of 170 percent over 20 years. Adjusted for inflation that's $1.9 billion more than expected in 2015" (18). In areas less popular

on the world map, economic growth plays a substantial role. As businesses expand and populate a location, more labor is required; residents are then provided with employment options. Moreover, “Their [tourists’] economic contribution is greater because the items purchased locally reduce leakages and enhance the recirculation of outside dollars in the community” (Nickerson, Grau 22). Money that would otherwise be someplace else, contributes to the financial success of both companies and individuals. Correspondingly, circulating cash enlarges profit margins, incentivizing businesses to provide better wages and benefits to their much-needed employees. Overall, increased tourism stimulates economies and promotes fiscal freedom especially in areas with fewer visitors.

Nevertheless, there are repercussions. An increase in tourists means basic public services including roads, running water, and electricity will need to be constructed; likewise, maintaining environmental conditions cannot be overlooked. The corresponding government, the funder and organizer of these projects, will only receive a portion of tourism-related revenue. Assuming the government is free of corruption and greed, allocated funds may not be enough for development. In Montana’s case, “Glacier National Park and their gateway communities continue to grapple with too many people or cars, causing a strain on infrastructure and the landscape” (Nickerson, Sage, Grau). Conserving the environment, a community will have to manage and exert resources. Depending on the situation, this may not be completely possible. If proper infrastructure is not addressed, Montana and other regions will witness a deterioration of their home.

Among other concerns, tourism may exacerbate financial issues. Prior to touristic exposure, a community has an established economy; however, the potential profit from tourism can incentivize governmental and business practices that jeopardize community wellbeing. Jover explains, “In some urban spaces, mass tourism is incompatible with residential uses, as it deeply

affects aspects such as housing prices, the nature of business composition, usage of public space, air quality, etc" (3048). While it is necessary to satisfy incoming travelers, overextension is possible. With priorities geared towards tourism, communities can dig themselves into a financial deficit; thus, domestic affairs will be more challenging to solve. Furthermore, "Touristification contributes to a loss of authenticity in these spaces by the sociospatial transformation of neighbourhoods in line with the needs of consumers with high purchasing power," elaborates Jover, "but it cannot be strictly understood as gentrification because the tourists do not settle down permanently" (3048). Although visitors are nonresidents, their importance can radically sway economic and governmental decisions. As a city or area becomes more of a popular destination, this effect, also known as touristification, is amplified. Consequently, citizens could find themselves neglected by their own community—even if they are the ones supporting the industry.

Besides money, tourists are unknowingly imprinting cultural values on the societies they visit. Generally speaking, this is not necessarily harmful to customs and traditions; however, lifestyles can still be negatively affected. For the Maroons inhabiting the Caribbean, the answer to cultural influences is not simple. The article "Caribbean Maroons Hope" illustrates, "Maroons in the Caribbean are increasingly showcasing their unique culture for visitors in hopes that heritage tourism will guarantee jobs for the young generation and preserve what remains of their centuries-old practices in mostly remote settlements." Today's world is constantly evolving and older traditions alone are unlikely to survive. Visiting tourists present an opportunity for diminishing groups to integrate into modern society, creating a symbiotic relationship. As a result, younger descendants are no longer coerced to abandon their heritage. To prevent a

complete eradication of cultural identity, groups like the Maroons are adapting and tourism is providing options.

However, this may not be a permanent solution. The dynamics of global change have become inevitable—a destined fate for many cultural lineages. Akova and Gökmen clarify, “The active nature of culture, together with the impact of the globalization argument, has permeated every aspect of individuals' lives today.” Retaining lifestyles that go against modernization is no easy feat. An increase in tourism, while beneficial in some regards, pressures communities to transform into something else. With more outside influences such as tourism, cultures are quickly evolving. Although, it should be noted that culture is immensely complex. Determining and defining a favorable outcome is solely dependent on the specific culture at hand and their distinct beliefs. Still, whether the Maroons or other unique civilizations can adjust and survive, remains to be seen.

Fortunately, when Mr. Douds intermingled into Ukrainian culture, both he and the village came out with broadened perspectives.

