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## Mind Full: A Journey to Find Inner Peace

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## *Prologue*

Spring semester of my junior year in college I studied abroad in Europe. Studying abroad was something I had always dreamed of doing since high school. The first time I learned about study abroad was in my college mentorship program at UCLA. We had a presentation on what it meant to study abroad and the opportunities that were available in college. So when I got to LMU it was something that was in the back of my mind my first two years, but it wasn't until my third year in college that I got the courage to apply. I applied the first semester of my Junior year in September 2014, was accepted into the program a month later in October 2014, and found myself on a plane two months after that in January 2016 on my way to what is known as the birthplace of the Renaissance: Florence, Italy. A few months before I left abroad, I bought Elizabeth Gilbert's famous book *Eat Pray Love*. At first, I thought it would be a fun read since I was heading to Italy. In her book Elizabeth, "Liz," is going through a messy divorce so she decides to leave to Italy, Indonesia and India in search of purpose. Although I can't say that I was going through the same trials that she was, this was the inspiration that would help me find my own purpose.

I'm a little nervous. I've flown alone before but this time it feels a little different. I think it's because I've never traveled by myself for such a long period of time let alone this far. I don't know what I should be expecting. All I have with me are my things, my host family's address and about 100 euros. It's about 10:00pm Los Angeles time and we took off about an hour ago. I will arrive in Paris in the morning and then take an hour flight to Florence. The flight is about ten hours total so I brought with me Elizabeth Gilbert's *EAT PRAY LOVE* in hopes that I will finish reading it. So far it has taken me about three months to get through the first 30 pages. This isn't because the book isn't interesting but I just haven't found the time in between assignments and tests to squeeze in some reading. Bookmarked is page 32. I pick up where I last left. Liz has just arrived in Italy...

### **January. EAT**

Sometimes I wonder what has made me so paranoid, why I always think something bad is going to happen. This morning we hopped on a train to Venice. Venice is about three hours away. I'm traveling with Grace and we are meeting everyone else when we get there. I try to get cozy in my seat to take a nap. We're traveling Trenitalia, the main train in Italy. This man keeps walking up and down the aisle. I feel a little uneasy and wonder why he is doing that. As much as I try to not pay attention and focus on going to sleep I can feel my heartbeat in my chest getting louder and faster as if I had no control over my body. I feel my breath getting short and find it hard to pull in air. I don't know why I feel like this. The feeling as if something bad is going to happen.

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It was two days after we arrived in Florence when we first got news of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks. The Paris terrorist attacks which killed eleven people at a kosher market and satirical newspaper company would only add to my extreme paranoia of being in an unknown country. Prior to studying abroad my only image of Europe was what I had seen in movies, such as *Taken*. In my mind Europe was unsafe, a place where something bad, such as being kidnapped could happen. I began my study abroad experience terrified that something would happen to me while I was away from home, while I was away from my family.

When I first arrived in Florence I thought I just didn't fit into the group of students I was studying abroad with and blamed my feelings of unhappiness on this. Florence is the home of over 20 American university study abroad programs composing over 2000 American students every semester. I felt overwhelmed by the size and demographics of the program's participants. I hated being around so many Americans. I felt like my experience would not be the genuine Italian

experience I had gone for. This made me grow resentment towards many of my peers. My mind began to cultivate a sense of hate for any reason it could find. I would hate them for having money, for traveling, for going out to bars or out to eat without batting an eye. At first I tried normalizing my feelings by telling myself that I felt this way because I didn't come from an affluent family. I remember my first worry when I arrived abroad was making sure the money my family and I had saved up would last me throughout my entire trip. My feelings of unhappiness and my growing feelings of resentment got the best of me my first few weeks. I would let my frustrations out on the people that were closest to me such as my roommates. I felt alone. All I remember was wishing that I could be back at home with people who understood me.

These mixed feelings of paranoia and unhappiness continued for about the next month and half. I felt as if I had absolutely no control over my mind or body. It was as if my thoughts had a will of their own and I was just there in complacent observance. I would be on my way to another new and beautiful city but the only room that my mind left space for was paranoia. Negative feelings such as fear would come up when a stranger would walk by or feelings as if something were about to happen to me. I believe these emotions affected me the most because I have always prided myself on being very self dependent. My independence and self-drive were some of my own favorite qualities and now that I was in an unknown place it was as if that entire sense of self was stripped away from me. I dealt with this in a different way than Liz did. She ate Italian food for pleasure and while I felt like I was doing the same, it was more of a temporary fix to a deeper problem.

