

Before I left for the United Kingdom, I was told that studying abroad would provide me with the opportunity to take a step back from every-day life in the United States. Then, I could truly appreciate the bigger picture that is our world.

Of course, I can now confirm that this statement is all good and true. However, what I did not expect were the countless leaps forward into the every-day lives of amazingly unique people. My time abroad gave me the chance to look closely at some of the incredible pieces that make up that bigger picture of our world.

Out there, right at this moment, is someone who's life story would blow our minds. They could be sitting right next to you in the coffee shop you're in. They could be sitting in a coffee shop halfway around the world. They could be wandering through an airport looking to get a parking permit validated. They could be sitting alone in a cemetery watching visitors walk by. They could be dancing alone in a night club. I hope to use this blog to tell the stories of those I meet.

This post is about the one sitting alone in the cemetery –

First, a little backstory about where I was and what I was doing:

In February, I made a decision that I would like to think any study abroad student would probably make – I blew a significant chunk of my scholarship money on a trip to Dublin, Ireland for St. Patrick's Day. After a few grueling weeks of boiled rice, steamed vegetables, and Tesco Meal Deals due to my lack of grocery funds, I hopped on a far too crowded bus with a far too expensive ticket so I could board a far too cold boat and sail to a far too far land.

Was it worth it? Absolutely.

Quick side note of something I, as an American in Ireland, found interesting:

St. Patrick's Day in Ireland was amazing. It's a bit difficult to explain, but once you've gotten decently settled into your study abroad experience, you begin to forget that you're not in America anymore. You become accustomed to your surroundings. Then, every once in a while, Europe slaps you across the face. The St. Patrick's Day parade definitely left its mark. As I stood waiting in the cold rain (of course it always rains in Ireland) for the parade floats to pass by, I excitedly envisioned something akin to the Macy's Day Parade – Santa Clause, Pikachu, Mr. Potato Head. It's American tradition to watch cute floats pass by as they promote something a company is trying to sell you, whether it be tickets to the next Kung Fu Panda movie, or a new special edition Care Bear. Ireland doesn't try to sell you anything. Ireland's parade floats aren't cute Smurfs or Muppets. Ireland uses its parade floats to portray stories in ancient Irish folklore. Ireland's parade floats are demons. Historically significant demons. I looked up at papier mâché characters with sunken eyes and mermaid tails. Marching bands would pass by wearing masks with fiendish grins. I'll put up some pictures here courtesy of Alan Betson from the Irish Times

(his photos are unarguably better than mine). I wish I could tell you the significance behind this folklore, but I never had the chance to find out for myself.







The parade was just as interesting as it was unexpectedly terrifying.

Now, on to Martin and his Tapestry of Life:

Dublin, Ireland is in no shortage of things to do. The city is filled with hundreds of vibrant, fun-filled attractions – The Guinness Storehouse, Irish pubs, Phoenix Park, and the Botanical Gardens. On the other side of the vibrant coin of sightseeing, there is the Glasnevin Cemetery – the first officially catholic burial ground in Ireland; home to 1.5 million internments within close to 126 acres. I chose to pay it a visit.

A quick bus ride dropped me off to the cemetery entrance. It took about two steps in for my mind to start whirling about what I was looking at. Imagine standing on top of the Empire State Building and looking down at the vast Manhattan expanse. Now replace all of those sky scrapers with tomb stones. That's what it looked like, if that makes sense. It was overcast (of course), and the grass was incredibly green (no doubt, it was uniquely fertilized) wherever stained slabs of eroding concrete didn't permeate the ground. Here and there, you would spot the kind of tree which you would only see in a graveyard. Gnarled, twisted, trunks, with branches groping towards the sky. As if the spirits of the buried were soaked up through the roots and helplessly reaching towards heaven. It was eerie, but the beautiful kind of eerie. Everything here was at rest. Or, almost everything.

"Louvely place, innit?" were the first words I heard from the side of the pathway. It was an older man wearing an oversized high visibility jacket, large boots, and thick black hoodie. A local undertaker, I thought.

"Of course, it's absolutely beautiful," I replied, struggling to comprehend what was the thickest Irish accent I had ever heard.

