

Reflective Essay

Uwe Fromm

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It is not often that you get the chance to be gifted some time to reflect and turn around, look back at where you are coming from, what your path has been, and what ultimately led you to the place you are today. No, instead, in today's world, it doesn't seem to matter what you have been doing and what you have experienced so much as it does what you are planning to do in the future. You just stare forward, 'keeping your goal in sight', often being asked in job interviews where you see yourself in 5 or even 10 years. The only time it seems to matter what you have been doing is when creating your CV. A piece of paper that, in one-liners and lists, presents your past in the most beneficial way. It does not matter why you really took the decisions that led you to the things you show on your CV or, god forbid, where you have failed. But in the end, it seems to be precisely these instances that form you and make you the person you are. It is, indeed, not often that you get gifted the time, and maybe also a reason, to look back and explore your own past and reflect on it – perhaps the following will be an inspiration to, once in a while, *take* that time in the future.

Right now, I am sitting at my desk at a place that I now get to call 'home', the Swedish city Gothenburg, where I moved to not even two years ago without ever having been here before or knowing anything in particular out neither the city nor the country. I would think that many would call me 'impulsive' to do something like that, and I think I would have agreed – up until today. In preparation for this essay, I tried to trace back the international path I have taken that had me end up here – physically, academically, and emotionally. Throughout the following pages, I would like to invite you to re-wander along that path with me, and take small breaks to pause and retrace how this path has influenced the person I am today.

This journey begins precisely 10 years ago, in the summer of 2011. Just having turned 16, I was getting ready to move to the United States of America for a year to attend a local High School in northern Kentucky. A time that, incidentally, in the person of a former classmate's father, also offered me the first taste of the inflexible and rigid mindset of just focusing on the

professional future instead of focusing on the path in between and the experiences along it, showing up at our garden gate unannounced and uncalled for one day, trying to convince my parents to reconsider allowing me to move to the US for a year, as this would create an unnecessary 'gap' in my CV. With growing temporal distance to that incident, my appreciation for my parent's decision to let me go regardless is growing exponentially, allowing me to 'rip' myself out of a functioning family, friend group, social life, and hobbies, and start from scratch in a country that was too far away to go back 'home' for a few days when the homesickness became noticeable. It is not often that you have to integrate into an unknown family, find new friends and hobbies when – in contrast to the naturally grown surroundings when growing up somewhere – fully aware of the ongoing process, not to mention in a foreign language. But this is precisely why I am considering this international and intercultural experience to be the drop falling onto a still water surface, creating concentric shockwaves that carry on to travel across the whole surface, impacting whatever comes in life after that impact and setting prior experiences into perspective.

More specifically, having been very proud to have made that experience and – in my personal understanding – also 'mastered' that challenge, I was determined to pass on my excitement and knowledge by starting to work for the exchange organization, the American Field Service (AFS), I had made this experience with as a 'Sending Coordinator'. In this position – while still very young myself - I was in charge of the selection process of prospective future exchange students, going to fairs where I was representing the exchange organization, as well as leading 'preparation camps' where I had the pleasure to talk to the future exchange students about culture shocks and how to deal with living abroad, away from family and friends in general and for the US specifically. During that time, I experienced further personal growth by taking the newly gained self-confidence stemming from my year abroad over to my life in Germany and being able to 'actively'¹ approach people – inside and outside the 'exchange organization bubble' – more openly, sincerely, and confidently. But this also held true for the more 'passive'² side of the coin, where I became experienced a growing urge to learn about other countries and get to know different cultures – preferably by immersing myself in the culture in question and getting to know people from all over the place.

¹ In the sense of ,output', and contributing to something

² In the sense of ,input', and learning/experiencing something

After eventually graduating from High School in Germany and having applied to a University with two campuses, one close to the city I grew up in – the southern Germany city of Stuttgart, or right at the border of Germany and France, just 10 minutes away from downtown Strasbourg, France, I was faced with the choice to – once again – move away from home, building up a new German-French life, or staying at the comfort of home. The decision was, not last to my experienced, build up confidence and curiosity, not too hard to take. While I became an active part of the student body as student body president and other positions within the University, the most notable thing I got to take away from that time was the experience of the 'non-existent' borders within the European Union and the from there stemming simplicity of 'actively' getting to know people and 'passively' taking advantage of all this region had to offer, regardless of what country the soil you were standing on actually belonged, as well as experience the cross border cooperation of the local authorities that, in every decision they took, were considering the implications on the whole region, again, regardless which side of the border.

