

Student Work

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Letters from SPICE

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Letters from SPICE

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2017

Ashley Huizinga

During my Study Program in Central Europe (SPICE) last semester, I spent many assignment hours on reflections for my Culture and Society class. Some of those reflections took the form of letters—written to my past self, future self, past SPICE students, my parents, my Dutch ancestors, etc. Here, I've selected a few of those letters from a compilation I made for my final assignment.

Dear past self,

So, Studies Program in Contemporary Europe? You might not know what that is yet. You probably think “Europe, cool”, but you might not know that you'll be exploring and adventuring there very, very soon. **You can't imagine the places you'll go, the people you'll meet, the languages you'll hear** in Reykjavik (that was definitely Icelandic), Zwolle (“Nederlands”), Aachen (German and Bulgarian), Rome (Italian), Paris (French), in a little Asian restaurant in Italy (Korean), from a fellow SPICE student (Hungarian), and in the three *Night at the Museum* movies that you're going to watch all in one night (Egyptian Arabic and whatever Attila the Hun spoke). By the time you're 22, **you'll have walked the streets of 8 countries and eaten Korean food in 4 of them** (the States, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands). Someday, you'll be drinking chai tea with cinnamon and faking a British accent on the train while you talk to a Canadian nursing student about what it feels like to be in labor and how much you don't know about *Lord of the Rings*.

You won't be what you once were. But that's okay. Also, you still won't like coffee, so don't even bother.

Dear Dutch ancestors,

Your distant descendants here are still as blunt and honest as the **stereotypes** claim they always were, and yet the Dutch people are so polite as to make things notoriously difficult for English speakers trying to learn the Dutch language. **The culture you left behind still values honesty, transparency, and authenticity.**

I can't imagine **what it was like to move** across an uncharted ocean to an unknown country with nothing to tie you to the land you left except the memories of those you left behind. **I moved** across a charted ocean, to a country I'm able to research on the internet in seconds, with a cell phone, Facebook, email address, and plane ticket for the flight home. That doesn't even compare, really.

Because you did choose to uproot your lives and begin anew elsewhere, I was born in the very Dutch area of West Michigan. I grew up *surrounded* by others of Dutch descent (I didn't actually meet an African American until I was in college, in an almost-equally Dutch area of Sioux County in Iowa). I sport the blonde hair and blue eyes of a Hollander, but the Huizinga genes failed me height-wise, and I've been a stubborn 5'7" for a few years now. I'm half-Dutch-blooded, half-English-blooded, a little German, and a dash of Irish. Figure that one out.

I'm sure it's not easy to imagine. But it's pretty fascinating that **I'm alive in this moment and can track my lineage back to a tiny country** across the whale-road, if you think about it.

Dear the Netherlands [at least, what I thought the Netherlands was],

The Netherlands (“Nederland”). Windmills, wooden shoes, tulips, parades decked out in the color orange (“oranje”),

Delft blue plates in every household, sheep and farmland and bridges over canals. Prostitutes on the street corners of Amsterdam, coffee shops in the cities, flags of LGBTQ pride flying high. These were **the images that came to mind when I thought of the Netherlands**. In imagining Europe, I drew up pictures of castles, rolling green landscapes, museums, and graveyards of war crosses. **I didn't expect what I found, and I didn't find what I expected**. I found instead fewer sheep and more water, no tulips (yet), and Delft blue knick-knacks only in the souvenir shops and secondhand stores. I saw my first pair of wooden shoes on a construction worker, but only after more than two weeks here. I haven't seen any castles, although the ruins of Zwolle's city wall set dreams dancing in my head of epic sieges and heroic battles, with armies of knights and archers storming the city's gates. Still, **there's so much to discover about the history and current events of this country: people to meet, tourist spots to frequent, obscure fishing towns on the coast to visit, food to try** (particularly "herring"). From now on, I expect the unexpected. The internet doesn't have *all* the answers.