Talking with his hands Mr. Douds expresses, “That was the formula for Peace Corps. Our stated goal was for me to go over there and learn about the Ukrainian culture, bring it back to the states and share the culture. At the same time, bring American culture—*real* American culture, me as a real person and not the stuff they see on TV—and let them see what Americans are like.”

In 2002, Mr. Douds departed for a remote village in the Ukrainian countryside. It was nothing like he had ever seen before: wagons being pulled by horses, unreliable water systems that would sometimes turn off without warning, and Soviet-era buildings that siphoned the life out of him. However, none of these memories match the sheer vividness of a pig being harvested for food.

Douds looks at the ceiling and then winces almost as if the memory itself causes him to recoil. With a deep breath he begins, “Instead of bringing the pig to a butcher, they bring the butcher to the family. And he shows up. We are in the back pen and he has got this leather roll that is an assassin’s plethora of knives and he rolls it out on the table. Knife and saws, everything that you could imagine. He pulls out this thing—oh my gosh the thing must’ve been at minimum a foot-long knife. He says, ‘alright all I need you to do is hold the pig down.’ When he comes out of the pen, I was thinking it is just a pig, like a that will do pig—it was not. It was a hog and it scared the heck out of me. Didn’t scare anybody else since they all knew it was coming, I didn’t know that was coming out of there. It was lumbering, it was not graceful. But it doesn’t matter because the dad of the family, had a rope and he got it under the legs and yanked it out and the pig fell over on its side. At that moment the pig started screaming. It was a scream, not a squeal, it was a scream and it was piercing. So I came in and put both my knees on the pig to try to hold it down and then the butcher came in. With the point of his knife, he stuck it right into the chest and *slowly* pushed it all the way into the pig’s chest. The pig slowly stopped breathing and eventually died.”

Just as I think the description is finished Douds continues, “Once the pig was dead they cut—it is a horrible, a horrible visual for you but think of a Halloween pumpkin how you cut the top off of it so you can get our the innards, that’s what they did to the chest. They cut a big square out of the pig’s chest, they pull it out like the top of a pumpkin, and then they got a tin cup and scooped out all of the blood for blood sausage and any other number of things. Every single pieced was used.”

Completely shocked, it takes me a moment to recollect myself before I can comprehend that situation. Being the cheeseburger-muncher I am, I never considered the death of the animals

I consume. Of course, their slaughter is hidden behind the walls of brands and plastic wrapping; but for the villagers, the gruesome execution is a normal occurrence. Given the circumstances, I understand that this is necessary for their survival; being in an isolated civilization means options are a privilege. While Douds explains the constant "meals" of the same bread, pig fat, and soup, I only feel a sense of gratitude.

As the end of our conversation draws near, Douds illustrates the villagers' perspective, "Their eyes were opened up to a whole new world. In fact, a number of people that I've met, students that I have taught while I was over there, had now started traveling overseas, all throughout Europe. Otherwise, they were from this tiny poor village. There was no way they were leaving if they haven't been exposed to something. I was exotic in Ukraine and I think they saw that, the potential that anybody could do this."

A final thought pops into my head and I ask, "Would you tell other people to travel?"

Pausing, Douds looks at me in the eyes and answers, "Always. If you haven't seen the rest of the world, then everybody is strange, different, and weird. But if you travel, that perspective helps you to understand and accept people. You can't close your eyes to what you have seen. That opening of your eyes, that perspective that there is a world outside."

With a lot to ponder on, I say farewell to Douds who promptly returns to his computer.

The following day, I encounter Hendrickson and before he tries to leave, I ask him the same question.

"I honestly believe that every student could, if they can do it, travel abroad because it changes your perspectives on what you have here. You appreciate and start to understand that they are a lot of things that people have here that aren't anywhere else in the world. You should be a lifelong learner, whether it be positive or negative is up to you, but you should be one of

those people who can sit down and look at things and say: ‘wow this is something new, I wanna learn more about it.”

From the tales of only two teachers, I have come to learn about the many people who share the same world as I do; however, this knowledge remains incomplete. Until the day I walk the path of an adventurer and immerse myself in the chasm of culture, I will only have a page of the entire book. Though, I am still young. As my high school career comes to an end, a new chapter begins. Hopefully, the novel will tell of my various feats and accomplishments far beyond the fields of Shakopee.

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