I believe that it was at that time that the 'concept' of the European Union evolved from something theoretical I had learned in school to something real and tangible. And while the concentric shockwaves, caused by the 'drop' that was my exchange year, had already influenced my decision to move to the German-French border, it continued to draw its circles by eventually bringing me to the conclusion that I wanted to learn more about the European Union and its way of working – ending up in me moving to Brussels, Belgium for a few months to work for the Representation of the State of Baden-Württemberg to the European Union. During these months, I got to know about the University of Gothenburg and the Master's Program in European Studies, of which I now am a soon-to-be graduate.

Yet, me studying in the program mentioned earlier cannot only be understood as a product of my experiences and the from there developed passion for the ways of working of the European Union, and the collaboration of member states within, but also as a vehicle of precisely that. Only through these prior experiences, I feel like I can grasp the content of the courses better and look at certain situations not only through the eyes of a German but also through the eyes of other European countries and even from a transatlantic angle. Therefore, I highly

appreciated the opportunity to gain further experiences by moving to Italy for a semester during the Master's Program and adding yet another angle – especially during the extraordinary time of the Covid-19 pandemic. While this time certainly was not easy for anyone, I was very thankful to be able to source from prior experiences of living in a foreign country by myself, giving me the strength to pull through this very isolated and draining period. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that this time was able to contribute to my mental strength and taught me – and all of us – the skill of working remotely and with people not only within a country but internationally.

This new skill of remote, international work, paired with my interest in getting to know other cultures and people as well as sharing my own experiences of moving and living abroad, led me to take on the position of the EUTOPIA Student Career Ambassador at the University of Gothenburg, after having returned to Sweden after the Italy semester.

As EUTOPIA Student Career Ambassador at the University of Gothenburg, I have the opportunity to combine all of these active and passive actions. The aim of this position is manifold. On the one hand, I can act as the 'link' between the student body of the University of Gothenburg, the staff, and employers in and around Gothenburg, where I get to know the challenges the job-seeking students and the job markets are met with, which can be both cultural challenges but also challenges relegated to the job markets the different countries, 'forcing' people to expand their horizon and look for jobs in other countries. On the other hand, I get to work together with the Student Career Ambassadors of the other EUTOPIA Universities. Passively, I thereby get to learn about the Swedish employment system and the systems in other countries. Moreover, even more important, however, is the experience to be closely working together with people from different countries and cultural backgrounds. While most of my international experiences have – until then – rather on an intercultural level, the experiences of a more 'professional' approach is immensely enriching and makes the differences between the ways of working apparent – sometimes presenting challenges stemming from, for example, different linguistic backgrounds, or even just such 'small' things as different public holidays, making it occasionally difficult to find a fitting meeting date for all parties included. At the same time, however, this presents the opportunity to adapt to cleverer ways of working and question own systems. Actively, I can use my prior and newly won

experiences and pass these on to students, young professionals, university staff, and employers in Sweden and internationally. This, I find especially rewarding, considering that the world seems to shrink not only due to technological advances where working with international teams and institutions becomes normal, but where moving to another country is not unimaginable anymore – but taking the step from theory to reality is still connected to many challenges and questions on all sides.

As we are coming to the end of the path – the present time – I need to refer back to the very beginning of this text, where I wrote that I would not agree with the statement anymore that my move to Gothenburg was impulsive just because I had never been here before I moved and because I did not know about anything that this city and country would have in stock for me. No, on the contrary! I am convinced that my decision to move was just a culmination of everything I had experienced before, both personally and professionally. I am where I am because 10 years ago, I decided to go on an adventure and move to another country where I had to build up everything from scratch – it is maybe almost ironic that this country happened to be the US, having a history of being a country established by people that have done precisely that, move into the unknown. The experience of open-minded and hearted people helped me to gain confidence and created a thirst to continue to learn about the international environment in which we live – be it passively through moving to different countries to immerse myself in the cultures or actively by researching the European Union, by sharing my experienced in settings such as an exchange organization, and helping to bring people from multiple countries together and supporting them in their hopes and dreams to move abroad and start a life and a career through my position as EUTOPIA Student Career Ambassador at the University of Gothenburg. Lastly, it seems worth mentioning that the above-written text is only a snapshot of what has been and what has happened over the last 10 years. Therefore, I can only end by stressing again to hope expressed in the beginning to pause once in a while and take some time to reflect on what has brought me to the place I will be at. Through that, it becomes possible to sharpen future goals and – above all – appreciate the present.

Feedback/Reflecting on the reflection:

While reflecting on my path, experiences, activities, and how they have forged the person I am today, I realized that it was easier to talk and think about my experiences lying further back in time. However, for experiences I have made quite recently, just like my stay in Italy or my work as EUTOPIA Student Career Ambassador, it felt harder to reflect on these.