



THE MINDFUL TRAVELER

*Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not,
Given me seats in homes not my own.
Thou hast brought the distant near
And made me a brother of the stranger.*
—RABINDRANATH TAGORE, *Gitanjali*

DURING HIS LONG and extraordinary life (1861–1941), Tagore, the beloved Bengali poet and educator, journeyed to 30 countries on 5 continents. What’s surprising is that he was ambivalent about travel. He privately confessed, “I am not a born traveler. I have not the energy and strength needed for knowing a strange country.” Nevertheless, his exchanges with the intellectuals and common people of the places he visited profoundly shaped his vision of global community. Convinced that borders were folly, his ideal became the world citizen, the Universal Man. “The complete man must never be sacrificed to the patriotic man, or even to the merely moral man,” he warned in a letter from New York to a friend (Tagore, 1996). For Tagore, patriotism and nationalism were but passing phases in the evolution of the human community. He believed that in time, and with the increase of cultural exchange, the cosmopolitan ideal would be reached. That humanity is too good for narrow interests and exclusive loyalties.

If he were alive today, Tagore would no doubt smile on an emerging generation of a “new cosmopolitans.” They, like he, are attempting to think and live between the local and the universal, the traditional and the modern, the material and the spiritual. And these aren’t just old-school

revolutionaries trying to overturn the old order, nor technophobic hippies wanting to unplug the system and return humanity to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. They are hybrid figures that don't fit nicely into *any* of the established categories. Their social vision isn't at home with the religious Right or the secular Left, with the White House (big government) or Wall Street (big business). While not exactly unpatriotic, they've distanced themselves from a "my country, right or wrong" nationalism in favor of what sociologist Alan Wolfe (1999) calls a "tempered internationalism." In their gut they know that we're "all connected now" (to use Walter Truett Anderson's [2001] memorable phrase) and that the irreversible mixing of the world's economies and cultures presents us with more opportunities to realize relatively higher degrees of creativity, contentment, justice, and sustainability than have been known in any human society before now. Rather than revert to a supposed golden era, they consider how to act responsibly in an integrated world of far greater complexity, where the apparently simple acts of traveling, serving, buying, and selling have repercussions that are far beyond the limits of their immediate experience and that they are morally obliged to take into account.

When Ethics Travel

Global learning is never completely innocent. It is saturated with difficult power relations, endemic to cultural difference, that can't be wished away or canceled out by a more "ethical" brand of travel. Even travel scenarios that allow us to serve others can make us feel good about ourselves without bringing to light their less-than-desirable side effects for both the destination community and ourselves.

What might be some of these unpleasant consequences? Consider the following fairly typical scenario: A faculty member at a private liberal arts college in the Midwest decides to offer a four-week course on tribal arts and social problems in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. In the weeks that follow, 15 young adults, none of them Thai, are recruited to study traditional textiles and work with AIDS-infected girls. It matters little that no one on the team has any proficiency in Thai or can point to a close friendship with any Southeast Asian immigrant back home. Neither has

there been a prefield, case-study analysis of the way commercial tourism often aggravates exploitative employment of women (i.e., prostitution), undermines women's human and social capital, and traps them in long-term poverty.

After a couple of meetings to review the travel itinerary and behavior expectations, the group takes off. On arriving in Chiang Mai, they are immediately besieged by hawkers and hustlers. They check into a local YMCA (arranged by their local host as part of a package deal) and are straight away identified with the resident tourist population. It so happens that their host is a well-known "culture broker" who has learned through much practice how to mediate between locals and foreigners. Each day he makes sure the group members have what they need, including flush toilets, village treks, meaningful service tasks, clear directions to the nearest Pizza Hut, and souvenirs for family and friends.

The host-guest relationship is mainly instrumental and impersonal, rarely colored by affective ties. Likewise, the behavior of foreign students and locals is almost always "on stage," each having prepared for his or her performances behind the scenes. The students have read their orientation materials, consulted with trip alums, and perhaps ransacked a *Lonely Planet* guide or phrasebook. The middleman and other locals have consulted with fellow performers; assessed the commercial or political benefits of associating with these "outsiders"; and, of course, rehearsed a friendly smile. Caught in a staged tourist space, the encounters between these parties are almost invariably marked by disparities of power and levels of stereotyping that would not exist among neighbors or peers. Each party knows that the transactions probably will be brief and temporary. This frees everybody from the constraints of mutual, long-term relationships and to act in terms of his or her own interests.

During the month of travel study, the foreign land fulfills its promise. Although the 15 foreign students may have only skimmed the surface of the regional culture, they succeed in meeting fellow travelers from around the world and forming deep bonds of friendship with trip mates. The fact that the *study* side of the study-abroad experience has been reduced to make room for assorted field visits virtually assures all participants of getting a passing grade. Service experiences also meet student expectations. They come away confirmed in their sense of being the ones who are healthy and strong, and the infected girls as being helpless and deficient.

Returning home, they're likely to speak and write of what they learned *about* or did *for* the locals rather than *with* them.

This simple—and perhaps simplistic—sketch serves to challenge the commonplace assumption that sojourns abroad automatically yield transformational results, either for “goers” or for “receivers.” Much depends on specific program features and the choices that we as individual travelers make along the way.

Most of us are creatures of habit. Our tendency is to do things—including travel-related things—on automatic pilot, largely oblivious to the movements themselves and how they impact the world around us. While autopilot helps us stay “on course” in the rush and pressure of daily life with a minimum of expended energy, there is a major downside. It tends to undermine our capacity to be “mindful”—to consider *why*, *how*, and *with what effect* we do what we do. Instead, we simply go with the flow, even if that flow is shallow and trifling.