Dear former SPICE students,

You warned me **that this semester involves a lot of thinking, writing, and self-reflection**. You warned me not to spend every weekend travelling and to take the opportunity to **connect with my host family** whenever possible. You warned me not to spend so much time with my head back in the happenings at home that I forgot about **living in the moment here**. You warned me that there would be a lot of bread with cheese, and that Dutch food isn't the kind of spicy or flavorful cuisine that people imagine with they think of the word "cuisine". You warned me that I would bike to school in the rain sometimes.

But you also told me stories about visiting places I'd only read about in books. **I haven't and won't see everything I want to see, but you've told me that's actually okay**, especially because we're college students attending a pretty expensive private institution and we don't have the money for going around the world in 80 days. You told me to **take advantage of the group here** and to make use of other Americans in the same situation when I needed people to talk to.

Although, you didn't tell me to try kibbeling (delicious). You didn't tell me the value of visiting the little towns just to walk around (Giethoorn and Geldrop). You didn't tell me how expensive it is to visit the bar every Thursday, or why university students go out to the bars on Thursdays instead of Fridays. **You didn't tell me I might not be able to mesh well with the group**, or that half of the people on SPICE would seem to be here just to drink and travel instead of classes or spending time with distant family. You didn't tell me I would be **confronted with situations** like this, and **that I would learn more about myself and others from those circumstances that I could have ever imagined**.

You didn't tell me everything, but that's alright. I won't tell future SPICE students everything, either. Half the fun, I guess, is figuring it out yourself. Like learning how white the world gets when every tree and canal is blanketed in snow, or how blue the sky can be on a clear, cloudless Sunday in April...

Dear self,

I hope you're **studying your Dutch well**. This is a **once-in-a-lifetime opportunity** to study Dutch within a Dutch realm, and you had better be taking advantage of that. You wrote so much in an earlier reflection about *desiring* to learn Dutch, and after three months here, you should have enough reasons why. Of course, it helps that you look Dutch, so people tend to assume (more often than not) than you can speak the language. Doesn't it feel awesome when Hollanders – strangers – speak to you in Dutch? Doesn't it feel like **you might be able to belong here** as long as you were given enough time to do so, and as long as you could pull off the threads tying you to Michigan and Iowa (because that's what's been holding you back the most while you've been here)? You would probably learn

best in a forced immersion language environment, but that's not what the Netherlands offers anymore. Work with what you have, even if that means making mistakes (which you hate) and expecting patience from your conversation partner (they *will* help you).

Your **strengths** are your relationships to others and your sensitivity to the emotions of others. You have a strength of character and opinion, but you need to be more assertive about them. After years of side-lining friend groups, you've developed a **sense of self and of inclusivity** – use those to improve the lives of those around you, wherever you are. Even if it's just making someone's day.

Dear future self,

I hope you **remember** everything.

I hope you still know that Henrico likes watching the news every evening, visits the Centrum for bread early every Saturday morning, and someday dreams of flying out to America with the family to build a house for you and your future husband (if you've **married for money**, of course). I hope you remember that Hilde can cook anything, and that she likes chocolate-covered food, whiskey cream, and laughing about the latest adorable but naughty thing Elize managed to do today. If you recall, Lucas used to dislike biking, but he loved pop music, Clash Royale, and being the first to finish his dessert at dinner (the Dutch word for "first" is "eerst"). I wonder if he still does? I wonder if you remember that Jesse was really shy when you were a stranger, but that he eventually started to practice his English with you. He might still enjoy playing chess, volleyball, making jokes in Dutch that you can't understand, and reading comic books about Donald Duck. I hope you remember that Jasmijn likes volleyball, flower headbands, drawing things with two heads, stickers, and repeating English phrases. I hope Elize still likes attention, having her hair done, swimming, naming the colors of things in English, riding Henrico's bike to church, and "baking".

I hope you look back on the pictures and remember every moment, even when you can't remember the names of places or which ceiling goes with which church (*so many churches*).

Also, **I hope you found your family history by now**. You'll need a list of places to visit **when you go back**, of course.

I'll end this particular "travel diary" (if you could call it that) with one of my favorite travel quotes. J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote, "Don't adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry on the story." Maybe I'll continue carrying on this story. Maybe you will. Who knows?