### **February/March. PRAY**

When I began to notice my mood changing drastically and noticing that everyone around me was enjoying their study abroad experience something inside told me it was I who had to change. Liz was now heading to India in search for her guru at an Indian meditation temple known as an Ashram. After her first four months of pleasure in Italy she knew she was still missing something. I knew I was missing something. Just as Liz got up and left Italy I knew I had to also get up and take control of my life and my experience. This was my one experience abroad and I knew I couldn't give up on it. My idea of meditation came from Liz's experience with meditation. To me meditation is kind of like prayer. A prayer to yourself, a prayer to your heart. And similar to prayer, it is something you must do often to notice a difference. So I began to pray.

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I've been trying this meditation thing for about 2 weeks now and I don't really notice a difference. Sometimes I forget but when I remember I always make sure to remember the purpose of my meditation, to find self tranquility. Today I took an afternoon walk and stopped at la Feltrinelli a bookstore in Florence's downtown area. I come across a book called *Search Inside Yourself* by author Chade Meng Tan. It seems to be a book for people looking for a practical way to meditate so I decide to buy it. As I get home I am excited to begin reading this new book even though I haven't finished Liz's story just yet, but I'm excited to pick up the practice of meditation alongside her. I learn about the practice of mindfulness. A meditative practice that focuses on the present moment.

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I find myself on a train once again. This time I am headed to Pisa in order to catch a flight to Paris for my spring break. Again, I notice my body and mind getting agitated. Thoughts quickly pop into my mind that something could go wrong. Thoughts of a possible terrorist attack or a strangers hurting me flash in my mind with vivid images. I close my eyes. I remember what Chade Meng Tan says. He says that our practice begins with self observation. I began to scan my body and my mind and observe how I feel. My breathing is heavy and my skin feels tight because of the nerves. I notice and I accept it. A practice of mindfulness according to Tan starts with a nonjudgmental mind and that all begins with being nonjudgmental about our own selves. So I observe my feelings and tell myself that it is okay for me to feel this way, but I also tell myself that it is okay for me not to worry and to simply enjoy my trip. I breathe in once again, this time with a slower breath. I feel the air around me fill my lungs as if they were being cleansed of negative energy. I remember Liz's process of meditation and proudly realize that I have just begun my own.

### **April. LOVE**

Liz has left India and gone to her final destination--Indonesia. I realize that it is now April the final month in my Europe destination. It is my birthday this weekend and we are headed to Greece. We spend our first weekend of April traveling because of Easter break. I have spent the last two months developing a daily practice of meditation. It has been a difficult process with so much to do in including school work, volunteering, and travel planning. However, carving out a time each day to dedicate to myself has proven to be very rewarding. It is something I look forward to each night after dinner. I find an open space and sit cross legged and let my mind go into a state of meditation. At first this was hard because my mind would begin to wander, but the more and more I practiced the

easier it became. I first began in sitting meditation for about 1 minute each night. Now that it is April I can sit in a state of mindful consciousness for about 7 minutes.

A few days before leaving to Greece I was sitting in my daily night time practice. Listening to the binaural beats that help me with concentration and feeling the earth's breath fill my lungs with each breath I took. Then it came. This final moment of liberation. I felt everything go free. It was like this great pressure in my mind was finally released. It was indescribable. It was like nothing could hold my mind back anymore. It felt like someone had blown the breathe of life that I was looking for back into me. When we boarded the plane for Greece all I could feel was excitement. When we arrived I knew something was different within myself. I saw colors in their brightness, food tasted as good as ever, smells seemed like the fragrances of life.

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I was no longer seeing my days as ones that were dragging by slowly but as days that were beautiful in each moment. I learned to be present and enjoy each second. My idea of meditation came from a book. A simple book that I was reading for fun. A book that I would later find to be my salvation. Looking back I realize that a feeling of loneliness in my mind overpowered me. My time alone gave me a chance to reflect on things I had never done so before. I found myself to be so alone in my thoughts that I began to think about the way I was thinking. When I began my meditations this helped me because I would reflect on the way I was thinking and the way in which my mind was creating thoughts and ideas. I now look back on my experience abroad as an experience that has given me a sense of liberation, a new mindset and a new outlook on life by helping me see beauty in every experience and moment. It has helped me love the woman that has come out of this experience. It has made me resilient to new environments. It has helped me become more self-aware and self-understanding. It has made me a more compassionate person as I continue working in my daily practice with hopes to achieve full mindfulness. With a sense of peace I can now say my experience abroad was the biggest blessing I could receive.

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*“Somewhere within us all, there does exist a supreme self who is eternally at peace”*—Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*