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1. I really didn't know what to expect as I flew into Pau, France. Thankfully my host mom was waiting for me outside of baggage claim and she could probably tell by the baggy clothes and the dazed look on my face that it was me, the American. She welcomed me kindly into the town and drove me back to their house so that I could rest. I certainly needed it after over 20 hours of traveling and little food or sleep. The grey skies didn't replenish any of my energy, but off in the foggy distance, the sight of the Pyrenees mountains (les Pyrénées) excited me.

The first month lasted an eternity—each day was jam-packed with new vocabulary, new customs, new surroundings, new people. In each interaction I had with the French, I was highly aware of my American accent and always wishing that I'd studied more vocabulary before coming. It wasn't easy and I missed home a lot, but there was something that got me going each day. In the United States, it's easy for me to get comfortable and to fall into routine habits. But instead of this foreign "out of place" feeling preventing me from immersing myself into new habits and new relationships, it actually fueled this immersion. It's as if I was searching for something that would make me feel at home. I don't think I ever did find it, but I discovered lots along the way that would give me a great appreciation for the French culture and that would leave me wanting more.

2. I hiked and sang in the mountains, climbed castles, and explored ancient cities and cathedrals from all eras. My friends back home went crazy for the pictures that I sent to them. As surreal as this all was, however, I learned the most about France with my friends from the University of Pau and with my host family. The cultural ideals in the U.S. are very different from those in France. Over there, abortion will always be a right for women, guns will never be allowed for self defense, and health care will always be free for their citizens. These are core beliefs that are undisputed by the French, and those are just a few that grabbed my attention.

One of the largest differences that I saw was in France's "laïcité," or secularism. They draw a sharp line between government and religion, so much so that you are not allowed to wear religious symbols, such as a Christian cross or a Muslim hijab, at any public school. The "recruiting" or advertising for religious organizations that occurs at UW- Eau Claire would never happen in France. This is one of the reasons that a large amount of French youth identifies with atheism. I'm not saying that laïcité is good or bad, but it is certainly different from our culture and it has a profound effect on France.

Another idea made itself apparent to me after a tragedy unraveled in Paris. On November 13th, terrorists opened fire on a café, a rock concert, and a sports stadium, killing 130 people. Even though I was on the other side of France, I expected these attacks to take a big toll on the people around me. What I saw, however, were people carrying on quite normally with their lives. My language professor did address the topic and even took the first two hours of that next Monday morning to discuss it, but she explained that the French wanted to fight back by enjoying life even more than before. They were going to fight back by loving, drinking, and laughing with their friends. Although they considered cancelling it, my host family's choir concert that I participated in still went on as scheduled and we sang to a full room of people just a day after the

attacks. This gave me a deep appreciation for the French spirit that, although can be sarcastic and pessimistic at times, knows how to enjoy life fervently.

3. As I mentioned before, France grants free healthcare to all of its citizens, along with other benefits like (practically) free education and unemployment aid. These are supported by taxes that Americans couldn't fathom, but, to the French, it's normal for the government to hold lots of power. Generally, they trust the government to use their money to help the citizens in the best ways it can. Taxes that range from 12%-45% give the government lots of flexibility. Students can actually go to college for approximately 400 euros (~450 dollars) per year, including their textbooks. In most U.S. colleges, that amount might just cover a student's books.

The French government also places certain restrictions on its citizens. One of the greatest examples of this is that their "free speech" isn't necessarily as free as ours. It is actually illegal to say things that encourage hatred towards people because of their race, sexual identity, or disability. And, oddly enough, the government has the right to refuse a baby's name if they believe it to cause harm to the child's future.

Through all the pleasures and displeasures that come from the French institutions of power, the trust that the French place in their government is remarkable. It has shown me that a highly centralized government can lead a happy country.

4. As horrible as they were, the attacks of the 13th of November provided a great learning opportunity for me. In support of France, countries around the world sent out messages of hope as they lit their monuments with the blue, red, and white national colors. As my language professor talked with us about the events, she pointed out that the U.S. has been a friend of France for many years, through wars and other tough times. She said that France might not always show it, but they really do appreciate our support. This goes against the stereotype that I heard a few times before coming over that the French dislike Americans.

It wasn't just the lights on the World Trade Center spire and on San Francisco's City Hall that showed American support for France at this time, but also the support messages extended on social media from American citizens. My language professor greatly appreciated this as well, but when she heard Donald Trump's message, she wasn't so pleased. Apparently, he was saying that the Parisians would have been saved had they been allowed their own guns for self-defense. After hearing this, my professor half-joked and half-warned us, "If you elect him President, we're not going to be friends with you guys anymore."

5. Before I left for France, I heard that, just through being there and being immersed in the culture, I would become "fluent" in the French language. As the weeks ticked on, however, I realized this wasn't the case. Although I was putting myself out there entirely and speaking with French friends whenever I had the opportunity, I was touched by a hint of nerves whenever I spoke. And it wasn't just speaking that gave me difficulties, but I also felt nervous whenever I anticipated having to respond to a question. This impeded my listening abilities because instead of listening calmly, I would worry about not understanding. I yearned for close connections with new friends, but it proved to be too difficult. Often times, I felt more clueless or even bothersome rather than feeling like I was enjoyable company.

Thinking back on this now, I realize that it was completely okay. I was experiencing the nerves of being the outsider, like all immigrants coming into the U.S.

must feel at the beginning. There is a process that must be followed through in order to achieve language (and cultural) understanding and fluency. If I had spent more time there, my progression surely would have gotten faster and I would have started to feel more like a part of the community. This uncomfortable experience gave me a new perspective, and now I have a greater appreciation for the effort that immigrants coming into the U.S. have to make, especially those that do not speak English. Now, hopefully I can be a better advocate for immigrants in the U.S. and encourage patience on the American side by explaining the difficulties that they must face trying to assimilate into our culture.

6. I had a friend while I was in France with whom I spoke French and she spoke English. We got together a few times over the course of my stay. Remarkably and unexpectedly, at the end of the semester, she thanked me for being so patient with her as she practiced English. I hadn't realized it, but I was making a big difference in her life by giving her the opportunity to experience a culture different from her own.

This experience abroad hasn't necessarily changed my life goals, but it has energized me and will continue to boost me forward in my pursuit of becoming a French teacher. I have always been one to see the "other side of the story," and as I go forward I want to reveal to others new perspectives that they haven't before considered and help students discover a world outside of their own. I hope to be a catalyst for global connections that not only makes others curious about the rest of the world but also makes them consider changes that can make their own country better. Personally, I'm always searching for ways to make an impact, something that future generations can remember me by. I think this is one area in which I can start a ripple effect that reaches the other side of the globe.



My host dad, Philippe, on our September trip through the Pyrenees.

This is one of my favorite memories from my time in France. As we hiked upwards for hours, he told me stories from his childhood about trips that he would take with his 4 brothers and his dad through these mountains. Although we're 40 years apart and our native languages are different, we connected that day through his language and through one of the most magnificent sites that southern France offers.



The top of the castle in Lourdes, southern France.

As I looked over this holy city, which has seen centuries of European history, I realized that I was seeing something magical. There's history in France that our young country can't imagine. And more than this, I felt that this image depicted the "new perspective" that I was starting to understand. There really is a world greater than the little one that I knew. There are so many stories that I have yet to learn.