"Would you loike far me ta show you araund?" he asked, perhaps a little too quickly after my response. Free tour? Sure. I complied.

Then, out came his notebook. It was an old, tattered, thick, yellow, notebook with hundreds of misshapen pages within it. Etched haphazardly on top was:

"THE TAPESTRY OF LIFE"

"E're we are den," he said as he cracked the book open. Yet without looking at the contents of the page he had just opened his notebook to, he began to lead me to a tombstone. "Great stuff, great stuff," he muttered to himself as we tread over the burial grounds.

"E're's one of mi favorites." He points to a small dilapidated slab of limestone. "Poor woman who doid buy gonshot in 1916 while lookin' out 'er window. There was a revolution ya see? And dis one right 'ere is next to it is unmarked. 38 children killed in the same revolution."

As he spoke with me, he would pause between every few words to lick his fingers and flip through the pages of his notebook. He maintained eye contact throughout all of this, never looking down at the pages he would slide his hands across. I managed a glance at the pages. Every single one was covered in nearly illegible scribbles. Through the furious finger licking flipping of pages, I saw small glimpses of photographs. Some colored, some black and white, some ripped and dirtied. There were dates, maps, arrows, names, numbers, everything. Here and there between tattered pages were newspaper clippings, yellowed with age, some even slightly singed at the corners. The next 30 minutes progressed similarly. I was shown the graves of singers and writers, medics and mercenaries, revolutionaries and oppressors. He excitedly explained the history behind each and every slab of limestone, concrete, and marble in hushed tones. All the while licking his fingers and flipping his pages. I began to realize that these numbered scribbles in this man's notebook were notes pertaining to all of the graves we walked past. He presents to me the grave of a man shot dead in an Irish uprising, then the grave of the said revolutionary's son, similarly shot in an uprising, and finally the grave of the revolutionary's grandson, also shot dead. At the bottom of each page in the man's notebook were the words "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

I was following a man who had documented the history of a graveyard with up to 1.5 million graves. I needed to say something.

"Excuse me, I noticed that you've written down all this information about each grave. This is incredible. How long have you been working here?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't work 'ere... I live 'ere," he replied.

"What?"

"Been 'ere since eight years old."

"How?"

"Mi mum used to take me 'ere every sonday. I grew up lovin' it."

"Really?"

"Some lot like to play on the beach in their bikinis and whatnot. I liked to play in the graveyard and think about the history. I have a spot here where I like to sit. I can face the port and listen to the water. I love the sound of the water. I watch the gulls come in the marnin' and then the crows come towards the night. I love the nature and the trees and the birds singin'. The graveyard is my playground."

"How did you come across all of this information? How did you put it together? Google?"

“Nah I don’t use those laptops and things. Bits and pieces. I collect bits and pieces here and there. People come by and I walk with ‘em. They give me bits and pieces. I found old newspapers. They give me bits and pieces. Books and things. Bits and pieces.”

My mind couldn’t comprehend the dedication that this man had to have had in order to piece together hundreds of pages of information. He was alone. He sat here every day collecting his bits and pieces. He dedicated his life to the dead.

“You are honestly one of the most incredible people I’ve ever met.” I managed to say.

His response – “Well, thanks for letting me show ya around!” He turns and begins to abruptly walk away at a brisk pace.

My mind was reeling. I needed a picture. I needed contact information. He needed to be documented. He needed his story to be told at some point by someone who has more in their writing portfolio than this blog. There needs to at least be a BuzzFeed article about this guy. I wanted at least a name. I call out to him as he’s walking away – “What’s your name?!”

A pause. No response. Then he looks back for a second:

“Oh... I’m Martin!”

I lose sight of him behind a sea of graves.

It starts to rain. I head home.

If ever you find yourself in the Glasnevin Cemetery of Dublin, Ireland, I highly encourage you to walk to the far north east side of the grounds. There, you’ll find a spot where you can sit facing the port and listen to the sound of the water. There you can watch the gulls come in the mornin’ and then the crows come towards the night. And there, hopefully, you’ll find a man who dedicates his life to the dead – Martin, and his Tapestry of Life.