This chapter contends that we have the ability to choose whether our journeys will be mindful attempts to maximize benefits to ourselves and to host communities or yet another luxury commodity consumed more or less mindlessly. In Buddhist traditions, mindfulness (*sati* in the Pali language) is a moment-by-moment attentiveness to the world both within us and around us. To be a “mindful traveler” is to approach our field settings with a level of sensitivity and curiosity that raises our conscious awareness of how we affect the social and natural environments we enter and act upon. This intentional awareness finds its ground and inspiration in a “story” that clarifies our motivations and allows higher purposes to guide our attempt to grow in worldly wisdom while enriching the lives of others. Ultimately this is what distinguishes the mindful traveler from the carefree drifter or mass tourist.

Travel Worlds

A thirst for change and a more satisfying life underlies much of the travel that has occurred throughout history. During the medieval period, pilgrims endured hardship for months and even years on journeys they hoped would end in spiritual enlightenment. Religious scholars crossed national and cultural borders in search of new knowledge or to spread

their faith. They were followed by the young elites who undertook “Grand Tours” through Europe starting in the 17th century. Following established trade routes, they would dedicate two or three years to expanding their intellectual and cultural horizons through travel study. Then there were the real explorers and adventurers—like Marco Polo, David Livingstone, Freya Stark, and Sir Wilfred Thesiger—who pioneered routes in uncharted lands. All that was left was for an eclectic and far more civilized swarm of colonists, merchants, and missionaries to fill in the details and beat down tracks that would eventually appear in today’s savvy travel guidebooks.

St. Augustine of Hippo once wrote, “The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page.” Travel is a school for life, one that generates fresh insights and unforgettable memories. Nevertheless, it primarily enrolls a class of wandering elites. The explorer of the Amazon, the collegian studying abroad in Spain, and the religiously inspired volunteer to Haiti may each bring different personal backgrounds and goals to their travel. What they all share in common, however, is the expectation that travel will confer a certain social status and, perhaps, a much-needed break from the compulsiveness and tedium of bourgeois life.

We might like to think that educational travel is a special case, immune to this self-actualizing orientation. However, it probably has more in common with other “enlightened” forms of travel—like adventure travel, mission travel, and pro-poor travel—than we would like to think. This is evident both in the type of participants and in their travel expectations and consumption practices.

As noted previously, the numbers of those studying abroad is on the rise, especially in so-called nontraditional locations. In most cases, this involves transporting rich, White collegians into societies where the majority is poor and dark skinned. In common with others from their ethnoclass, they learn to distinguish themselves from others, not just by their education, income, and place of residence, but by the objects and experiences (what Pierre Bourdieu [Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990] called “cultural capital”) they accumulate. This is particularly true for the more adventurous types of student travelers who often emerge from their ventures as figures of admiration, earning a certain cachet from having toughed it out in places marked not only by extreme climate conditions but also by brutal levels of poverty and inequality.

This admiration is often well deserved. Many of us venture out to distant lands in order to test the limits of our emotional maturity and world understanding. Through international service-learning programs, in particular, we also hope to contribute something of value to others. As an expression of sincere desire or obligation, there's nothing wrong and everything right with caring for AIDS orphans, dispensing medical supplies, and building shelters for the homeless. "The problem," contends John Hutnyk in *The Rumour of Calcutta*, "is that the technical apparatus and the conventional possibilities that are currently established for such expression tend easily towards servicing a grossly unequal exploitative system which affects us at every turn" (1996, p. 219). In other words, the collection of service experiences can be just one more form of consumerism, a "commodity" the volunteer actively "takes." This should come as no surprise in a world market where virtually everything is for sale. But it's still important to stand back and consider the links between the global economic system and our study or service abroad.

North-to-South educational travel certainly tends to highlight harsh social and economic imbalances. Contrary to quasi-Marxist analyses, these disparities are rooted not only in oppression by propertied classes but in poor soil, land shortage, primitive technologies, population growth, and despotic leadership (Diamond, 1999). Nevertheless, affluent westerners planning sojourns to third world destinations can discover that the price of their round-trip airfare alone represents a significant percentage of their host's annual income. Australian priest Ron O'Grady (1982), who has lived much of his life among Asia's poor, asks us to ponder their reality:

They are people who will never be tourists. When they speak of travel they mean going on foot, or in a crowded bus, to the next village or town. . . . Family incomes are barely sufficient for survival and there is no extra money available for luxury travel. Indeed, when they think of luxury, their minds cannot stretch far beyond a bottle of soft drink or a better meal. The concept of a paid holiday or expenditure on leisure travel or visiting a foreign culture is totally outside their conceptual framework. (p. 1)

Ironically, the gross disparity in the life conditions of the poor and the nonpoor underlies much of the allure of third world destinations. The



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inexpensive and unspoiled places that sojourners increasingly search out and appropriate into their personal worlds reflect, to a great extent, political and economic imbalances that originated under colonial rule. “Imperialism has left its edifices and markers of itself the world over,” notes Caren Kaplan, “and tourism seeks these markers out, whether they consist of actual monuments to field marshals or the altered economies of former colonies. Tourism arises out of the economic disasters of other countries that make them ‘affordable’” (1996, p. 63).

