

## **The Lessons of Looking Up**

**By: Alyssa Gjedsted**

Traveling has always been one of my parent's priorities in raising their children. Since before the age of two, I have crossed coasts, countries, and continents. I have seen countless masterpieces, heard numerous dialects, and taken photos in front of every tourist attraction. My parents' zeal for exploring the world passed to me, and as I grew older, I continued to make excursions around the world independently. I understood the message they were trying to convey: there is something to be learned about every place you step foot, and more importantly, something to be learned about yourself in every foreign place you go.

I had never traveled quite so far for quite so long as I did when I came to Florence this semester. Though undaunted by the distance itself (as I had previously been to Italy on several other occasions), I was intimidated by the thought of four months apart from my family, friends, and familiarity. Two summers before, I had lived in an apartment in Rome and taken classes in Italian in the city. That was for five weeks. Four months seemed like an infinitely longer time to be away.

As I stepped off the plane, I immediately felt like an imposter. Even after studying the language for almost four years, I felt like every person with whom I spoke or walked past looked at me as a stranger in his or her country. I walked like an American, spoke their language with an American accent, dressed like an American. No matter how many times I changed clothes or practiced the subtle deflections of the Tuscan dialect, I still felt like I hadn't fully mastered the art of being Italian.

At the same time, I looked at Italians as an entirely separate entity unto themselves. They dressed better, they walked down the street with poise, and their mannerisms were more refined. They didn't seem to share the same feelings, desires, doubts, and thoughts as I did. Every time I would speak to an Italian, I imagined I was speaking to an alien. Though my grammar was correct and our conversations would evidence mutual comprehension, in my mind I grappled to accept that they truly understood what I meant. How could they? We were two different kinds of people. I thought of life through an American viewpoint and they understood life through an Italian. To me, being Italian didn't simply mean hopping on a plane and flying fourteen hours across the world to a different country. It meant living in an entirely different universe.

After almost four months here, I can tell you what I've come to learn about the Italian culture and how it is different from ours. I can tell you how much they love to cook, and recount humorous stories about how at the dinner table, no matter how much you put on your plate, it still isn't enough for your host mother's satisfaction. I can tell you about the difference between American punctuality and Italian punctuality, which happens to be an oxymoron. I can even express how grateful I am to still be alive after braving the streets filled with Italian drivers every day walking to school.

However, these aspects of Italian culture won't be the most fundamental, valuable, and incredibly basic lesson I learned while living here. I can recall the exact moment I became enlightened to a concept that will follow me throughout the rest of my life and the rest of my travels within and outside of my home country. Every day, as I'm walking home, I pass by faces of people I've come to recognize and store fronts that have become so familiar I can recite their names in order as they go down the street. At the end of the block, there is a building that is several

stories tall, with a nondescript façade and freshly painted walls.

Typically, I walk past these buildings with an air of indifference; I am hurried and distracted by the blaring music of my headphones, not to mention paying close attention to the dizzying confusion of traffic moving speedily around me. However, on several occasions I have noticed an elderly woman come to a window on one of the top floors of this plain building, open the shutters, and slowly lower a basket- tied to a spool by a thin piece of string- down to the ground floor. There is always someone waiting below to gather whatever is inside the basket, and as the person walks away clutching his or her package, the woman at the top patiently reels back in the basket and quietly closes the window. No words are passed between the woman and whoever waits below; I have only ever seen her smile gently and wave as the other takes the package and hurries off down the street.

One day as I was returning home, I looked up to see the woman open her window. At this point, I knew what was to follow. However, instead of humorously watching her lower the basket in what seemed to be such an inefficient system of mail delivery, I instead looked to the basket's recipient waiting at ground level. It was then that I noticed his torn clothing, his disheveled hair, and his dirty face and fingernails. Suddenly, I realized he was homeless. I immediately glanced up to the basket, still being slowly lowered to the ground. Peeping over the top of the paper bag within it, I could see loaves of bread and fresh vegetables. The woman's face was friendly and warm as she continued to reel the basket down, inch by inch. The man below looked anxious, but not overly impatient, as he waited for his dinner to arrive. When the basket finally reached the bottom, he quickly grabbed the bag as if she were going to jerk the basket back up again before he could touch it. Then he looked up with a face of genuine gratitude, and silently walked away with his gift, leaving the woman again to slowly reel the basket back in, empty.

In this moment, I came to realize how small this world is. All too often, I feel as if foreigners, especially tourists, rush through different cities and countries as if the people living within these places practically aren't there. They aren't real. They are temporary beings; you forget that they can speak and understand you just as you do them. Yet right before my eyes, I had witnessed an array of emotions and actions that all at once were surprising to me but also incredibly familiar. I had watched hunger, sympathy, gratitude, patience, and generosity unfold, all within a matter of minutes. The feelings of the homeless man and the actions of the elderly woman put my entire four months into perspective for me.

Suddenly, Italians weren't foreign beings with their own set of thoughts and emotions and notions completely alien and incomprehensible to me. They were human beings who lived and breathed and felt and thought, just like me or anyone else in any other part of the world. They too suffered and gave, endured hardships and volunteered a part of themselves to others. Suddenly, a part of me was Italian and a part of them was American. I came to realize that at the most primitive level, the very basis of this world, different languages and customs don't altogether matter. How I dressed and how much I ate was inconsequential. What took me from being a stranger in someone else's country to a person experiencing life in a different part of the world was my understanding that ultimately, we are all just human beings, speaking different languages, wearing different clothing, but still living, breathing, feeling, and sharing together under one sky. To understand this, one only has to look upwards. This was the most genuine and enlightening lesson I took from my life in Italy this semester, and one I will carry with me as I return home one month from now, indeed a world-traveler.