

# Looking Before Leaping

By Onawa Powell

“Attitude is the difference between an ordeal and an adventure” - Bob Bitchin.



In order to reflect on this semester, I need to look at what my original goals were and what I actually achieved. I originally wanted to go to Morocco because I wanted to practice my Arabic and I wanted to be immersed in another culture. I wanted to become familiar with a part of the globe that I had never stepped foot in and to see what I could find; I never made it to Morocco.

After studying Arabic for two semesters, I had learned about the UW Madison study abroad program in Morocco and so I applied for Spring 2018 and was accepted into the program. However, I was living in DC during the process and I quickly came to realize that this dream was not financially feasible. I was struggling to support myself in DC and it brought me to reality about the limits of money. It was a critical lesson to learn and it meant that another study away was not a good idea.

At first, I was heartbroken because traveling is my passion, but then, I realized that just because I couldn't do a study abroad through UW, did not mean that I couldn't find another way to practice my Arabic and to be immersed in another culture. I spoke to an uncle of mine who lives in Cairo and he was ecstatic to have me there. He told me that there was a teaching job in Cairo, just waiting for me. So I made an alternative plan and I announced to the world that I would now be studying in Egypt and taking my classes online; I never made it to Egypt.

Egypt didn't work out because I needed to buy a ticket to my dad's wedding in Thailand and once again, my funds were the limiting factor. I couldn't afford to buy a ticket to both Thailand and Egypt and still have enough money to get situated where I landed. I had learned from my experience in DC, to look before I leap and so, once again, I adjusted my plans. I thought, why not stay in Thailand, where I can stay with family and then get myself financially situated enough to make it to my next destination comfortably. I would still have the chance to be immersed in another culture and to quench my wanderlust.

My semester, in hindsight, comes down to this: you really never know what you are going to get in life. You can make all of these elaborate plans only to find out that they are not possible. Then, you adjust and you pinch and you pull and you find that you can make something even more glorious and beautiful than what you ever could have imagined. When you open yourself up to new possibilities and when you are seeking experiences that will help you grow or that will take you somewhere new, in those spaces and with that mindset, truly anything is possible. When unexpected things come your way, you have the power to take them and turn them into beautiful lessons.

This semester, I was not able to go to Morocco and I was not able to go to Egypt, I was not able to practice my Arabic but I was able to immerse myself in another culture. Not only that, but I have made a Moroccan friend here in Ubon. I have also had the chance to practice my Thai and to develop a deepened understanding and appreciation of Thai culture. I have gotten to know and to value my new Thai family here. Family is something that I never fully got to understand in the US with my scattered, divorced and isolated US family. Here, I feel included and I feel loved as part of a big, sociocentric family and I have created a strong bond with my new Thai sisters. These are things that I wouldn't trade for anything; I am so grateful that I made it to Thailand.

Furthermore, despite my original plans going awry, one thing that this semester has taught me is that even though things rarely go as planned, making plans can work wonders for the sole purpose of simply moving forward in life. I have found that when I take the time to put plans in place, it helps to build a frame for my future. You can lay out plans as projections into the future, like adding a rung to a ladder, it helps you to climb higher and higher. As you climb, you really

don't know what you're going to see when you get up there but you must make that reach if you want to keep going.

This independent study has also taught me something valuable about where I intended to go and where I ended up. Every week, I would carve out the time to sit down and reflect on what I was doing career-wise and to think about what kind of progress I was making. This step in creating awareness about the manner and direction in which I am moving, has come to be such a critical part of my career planning process. How can I find the way to my destination if I don't know where I am? This brings me back to the point of looking before I leap.

This lesson is one that really began to sink in during my semester in DC. From DC to my creation of a self-made study abroad, these experiences have taught me how to be truly methodical with my life. Methodical doesn't mean predicting the future, it means having an idea about what I want to achieve and deciding how I will tweak my plans as I go in order to achieve that.

I also learned that it is incredibly challenging to be traveling abroad and studying simultaneously. My grades definitely took a toll this semester because of the instability I faced and the constant movement that I made. I would often have to go through many twists and turns just to make deadlines for weekly assignments. The simple habits that I had made in the US, like popping into coffee shops for a few hours to focus on my work were much more difficult to maintain in this completely new way of life to which I needed to adapt. To ease my anxiety about my grades, I have constantly had to remind myself that my suffering academic performance is worth having the opportunity to be immersed in another culture.

This brings me yet again, back to the importance of planning and of being conscious of my intentions and my actions. This semester has made me hyper aware of what I am doing and why. It has shown me that while I can't just do whatever I want, that I do have influence over my life and that the more that I focus my energy through thoughtful planning, the more I can manifest my goals. I am thankful for these lessons as I am now prepared to apply them as I move forward with my life.

I have passed the Skype interview phase of my application to teach English for Hujiang University. I now have to train online and then pass a test to ensure that I can teach the material adequately. So, I most likely have a job teaching online and I also have access to some tutoring gigs here in Ubon. My plan is to stay in Ubon for a couple of months and save up some money. Then, I can book a flight to my next destination while maintaining my teaching job online which will ensure that I have a much smoother transition abroad. I will save up enough money for an apartment and a good cushion to live on and I will continue to teach online.

Now that I am attempting to look before I leap, I am nonetheless excited to see where I actually end up. The one thing that I know is that my life will continue to be one crazy adventure after the next.