Living “on the cheap” isn’t the only third world draw for affluent travelers. As hinted at earlier, the experience itself is seen as a form of liberation from the shallow and sometimes smothering “overdevelopment” of modern life. Authentic experience is assumed to lie elsewhere, in simple and spontaneous relationship with natural environments and supposedly purer cultures. The thought of braving it for six weeks in a “primitive” village among “traditional” peoples reflects this nostalgic search for a freedom and authenticity that the West lost centuries ago. Of course, the very act of Westerners visiting any remaining “remote and unusual” cultures ensures that those cultures, too, will eventually lose *their* simplicity.

All About Me?

It's often said that what we're attracted to in other people and places are those qualities we miss in ourselves or our homeland. If this is true, travel allows us to escape the banality of our own lives in order to seek satisfying experiences among those who can't escape the reality of their lives.

This is undoubtedly what led me to that remote Vietnamese village mentioned in the introduction to this text. Alighting from my motorbike, I was stunned to see the local community despoiled by U.S. media entertainment. But what was I expecting to find? Traditional forms of entertainment handed down from the elders to the young? An oral recounting of local history in story and verse? What a tale I could have told—of a simplified world where farmers experience antiquity, tranquility, communion with the earth, and all the other things missing in the West. Instead I discovered villagers in Levi's and Nikes intoxicated with images of paradise associated with my own natal land, Los Angeles.

Pico Iyer (1989) reminds us that “a kind of imperial arrogance underlies the very assumption that the people of the developing world should be happier without the TVs and motorbikes that we find so indispensable ourselves. If money does not buy happiness, neither does poverty” (p. 14). It was much easier for me to assume that these premodern villagers had freely chosen their way of life than to consider that maybe, just maybe, it was reflective of their place in the international economic order. My obliviousness was awkward enough, but it can take more pitiful forms. It's rather charmless to see Indian men gawking for hours at topless Swedes on the beaches of Goa, or obese Americans being hoisted onto the backs of camels in the middle of the Egyptian desert.

Images such as these underscore the speed at which traditional economies are converting from meeting their own basic needs to gratifying the leisure whims of foreigners. They also illustrate an astute observation first made by Karl Marx: that it is in the very nature of commodities to veil the social relations embodied in their production. When we eat a piece of fruit, buy an article of clothing, or participate in a study-abroad program, the economic conditions and social relationships of the many people responsible for producing that particular commodity or service are typically hidden from our view. We simply consume the product without giving the larger context a second thought.

Professor Ben Feinberg (2002) of Warren Wilson College was curious to know what, if any, “second thoughts” study-abroad participants actually had after spending months in another culture.

Doubting that a professor could elicit sincere responses from students, I invited one of my favorite undergraduates to work as my research assistant, interviewing 30 or so of her peers who had recently returned from courses in Central America, Europe, and Africa. The responses from Peter, who had spent 10 weeks studying and working on service projects with a group in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Lesotho, were representative. When asked what he had learned from his African experience, Peter used the first-person pronoun seven times, eliminating Africans: “I learned that I’m a risk taker, um, that I don’t put up with people’s bull, uh, what else? That I can do anything that I put my mind to. I can do anything I want. You know, it’s just—life is what you make of it.” (B20)

Global learning became all about them. Feinberg goes on to suggest that a generation raised on reality shows like *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race* come to see exotic locations as personal playgrounds sealed off from real people in real places producing real goods under real conditions with real effects. In fact, the inequalities and injustices that we might experience in some parts of the world are subconsciously perceived to be there for voyeuristic “consumption” as part of the overall experience. Program “sites” become “sights” filled with colorful street scenes of modern skyscrapers towering over teeming shantytowns and scruffy street peddlers. The tourist gaze transforms all into aesthetic images of “nativeness” to be discovered, sighted, and “shot.” The question of *how* outrageous wealth and horrendous poverty could share the same physical space is rarely considered. Our reflex is to observe the hardship of others’ lives and then come away feeling “blessed” or “lucky” that divine providence or fate has permitted us to be born in privileged circumstances, and not as one of those “made to suffer.”

This sense of gratitude, as mentioned earlier, may be heartfelt. But interpreting complex situations through a kind of “lotto logic” evades any serious analysis of the geographic conditions, historical relations, and real abuses (social, economic, political, and environmental) that explain the disparities we observe. And all too often an ignited sense of social

responsibility is extinguished by a naive faith in the justice of fate. In either case, the structural relationships between communities of the North and South are sidestepped in favor of an exclusive focus on the individual.

This may partially explain why consistent growth in study-abroad participation has not necessarily met with a corresponding increase in longer-term cross-cultural engagement, whether at home or abroad. It's hard to call people to radical responses to a world that has served only as a backdrop for ephemeral episodes consumed purely for personal enrichment. As noted in the preceding chapter, one frequently hears program directors lament the embarrassingly high percentage of students who exchange the rare delight of engendering cross-cultural understanding for spending hours on end updating blogs and partying with other foreigners. Some commentators, in their call for greater accountability and "quality control," have gone so far as to question the moral propriety of sending culturally innocent first world youth to third world destinations at all. They challenge us to ponder uneasy questions: In what ways do ethnocentrism, racism, nationalism, and exoticism subtly operate within cross-cultural sojourns? Is it even possible for nonpoor students to "encounter" resource-poor residents in anything other than a paternal and intrusive mode?

The Journey Toward Mindfulness

Contentious questions like those above will probably be debated for many years to come. Far less controversial, however, is the expectation for international study and service programs to do everything in their power to protect fragile habitats and cultures and to provide direct financial and social benefits to host communities.

