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Diana Noasconi Rhodes

### Swimming Upstream

Swimming the length of the pool, I am conscious of the camera and of the sensation of sweating. It *is* possible to sweat in a pool. I'm the lone American in a swimming class of thirteen Germans. The instructor is filming us to record technical flaws. Everyone here, it seems, swims better than I do. Awkwardness and anxiousness are part of any first lesson, but there is something deeper about this anxiousness.

Dreams are slippery things. They have a sheen in the abstract that gets muddied in the concrete. I've long wanted to live in Europe among its ancient buildings, cobbled streets, and monuments to history. Wish granted, I've lived, for five years, in the southern part of Germany known as Bavaria. But there's a difference between the traveler and the expat: the former is on holiday while the latter is on an island of sorts. Expat life demands comfort with uncertainty and insularity, plus a fluid sense of identity.

Reaching the end of the lane, I push off the wall, resume stroking, and recall something *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik wrote about life in Paris: Cultures don't encode things, they include some things and leave others out. Later, standing among the other swimmers, I realize even my swimsuit marks me as different: a lone flowery tankini in a sea of solid-colored Speedos.

I think what's at the heart of Gopnik's idea is we must figure out what's missing—both in a foreign culture and in ourselves away from our own. It's a process of adding and subtracting, shifting viewpoints to finally arrive at what's certain. Some life issues are non-negotiable. For instance, I easily embrace the German's raucous beer-hall culture, their storybook villages,

spirited festivals, love of dogs, need for orderliness, and rules about noise. (The list is long.) But their brusqueness, impatience, and penchant for fast driving and cigarette smoking leave me gasping for air. (A shorter list, but no less important.) I can no more deny my American-ness than they their German-ness. Living abroad means adopting what works and quietly abiding what does not.

Then one day a bell rings inside you—maybe while swimming—telling you it's time to leave. I'm an eager leaver, ready to repatriate to my beloved Seattle, but not unchanged. The amalgam of European, West coaster, and Midwesterner (my birthplace) that I've become will have to adjust again. European views on politics and social welfare—even on America's struggles—have wiggled into me while my American need for independence and independent thought have been strengthened. Plus I've missed those casual hellos we Americans so generously dole out to both friends and strangers. The task now is to suss out the usefulness of lessons learned abroad. Any hard skills to record on my resume?

Take the swim class. I'm learning resiliency and flexibility—how to swim for hours while translating drills from German to English. When it's my turn and another swimmer dives ahead of me, I learn that my place in line is not always assured. *Achtung*, traveler! Living in a foreign culture—or traveling for a time in one—reveals the foreigner *inside* us.