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The View From "Over There"

By Amy Westlund

A wise professor of mine once said that you can learn a lot about America by stepping outside of it—by spending time abroad. I have certainly found this to be a truth. For twenty years, Portland, Oregon was my world. Sure, I've travelled quite a bit throughout the country and have done the "Canada and Mexico" thing (Victoria, B.C. and Tijuana, respectively); and I have read and studied enough about Europe, the third world, and the next world that I have considered myself somewhat culturally literate. I certainly have not regarded myself as sheltered in any sense.

Two months of a dazed existence in culture shock did much to dispel the myth. On my flight to Chicago from London during a brief return to the States for Christmas, I had a nice chat with the British businessman next to me. I had heard of such airplane encounters before, but this was the first time I had the pleasure of experiencing one. For seven hours we discussed society, politics, religion, and life, pausing only for meals, part of the movie, and a short nap. This passing encounter helped me crystallize many of my experiences in England thus far and pointed out that I still have far to go before I really shake my Oregonian-American world view.

It was interesting to watch the proceedings of the presidential campaign, election, and inauguration from abroad. This was my first presidential election, and it seems a strange twist of fate that I should have participated by absentee ballot. However, the experience has reinforced in me the belief that my vote is important—not just for the interest of the United States, but for the entire world. Like the rest of my generation, I was raised on the rhetoric that America is "the most powerful and important nation in the world." As I left our shores for the Old World last fall, I was prepared to be humbled as I learned how America really fit into the global picture. To my surprise, the view is much the same on this side of the Atlantic. The election night coverage was broadcast live, here and throughout much of the world, by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). It was of tremendous international interest to know just who next would be "the most powerful person in the world." This is not simply a grandiose catch-phrase, but rather a truth expressed about a leader and a nation to which the rest of the world is effectively hinged. Nearly everyone I ran into for the next week asked my opinion on the outcome, and some members of the upper echelon in Britain were particularly pleased since Clinton, after all, is an old Oxford chap. For myself, I resigned to "no comment."

I have also discovered that the United States is an extremely nationalistic society. I used to stand on my unworldly political soap box and scorn the French and the Germans for their often fierce displays of patriotism, blasting these as threats to global harmony, etc., etc. But, I have since realized that Americans are no better, as the most recent inaugural spectacle will attest. It was not until my third month in Britain that I walked by a barren flagpole and realized that I had not seen a single British banner flown on campus—or anywhere else, for that matter. Truly astounded, I hastened back to my apartment ("flat") and asked one of my flatmates to explain this phenomenon to me. She replied that for many people, the Union Jack is associated with the monarchy, and it is no surprise that, lately, this may not be a source of national pride.

I since have heard other theories, including the most plausible one that the British people simply are not caught up in state glory to the extent of Americans, and given our respective backgrounds, it is not difficult to see why. America was conceived by its citizens from the beginning as the "city on a hill"; this is a theme which has remained consistent throughout our short history. Britain has been Roman, Viking, Saxon, and Norman; she has had her glory days and is now in the process of once...
again altering her course by joining the larger European Community. Nevertheless, there often is an impassioned loyalty toward

*This royal throne of kings, this scept’rd isle,*  
*This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,*  
*This other Eden -- demi-paradise*  

(Richard II. i. 40-42)

But this is more likely to be expressed in the more subtle forms of poetry and literature. Another flatmate confessed that she didn’t regard herself as a British subject so much as “just a person.” Considering the current state of European affairs, this would appear to be a healthy attitude. Perhaps the most surprising perception I have come to appreciate is just how diverse the United States really is. When I arrived in Birmingham, I was prepared to have to explain in rather great detail just what and where Oregon is. Within a few days I had the story down: “It’s on the West Coast, just north of California.” Or, if I was lucky, “you know where Seattle is? Just a three hour drive south.” What I wasn’t expecting was to have to use this line on other Americans I met! Of the nine students in my particular program at this university, only two of us live west of the Mississippi. One of my flatmates is “from Michigan, but I attend school in New Orleans,” and we have discovered about as many differences between our respective American cultures as with our British mates.

Besides cultural diversity, America is truly rich in resources. As of January 1, citizens of the European Community (EC) can travel between member states and bring home more duty-free goods than ever before, thanks to the latest phase of the Maastricht Treaty (that enigmatic pact which calls for European economic unity some time in the future). But certain imported goods, such as fruit juices, are still outrageously expensive: a litre of apple juice can cost up to $1.50! In the U.S., we take for granted that we get our OJ from Florida, our beef from Nebraska, our sugar from Hawaii and our politicians from Arkansas. Even the weather in America is more sundry than here. When people talk about “the rivers” flooding in Britain, they’re referring to the entire country! I still haven’t grown accustomed to the European weather map used on the evening news. On the same scale as the full-screen U.S. map, the programs show all of Western Europe, and often times a single storm system will obscure the whole of Great Britain from view. Personally, I can’t wait to get back to those all-American (Oregonian?) summer nights of steak and corn-on-the-cob. Yum!

Despite all the differences I have observed while overseas, it really is amazing how much our societies nevertheless are connected. As the world assumes its new post-cold war posture, the lines which distinguish people and cultures are increasingly more difficult to draw. Nowhere is this more exemplary than in the business sector. The first comfort I found in this country was the number of Ford automobiles on the roads, particularly around Birmingham. I soon learned that there is a Ford manufacturing plant right here in this city. To my own surprise, I grew very defensive when a local girl innocently referred to Ford as a British company. I sputtered, "Uh uh. Sorry. FORD: Michigan; Henry; Model T; American industrial revolution..." The poor girl didn't quite know what to do! I also saw one too many "Vauxhall" Cavaliers before it dawned on me that General Motors has plants in this country, as well, only under different names. In fact, there are so many "Britainized" American automo-
biles here that I am reminded of home more when I see the rare Toyota or Honda.

Of course, turnabout is fair play. I recently discovered, much to my dismay, that Burger King is now owned by a British corporation. Britain, in fact, "owns" more of America than Japan does, despite the popular belief to the contrary. It is increasingly difficult, anywhere in the world, to tell just where the profits are going at the end of the day. So when all this talk of business makes my head spin, and I can't be bothered to worry

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about it, I simply go down to the city centre and watch the latest (Japanese-owned) Hollywood movie, a pastime as popular here as at home (although, depending on how long the film is run in America, it can be as long as a one year wait for its release in this country!)

The good news is that not many things shock me anymore; the bad news is that by the time I get accustomed to this place, it will be time to uproot myself once more and return home. I suppose there is something to be said for the free spirits of this world, i.e. those liberated souls who roam the planet unfettered by national or even personal ties to any one particular place. On the other hand, I also believe connections are healthy, and one can cultivate her branches without necessarily cutting herself off completely from the foundation. Or as my mother says, "Don't be afraid to go out on a limb--that's where the fruit is." In other words, my time in Britain has not separated me from my roots at home; on the contrary, my love for America, and particu-

larly the Northwest, has deepened. I have made my Galilean discovery that Portland indeed is not the centre of the universe, but it nonetheless will retain a very distinct and important role in that universe.

As for now, the fruit is ripe for the picking, and with one hand firmly grasping my support, I am assuredly reaching with the other as far as I possibly can. After all, the reward is always sweeter for those who must work the hardest to achieve it.