Such an "ethic" is especially evident among the expanding class of independent, educationally oriented travelers. They may be children of privilege, but their travel style is decidedly in the direction of being purposeful and "pro-poor." Some elect to backpack their way through regional circuits, *Lonely Planet* or *Moon* travel guide in hand, in a latter-day equivalent of the Grand Tour. Others prearrange volunteer-service placements through organizations like Action Without Borders (www

.idealist.org) and Wiser Earth (www.wiserearth.org). Still others enroll in programs that feature locally sponsored homestays and service projects organized around issues of conservation, human rights, and community education. What they all share in common is both an awareness of the downside of conventional tourism and a desire to make responsible choices about where and how to travel. If the “old” mass tourist was all about sun, sand, sea, and sex, the “new” mindful traveler aims to be sensible, sensitive, sophisticated, and sustainable.

Even so, the question of how educational travel might enrich an impoverished creation while also enhancing the learning of the nonpoor eludes easy answers. On one level it’s becoming increasingly clear that tourism potentially carries both positive and negative effects for host communities. The more obvious of these are summarized in Figure 3.1.

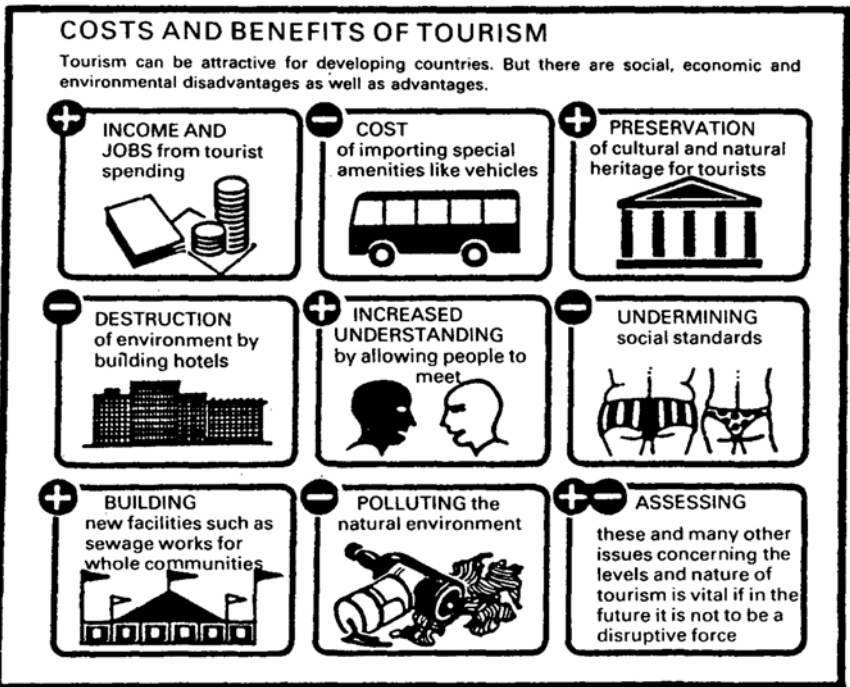


FIGURE 3.1 Costs and benefits of tourism
 From the United Nations Environment Programme

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On another level, though, a precise accounting of the complex pattern of gains and losses is difficult to achieve, for both technical and ideological reasons. One person might deem a given activity to be “just” and “beneficial” to a given community if it involves only X amount of disturbance to traditional lands and life ways. Another person may define it as involving Y number of new jobs and infrastructural improvements. A third may define it as involving all of these variables, as well as the cultivation of certain types of relationships between guests and hosts.

Instead of technical cost-benefit calculations, our focus is on practical strategies that might enable us, as educational travelers, to maximize benefit and minimize harm to host communities. Some of us may be quite sympathetic with those who argue that an immediate moratorium be placed on first world travel to the third world, at least until the most deleterious environmental and social effects are reversed. But is it realistic to expect that cross-cultural travel can *ever* totally be free of any undesirable effects? Deborah McLaren (2003) maintains that

For a tourist to have truly minimal impact, she would have to walk to the destination, use no natural resources, and bring her own food that she grew and harvested. She would also have to carry along her own low-impact accommodations (a tent) or stay in a place that is locally-owned and uses alternative technologies and waste treatment. Of course, she would also leave the destination in no worse and perhaps in even better condition than she found it and contribute funds to local environmental protection and community development. (p. 93)

Like the traders and soldiers before us, we are all agents of cultural change. This is particularly so in those regions where sociocultural differences are greatest. Because culture is never static, the question is not whether we will introduce change but *in what direction?* How might we journey in ways that strengthen rather than undermine the goals of economic growth, cultural preservation, social harmony, environmental protection, and spiritual flourishing?

Economic Mindfulness

One in every five international tourists now travels from a “developed” country to a “developing” one. Many of these countries promote tourist

activity as a means of generating new jobs and services, earning foreign exchange, and alleviating poverty. Nations like Thailand, Guatemala, and Nepal hope that their stunning landscape, distinctive culture, and low labor costs will attract a new generation of traveler, turning tourism into their “passport for development.”

The logic is not hard to appreciate: Tourist demand creates much-needed jobs in various sectors, including construction, light manufacturing, transportation, telecommunications, and financial services. Residents then use their wages to buy the food, medicines, or school uniforms needed to improve their lives, or even to open a small business. New economic enterprises, especially when established in isolated locations, can also stimulate much-needed infrastructural improvements.

