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Losing Identity

In the early days of the semester abroad here in Italy, we were bombarded by the directors of Syracuse University Abroad with countless papers, activities, rules, meetings, and informational lectures about life here in Florence. The two aspects of the orientation that stood out as the most important foundations for experiencing Syracuse in Florence and those were one, to be safe and two, to “get lost in Italy”. Lose yourself.

The act of losing yourself while in a foreign country brings out one’s true character. It is a test of an individual’s ability to adapt to unfamiliar situations in order to survive. The importance of setting out to lose oneself in a new city, among new people, surrounded by an incredibly new culture can be seen as a paradox because in order to find oneself, one’s true identity, it is first necessary to be lost. In the state of being lost, I believe the individual has the opportunity to make a change in the nature of who they have been up until that moment in time. There are indeed limitations to changing the personality of an individual, but when confronted with a situation where there is the element of the unknown, it is possible to adopt a different behavior while never losing sight of the fundamentals of their origin.

Experience is one of the most important aspects of gaining insight and knowledge of a subject. Living in Italy as a student, learning Italian and practicing with native speakers can be the most efficient way to grasp the language because it makes demands of a person. After just a few weeks into the semester, I found myself, quite unexpectedly, following the Italian instructions of the staff. Later, while volunteering for La Misericordia, the historical hospital in la Piazza del Duomo, I was not so fortunate. On my first day as a volunteer I was shipped out in the Ambulanza. I spoke little to no Italian as this was towards the beginning of the semester, and the accompanying supervisor did not speak the slightest bit of English. Along with my keys, orange jumpsuit, and friend Beaux, I set off for the countryside outside Florence. In fact, I have not the slightest knowledge as to where I was that day. I could only partially translate the job requirements from the description our supervisor gave us, which was to help with the care of patients in the rehabilitation center who had physical and mental disabilities. After discovering that we were sorely and inadequately qualified for the job, we also discovered that we had been left at the center by our “compagno”, without a way back home. We tried to speak to the director of the facility in the miniscule amount of Italian we knew, in an attempt to find a solution, to no avail. We were somewhere in Tuscany, unable to communicate and, indeed, lost. Lost from civilization it seemed, the only hope of returning home would have been to back-track our journey, on foot.

Since experiencing that heart-pounding event, I have learned a lot. I understand there are more important things to worry about in life, and that being lost in Italy is not one of them. One is measured by their strength of character and their responses in high pressure situations. Being lost fosters self-knowledge. If you do not keep your feet, there is no knowing where the road might take you. It is imperative to have the mentality; that everything will be fine in the end, in order to gain the full experience of being lost. I did which was asked of me, to “get lost in Italy” and now I can be truthful in saying that I have a better understanding of myself. “*Getting lost is just another way of saying 'going exploring'.*” and that is how I have interpreted the advice of the directors. I explored and through exploring found a new quality in my character, who is unafraid of the mysteries that are hidden in the world.