

This I Believe

My name is Sarah, and I spent the fall semester studying abroad in London. Those of you who have studied abroad, and those of you who are going through the start-up process, know that you have to fill out a lot of forms and applications before leaving. And there's this one question that seems to pop up in each one: "What do you hope to get out of your study abroad experience?" I put down the standard responses: I want to travel, get some job experience, meet new people. But there was this other phrase I kept throwing around. I kept saying that I "hoped to become a more independent person." I didn't really realize it at the time, but I think that was code for, "I hope my time in London will turn me into a grown-up."

I know that sounds silly, but I think that when we're kids we get this idea that being an adult means having a job and your own place to live, cooking all your own meals, taking trips by yourself, cleaning your bathroom, paying your taxes. And, minus the taxes, I was going to have a chance to do all that in London. So I had a vision of myself becoming this amazingly self-sufficient person who cooked fabulous meals, could navigate London like a pro, and rocked the world at her internship. And so, you can imagine my surprise when exactly one week after arriving in the UK, I found myself standing awkwardly in a corner of my flat, watching as an officer from the forensics squad of the London Metropolitan Police dusted my window for fingerprints. You see, I hadn't closed it securely and someone had managed to tamper with it while I was out of the room, reach in, and empty the purse I had left sitting on the chair under the sill. Fortunately for me, my credit cards and passport were safe, they hadn't been in that bag. So I was just out a wallet, some cash, my driver's license, and a two small electronics. Still, I felt this crushing sense of failure. I'd only been there for a week and already I'd messed up so spectacularly at something as simple as closing a window.

Now I'm not telling this story to scare anyone away from going to London. If it were up to me, I would make sure that every person in this room got to go there at least once in their lifetime. It is an amazing place, and I truly believe that it is one of the safest cities I have ever been in. But... it isn't Pella, and you have to be careful about things like closing windows when you leave the room.

Anyway, after I had talked to the police, made all the proper calls, and filled out the paperwork, I was left feeling really overwhelmed and defeated. But the next day, Abdul, the guy who worked the front desk of my building, stopped me as I was leaving. He said that the officers who had interviewed me the day before had stopped by that morning and left something for me. He handed me a bag, and inside I found an alarm for my window and a personal alarm I could carry around in my purse with me. London is a city of 8 million people, and the borough I lived in is home to almost 200,000. The Met Police must deal with thousands of calls a day, but these two officers had taken the time to stop by and give this gift to me, someone they hardly knew, just to make sure I felt safe and welcome.

And they weren't the only ones. I got a flood of messages of love and encouragement from people back home. The other students in my program, some of whom I'd only known for a week, kept giving me hugs, taking me out places, and making me laugh. And I began to wonder if maybe my perception of growing up was wrong. Maybe being an adult isn't about doing it all on your own, but realizing that we *all* make mistakes sometimes. Maybe it means accepting those mistakes, learning from them, and realizing that it is okay to ask for help and support when you need it. Maybe being an adult means having the courage to allow the people around you to pick you up when you fall and also celebrate with you when you succeed.

I learned this lesson over and over again during the wonderful four months I spent in London. Random strangers on the Tube were there to physically catch me when I almost did a face plant on the Piccadilly line, and my travel buddies kept me from freaking out when the cobblestones in Florence *almost* destroyed my camera. My friends were also there to buy me a plate of bangers and mash on my birthday, soak in the beauty of choral evensong with me, gaze in awe at the Christmas lights that covered the city, and jump for joy when I got tickets to see one of my favorite actors perform in a musical in Southwark. I am proud to say that I did become a more independent person during my time abroad, and I made a lot of great memories on my own. But my favorite memories are the ones I built with my friends, my coworkers, my fellow Tube commuters, and Constables Adam and Steve. In London, I learned that while I may be my own person, I get to live side by side with a vast group of incredible people. We are not meant to experience the ups and downs of life alone. My name is Sarah Purdy, and I believe in sharing life.