But these potential benefits are not automatically fulfilled. “Developing” economies drawn to tourism as a way of earning foreign exchange soon discover that only a relatively small amount of the nonwage revenues generated actually enters their national economy. Much of it ends up being repatriated (“leaked”) to first world firms that own and operate the airlines, hotels, car-rental agencies, and food services that foreign travelers depend on. In fact, it’s possible for that hypothetical group of 15 college students referred to earlier to book round-trip flights to Thailand on Chinese-owned Cathay Pacific (with commissions paid to a U.S.-based booking agency); enjoy a variety of onboard meals provided through a U.S. catering company; and then, following touchdown, rent a Mercedes or Toyota van that transports them to a hotel owned by a French transnational, before making their way to a local McDonald’s or Pizza Hut for dinner.

This example may be generalized, but it highlights the money power held by foreign interests compared with local communities and national governments. In fact, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) estimates that an average of 55 percent of gross tourism revenues to the developing world actually leak back to developed countries. What does stay in the country is typically captured by domestic elites, with very little actually benefiting poor populations.

That’s not all. To attract foreign exchange, governments of poor countries market their beaches and wildernesses, and the customs and festivals of their people, to the rich world. In the process, existing communities

are often evicted from prized properties earmarked for tourist development. As real-estate prices soar, the local families that remain must spend a larger share of their income to meet housing needs. Displaced farmers and fisherfolk often have little choice but to reinvent themselves as seasonal tour guides or low-paying security guards for vacation homes that are locked up much of the year. Women are particularly vulnerable, having to find alternative ways of generating income as domestics, bar maids, or worse.

Mindfulness compels us to stay cognizant of who actually gains and loses financially from our presence abroad. Beyond that, it urges us to take practical measures to maximize economic benefits to those typically left out of tourism development. Some of us might decide to stay in locally owned and operated guesthouses and eco-lodges or—better yet—in the homes of the rural or urban poor. (I’m actually writing this from the home of a squatter family in Manila, Philippines, my accommodations having been prearranged by a local pastor I contacted over the Web. The money that would otherwise be paid to a financially secure hotel owner helps to meet the basic needs of a family of seven.) We can also elect to use forms of local transportation that employ poorer members of the community and provide rare opportunities for informal interaction. When essential goods and services are needed, we can opt to patronize resident-owned eateries, barbershops, and sidewalk vendors operating in the massive yet largely unregulated “informal sector.” The habit of having one’s daily needs supplied by paying a fair price to informal-sector workers provides a direct economic benefit to poor families. And the “circuit” of buying and selling can also evolve into a network of casual friendships that support one’s learning of the local language and culture.

Cultural Mindfulness

Besides bringing money into the local community to purchase goods and services, we also introduce a new cultural reality. The languages we speak, the clothes we wear, the new ideas we share, the consumer habits we display—all of these send a message and carry an impact. That impact can be especially overwhelming in more traditional societies unaccustomed to foreign forms.

This doesn't mean that societies can—or should—exist completely independent of outside influences. Every community is enveloped in a complex process of continuity and change, with tourist flows being just one of many transformative effects. Some of those influences can be potentially quite positive. Educational travel, for instance, often facilitates the free exchange of ideas, allowing each party to become an access point to a more cosmopolitan identity and a more astute cultural perspective. At other times, cultural changes are the result, as anthropologist Davydd Greenwood (1989) notes, “of a lack of any other viable option; and some the result of choices that could be made differently” (p. 182). To the extent that we acquire an insider's point of view, we learn to appreciate those elements of the local cultural system that should be “approved” as promoting the well-being of human communities and ecosystems, and also those that might be “improved” or even “reproved” as harmful or unjust. Although evaluating the effects of tourism, much less homegrown cultural features, is riddled with complexity, are we to regard any cultural appraisal as “off limits” to foreigners? Many of the world's most vulnerable populations are protected today as a result of transnational movements that persist in addressing cultural practices that deserve to go, such as child slavery and domestic violence. Greenwood reminds us: “Some of what we see as destruction is construction.”

On the positive side of the ledger, tourism can enable third world entrepreneurs to effectively market aspects of their way of life to foreign “culture vultures,” thereby helping to revitalize traditional folk arts and instill a fresh sense of cultural pride. “With government or private grants,” observes Miriam Adeney (2006), “traditional houses and community centers may be built. Local music and dance and storytelling may be valued and practiced. People may weave and throw pots and dive and trek and climb who otherwise would have become plantation or urban laborers. ‘Lost’ stories may be recovered and brought back into public discourse” (p. 467). Local traditions and material heritage are important for anyone wanting to gain a deeper appreciation for another culture, and educationally oriented travel can help preserve both.

There is a fine line, as you might expect, between the revitalization of culture and its “Disneyfication.” To a greater or lesser extent, we all find ourselves inescapably complicit in the process of commercializing third world “otherness” within a global market economy. Witness the spectacle

of indigenous residents-turned-actors in embalmed cultural rituals or artificially staged festivals. In the borderlands of Burma and Thailand, tour operators have set up human zoos featuring women from the Kayan tribal group—called “long necks” because they wear coiled brass rings that elongate their necks. Tourists pay 250 baht (about US\$7) to take photos or just stare.

As we search out ever more remote and “authentic” destinations beyond the Eurocentric norm, the pressure for these areas to modernize only intensifies. Since 1975, Swedish linguist Helena Norberg-Hodge (2009) has carefully tracked changes that occurred in the western Himalayan land of Ladakh (“Little Tibet”) as it opened to foreign tourists and modern goods. Within two decades, the traditional culture was being held up to scorn and ridicule by youth who began to see themselves as ugly, poor, and backward compared to the beautiful, rich, and culturally sophisticated foreigners.

