

Uncovering the Tesserae

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I step off the plane to be greeted by a warm breeze touching my cheeks; a foreshadowing perhaps of the kisses my host mother would plant as I came to be closer to her. I think of other students and consider myself lucky, knowing I only had two hours of flying from Koln to Firenze; I mark it as the seventh time I've set foot on Italian soil. My apprehensions mainly consist of not knowing how to communicate with Italians. This fear becomes a reality when as a first year student I am placed in a house with a family that doesn't even know salutations in English, and my roommate understands even less Italian than I do.

Little did I know, that was just the beginning of my 'Adventskalender' adventure. The term 'Adventskalender' is used to describe a cultural German tradition in which a small gift is given in the twenty-five days leading up to Christmas. The gifts increase in size or importance as the days progress; and so it was for me with each passing day in Florence.

The first 'gift' I opened was a gift that can't be bought, a gift I had actually received from a young age; the gift of language. My first immersion experience would occur at the age of two years old. I moved to Germany, alongside the borders of the Netherlands and Belgium, to a small town called Kirchoven and I was enrolled in the Kindergarten. Naturally at this age, I couldn't possibly understand the implications this would have on me as I grew up, but I learned the language and ways of the German culture. Learning German motivated me to learn other languages, and in my last two years of high school (an International school in The Netherlands) I studied Spanish and I'm so grateful I did. I would not have been capable of exchanging a word with my host mother Mirella had I not.

Moving to Italy made me feel like I was Alice and I had fallen down the rabbit hole. I wanted nothing more than to establish a higher level of understanding with my family. The Italian language was the key to that door for me. I began learning primarily by observation and being told what things were. Mirella has very young granddaughters and had copies of children's books strewn across the house. The pictures and every day words slowly allowed me to become more stable, and rapidly I learned. The words became more than just one thing when I memorized them, they became story-telling devices, and they allowed me to enter the family.

Now I am not just a resident; I am a daughter, sister, and aunt. Everyday I take time to open a new gift. Each one begins with my observation of the gifts of life people don't take time to look for. When I watch my mother singing in the kitchen, or teaching her grandchildren Italian traditions, it's a gift. When I hang the clothes on the line, I continue a practice my great grandmother taught her family in La Spezia. I live as an Italian by taking the bus daily, greeting my friends at the café on the corner, and discussing the facets of Italian society that have made it great.

Ever since I was young, I've identified myself more as German than American, more of a European than a North American. So many aspects of German life parallel that of Italian. The importance of family and the emphasis on historical events that have defined the country as it is now, are common to both cultures. To have lived in countries so culturally rich, where composers, artists, and writers have received their inspiration; I am in awe. A life's work is created, by recounting those places in which you have been inspired. I haven't quite figured out who I am yet, but this season has helped me turnover a few tesserae in my life, which will ultimately help me discern what images are in my mosaic.