The movement of affluents into resource-poor areas inevitably entails unequal cultural encounters. Mindful of this fact, we must do all we can to communicate respect for the distinguishing elements of the regional culture. Leading up to the trip, we can take it upon ourselves to learn about the area’s political history, current events, religions, and customs (this will be the focus of chapter 5). We can also make sincere efforts to sort out the “unclaimed baggage” of cherished values and expectations—like time efficiency, technology dependence, and hyper-cleanliness—that are likely to perplex, if not annoy and upset, our hosts. Once settled in our destination communities, we will do well to follow the sage advice of vagabonder Rolf Potts (2008):

Go slow. Respect people. Practice humility, and don’t condescend with your good intentions. Make friends. Ask questions. Listen. Know that you are a visitor. Keep promises, even if that just means mailing a photograph a few weeks later. Be a personal ambassador of your home culture, and take your new perspectives home so that you can share them with your neighbors.

Given enough time, intentionality and program support, we may eventually become “accepted outsiders,” even in places where regular tourists are rarely seen. Neighbors come to admire, not only our eagerness to adopt native ways without demanding modern amenities, but also our willingness to speak, however haltingly, in the local language. This type

of empathetic movement toward the host culture places a needed restraint on potentially offensive cultural practices, whether it is stealth photography or condescending treatment of service workers. In the process, we discover the possibility of transcending the social and cultural patterns that have defined most of our lives in order to explore multiple definitions of what is common and what is good.

Social Mindfulness

Mindful global learning aspires to narrow the gap between “us” and “them,” strengthening the bond of understanding and legitimate respect between strangers. Every intercultural program participant is potentially a bridge between peoples, enabling an empathetic, two-way learning process that can be deeply rewarding for host and guest alike. Each brings a different set of “eyes” to the local reality. Pico Iyer accurately observes that, especially in economically poor countries, “a foreigner tends to see paradise where a native sees purgatory, insofar as a foreigner is in a privileged position and has more appreciative eyes, undimmed by familiarity” (Powells.com, 2000). By exercising cultural appreciation, we open the door to forging rare cross-cultural bonds and alliances based on a common commitment to community betterment.

Most of the harmful social side effects of tourism result from the large numbers of visitors introducing a foreign sociocultural reality into a more vulnerable, receiving culture. It often happens that as soon as an unspoiled destination is discovered governments and multinationals rush in to build roads, hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, and golf courses—“gilded ghettos” that enable temporarily leisured outsiders to enjoy a privileged separation from the mainstream culture.

All too often, the tourist’s very presence serves only to exacerbate already existing tensions felt between the young and the old, the traditional and the modern, the beneficiaries of tourism and those marginalized by it. In response to tourists in their midst, locals may start thinking: “I like that these tourists spend money here. But I’m uncomfortable with the way our children want to imitate their tastes in clothes and music. Our children no longer value our local traditions or feel much sense of duty toward their elders. Also, I knew all the groups in our community weren’t equal in wealth and power, but now I see how much greater it is

in the outside world. The tourist I'm looking at may make in one year 500 or 600 times what I make. I didn't use to think of myself as poor, but now I do. Why do they have so much and most of us have so little? Where did they get all that money? It can't be by just working hard, because we also work hard and look how little we have. Maybe these people are rich because we're poor. Whether that's true or not, I resent them for having so much and then wanting to come see people who have so little" (Abernathy, 2006, pp. 22).

Affluent outsiders must work to understand and empathize with these feelings of resentment over unexplained social and economic disparities. We might experience it as a protective distancing and defensiveness from certain resident populations. At those moments, we come to realize that mere physical proximity in no way guarantees personal proximity; "natural" divisions of nationality, race, social class, language, gender, and social custom can act to keep "hosts" and "guests" worlds apart. Unless we learn to be consciously mindful of ways power and prestige are distributed in our host society, these dividing lines will tend to reinforce each other until a gap of difference becomes a gulf of separation.

Our first step toward social mindfulness is to understand and acknowledge the visible and invisible privileges and prerogatives that we as elite travelers take for granted but that often are denied to our third world hosts.¹ They won't expect us to stop being who we are or to individually "take responsibility" for the historical oppression they may have suffered. What they *do* expect is for us to be aware of our own culturally installed identities and behaviors, and how our perceptions and actions impact the people around us. What's obvious to them, but typically not registered by us, is that being rich and White in the contemporary world is to be "associated with" and "benefited by" a global social hierarchy that places people like us securely at the top and people like them firmly at the bottom.

Aware of the vast social chasm needing to be bridged, we might actually decide to begin our global education in our own backyard. In virtually every North American and European community, our near-neighbors highlight the complex interplay of race, class, language, religion, and immigrant status. In choosing to enter their social worlds, we learn to confront our stereotypes and false assumptions. We recognize our tendency to romanticize, rather than actually befriend and "neighbor" the stranger. And we begin to ask ourselves why we find it easier to

struggle for cultural understanding and social justice everywhere else but in our own neighborhoods. Is it because we are drawn to the exotic and glamorous over the familiar and mundane? Or is it because we expect that third world peoples abroad will be less likely to question our motives and more likely to solicit our “help” than those at home? Whatever the reason might be, at some point we must learn to measure our commitment to justice abroad against the walls of our own house. This will inevitably involve close encounters with peripheral groups in our own communities, from whom we will gain a deeper appreciation for how power and privilege is distributed in the modern world.

Lacking this awareness, we can easily feel that some essential “cognitive hooks” are simply not available to “hang” critical incidences abroad. Talya Zemach-Bersin (2008), a study-abroad student in Tibet and Nepal, reports how her “program’s curriculum focused on cultural and language studies while avoiding the very issues that were in many ways most compelling and relevant to our experiences.” Disgruntled over not having the necessary conceptual tools to critically process what it meant to be a White American abroad, she asks, “Why had we not analyzed race, identity, and privilege when those factors were informing every one of our interactions?” Zemach-Bersin’s chagrin (some might say naïveté) over being viewed, time and again, as a privileged Westerner only supports our main contention: that the quality of our relations abroad largely depends on the consciousness we carry with us. Which is why the shortest route to global understanding may actually run through the lives of strangers at home.

Ecological Mindfulness

Until recently, one of the most neglected areas of ethical reflection in global study and service programs has been the relation of the traveler to the ecosphere. The natural world was generally perceived as trivial, merely the stage for the interplay of cultural actors, with no particular moral questions or obligations. This general disposition has begun to change. After nearly three decades of environmental advocacy, and especially with the release of Al Gore’s absorbing documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, more and more of us are considering the ecological consequences of our actions.

Indeed, one of those “inconvenient truths” is that global travel is closely linked with climate change. Few of us stop to consider the enormous amount of jet fuel required to fly us from home to that colorful or “unspoiled” location abroad. Airplanes travel in the sensitive upper troposphere and lower stratosphere, where they release a cocktail of greenhouse-gas emissions that currently accounts for about 13 percent of total transportation-sector emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂). A single trip from Toronto to Tokyo, for instance, produces over one ton of CO₂ *per passenger*. And this does not include the emissions from energy used in the airport buildings, facilities, baggage systems, airport service vehicles, concession facilities, aircraft fueling, airport construction, air navigation, and safety operations. “Fortunately for the climate,” writes Ian Jack (2006), “a lot of the world’s population is too poor to do much traveling at all.”

As the situation with atmospheric CO₂ worsens, it’s likely that national governments will be forced to impose some form of carbon tax or greenhouse-gas “allowance” in order to meet legally binding carbon-emissions-reduction targets. Until they do, respect for the aggregate rights of the biosphere calls us to embody personal lifestyles of restraint and frugality. “Love entails giving up at least some of our own interests and benefits for the sake of the well-being of others in communal relationships,” notes ethicist James Nash (1991). To some, the idea of yielding up even *some* of our travel privileges in order to safeguard the well-being of others sounds like wishful thinking. After all, don’t we have an indisputable “right” to travel, given sufficient time and money?

Ecological mindfulness calls us, first of all, to break through our obliviousness and indifference in relation to planet earth. It is, after all, our one and only home. Once this basic estrangement is healed we are in a position to weigh the educational benefits of our travel against the real harm done by it. This might lead us to ponder without denial or rationalization, whether the potential benefits justify the real costs. If we truly believe that global learning isn’t just about us, how do we balance the moral good of broadening our cultural horizons and enjoying the planet’s resources against the intrinsic rights of ecosystems and their associated life-forms?

I’m under no illusion that we can simply turn off our fossil-fuel-powered civilization and conserve our way to zero carbon emissions. At the same time, I’ve often wondered whether a greater “good” is achieved

by transporting a team of 15 Americans to Ghana for three weeks of service-learning at a local orphanage at a combined cost of \$35,000 and 40 tons of CO₂, when that same amount of money could support six full-time Ghanaians for an entire year without damaging the environment. I want to suppose that the intercultural encounters, together with exposure to a low-energy way of life, will significantly “globalize” the Americans’ thinking and “green” their lifestyles back home. But I know this is far from automatic. The far more common tendency is to eschew any personal responsibility or to adopt a childlike faith that, in the end, better fuels and technologies will save us.

Perhaps a more promising strategy would be to manipulate those program features, like length of term and size of group, that bias participants toward maximizing benefits and minimizing potentially harmful effects to all stakeholders. We can also address the enormous challenge of global climate change by flying carbon-neutral. Essentially this involves calculating our “carbon footprint” (the approximate amount of carbon dioxide created by our flights), and then buying “offsets” calculated to equal the amount of CO₂ created by the trip per passenger.² While some argue that such “offsets” merely allow us to buy indulgences for our sins of emission, others see them as an indispensable, though not sufficient, means of pumping money into renewable-energy projects and reducing fossil-fuel dependence.

At the point when we actually take up residence abroad, mindfulness requires that we retain our eco-sense. Tourism development is notorious for thoughtlessly “paving over paradise” and overusing scarce resources to meet the heavy water and energy demands of its patrons. In Phuket, Thailand, the fresh water needed for showers, toilets, baths, swimming pools, and golf courses at 10 of the largest hotels equals the water used by the entire local population of 250,000 (McLaren, 2003, pp. 86–87). We can help reverse this trend by opting to live with local families and learning to consciously adjust our level of water and power consumption toward the local standard. Here in Manila, my host family expects me to turn off any fans or lights that are not in use, to take “bucket” showers that use just a few scoops of water, and to hand wash and line dry my clothes. Adopting these new habits of restrained consumption serves as a constant reminder that my study or service site is someone else’s home, and that we all share a finite planet with exhaustible resources.

Spiritual Mindfulness

Every international sojourn brings us to a forking of paths. It can be yet one more “been there, done that” experience that pampers a spirit of pleasure and conquest. Or it can be something of a love story that romances our host community through empathetic acts of inquiry and caring. Spiritual mindfulness follows the latter path, inviting us to join local residents in pursuing insight and wholeness as a natural response to the spirit of life.

In most cities of the South, ethnic and religious heritages intermingle. Local residents manifest an enormous range of pieties and practices, both within particular religious traditions and at the interface between them. Each tradition has its own set of integrative norms that fundamentally influence their adherents’ attitudes toward personal virtue, family, community, ecology, and political authority. This pervasive religiosity may take some getting used to, especially if the idea of divine transcendence has been eclipsed by human autonomy. But if we are willing to maintain a principled openness to evidences of the sacred, the deep continuity of religious belief among native populations can present us with rare opportunities to discover practical wisdom and vital spiritual resources for cultivating a deeper, richer sense of self.

Unfortunately, most modern travelers carry a reputation for being outgoing but insular, largely unreceptive to sources of value and virtue outside themselves and their own cultural traditions. By now it should be obvious that an ethnocentric, our-way-is-the-best-way orientation ultimately contributes little to us as travelers, much less to our host communities. Not only does it leave us at arm’s length from some of the community’s most important sources of meaning; it also unwittingly reproduces the imperial error of a previous generation. The traders and missionaries of the colonial era were, according to David Bosch (1993),

predisposed not to appreciate the cultures of the people to whom they went—the unity of living and learning; the interdependence between individual, community, culture, and industry; the profundity of folk wisdom; the proprieties of traditional societies—all these were swept aside by a mentality shaped by the Enlightenment which tended to turn people into objects, reshaping the entire world into the image of the West, separating

humans from nature and from one another, and “developing” them according to Western standards and suppositions. (p. 294)

In a post-9/11 world, the margin of tolerance for repeating such errors has narrowed significantly. First world sojourners are especially at risk of being perceived as cultural imperialists interested only in extracting personal satisfactions from third world miseries. All the more reason why educational travel must dispose us, first of all, to seek out and welcome all reflections of truth, goodness, and beauty in the lives of those we meet. Reversing the natural tendency to denounce poorly understood ways of living, we stay poised to catch glimpses of the “holy” in even the most distressed places and peoples.

Imagine entering any one of the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) or *umjondolos* of Durban (South Africa) as part of a global-learning term. Immediately we would be immersed in physical and social realities as far removed from the landscape of automobile suburbs, sterile office complexes, and megamalls as can be. Our natural impulse, as curious outsiders, might be to treat the slum community as something of a tragic spectacle, something merely to feed our appetite for the bizarre.

But what if we were to find meaningful ways to connect with residents—playing billiards or soccer with the young men, participating in a storefront religious service, or volunteering in one of the area’s pre-schools? A self-aggrandizing and impersonal “poverty tour” might suddenly take on deeply human dimensions as we enter into the resilience, communal bonds, and spiritual vitality of those struggling against the insecurity of their environment. “In the slums of Dhaka,” reports Jeremy Seabrook (1995), “there is an attempt to teach literacy to 60,000 adults. In the late evening, by the smoky flare of kerosene lamps, rag-pickers, brick workers, domestic servants, child laborers, and rickshaw-pullers meet to learn and to share their lives. They are delighted when others try to understand what motivates them” (p. 23).

By generously serving alongside people of different faiths but like passion, we share in the difficult but deeply rewarding task of making the world a better place to live. This shared commitment also provides the context for thinking much more clearly about ourselves in relation to other people and the root issues affecting their lives. Jackie’s experience of having her cultural complacencies unsettled through serving alongside

residents of a rural community in El Salvador suggests the transformative potential:

Now I look at things through different eyes. Things I do and even things I buy, things I say, even just talking with people. And on the big level of what I am going to do with my life . . . I have been saying over and over that the people are not just numbers anymore. The poor are no longer just statistics. They have names and faces. They are friends. (Yonkers-Talz, n.d.)

Like Jackie, we might find that the initial confidence we exercise in commencing a journey abroad may unexpectedly evolve into a deeper unknowing. Everything may appear much more complex and less cut-and-dried than before. This is, after all, the genius of educational travel. As it arouses our passion and fascination with the unknown world, it also engages us in a constructive questioning of assumptions regarding our place in it. We find that there are no easy answers, especially as we face off with economic and political forces beyond our direct control. Grand, heroic acts are not necessary to participate in the process of change. Small acts, conducted in hope and with a certain mindfulness of our effect on a structurally unequal world, can quietly help to usher in a brighter future.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the largely unintended impacts—both positive and negative—of international travel?
2. Explain *why* certain negative impacts occur and what you can do to minimize the negative and maximize the positive impacts. What, specifically, will you do to journey mindfully?

Notes

1. Resources for deciphering the mechanisms of power and privilege include “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies,” by P. McIntosh, 1992, in

M. L. Anderson & P. H. Collins (Eds.), *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology* (pp. 70–82), Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (2nd ed.), by A. Johnson, 2005, New York: McGraw-Hill; and *White Like Me: Reflections on Race From a Privileged Son*, by T. Wise, 2004, New York: Soft Skull Press.

2. One of the best websites for calculating flight emissions, and then “neutralizing” them through community projects, is <http://www.carbonneutral.com/cncalculators/flightcalculator.asp>.

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