

Allowing Reality to Exceed Your Expectations

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I got on a plane for the first time in my life when I was 20 years old.

I was flying to Iowa to compete as a wrestler from the University of Michigan. We had a long January road trip, and flying was the best way to cross a frozen Midwestern landscape in the mid-1970s.

The plane turned onto a runway, droned up to takeoff speed, threw us backward into our seats as it sped down the tarmac, bounced, and then bounced again before soaring us smoothly into the air.

And as I rose above the clouds I saw a different part of the world for the very first time. I had imagined what the tops of clouds might look like. But nothing I had imagined prepared me for what they turned out to be.

Reality had exceeded my wildest expectations.

We landed in Iowa. I didn't expect things to be *that* different in Iowa City, only 400 hundred or so miles from where I took off. But they were. The people were broader; and blonder than they were in Ann Arbor.

Iowans are known to speak a different language from the rest of us. It's called "Iowish."

And speaking in Iowish, they shortened their sentences, they lengthened their vowels, they were less conversational, and yet somehow friendlier than I ever expected them to be.

Amos, our 126 pounder, staggered around in his maize and blue striped scarf, still woozy from too much Dramamine; the airline attendant could have just walked by, but instead, gently guided him out of the terminal and into the hotel shuttle.

As we drove along, the land was flatter, the buildings were squarer, the traffic moved more slowly. I was entranced by this friendly, foreign place so close to

home; it was not what I expected at all. But Iowa wrestling exceeded my expectations even further.

Olympic champion Dan Gable was the University of Iowa's coach at the time and our earlier National Runner-up team - lost all 10 matches. We lost so badly to Iowa, the National Champions that year, that the Iowa crowd was cheering for *me* in the heavyweight match, to somehow win against a Dubuque giant who outweighed me by over 100 pounds.

On that day, I lost badly. But in another context, I won big. I discovered I wanted to see more of the world, even if it was sometimes unpleasant. I wondered if reality could again exceed my expectations.

I left the United States for the first time in graduate school on a field trip to Mexico.

We crossed the border in late afternoon and it was like closing the door to a noisy auditorium. The pace of life there was different.

The sun had somehow baked a new aroma from the desert, roads and rooftops. The evening meal was being prepared all over that small border town; chiles and Hermosillo beef, roasting onions and cabbage and corn. It smelled like home, a home that I was returning to, even though I'd never been there before.

We drove straight to the ocean and I stood on above the high tide line to smell the surf. I'd grown up near water, was surrounded by it in fact, and in my mind I had thought often of how the ocean would be.

But again, reality exceeded my expectations.

I walked to where the water was breaking on the beach and watched it foam. The foam seemed to be alive as it raced up the wet sand before finally sinking between broken shells. And the next morning I found that it *was* alive. It churned with plankton; larval species of crabs and polychaete worms, gastropod molluscs and algae, struggling and twinkling in a microscopic drop of seawater.

I held brittle stars and sea hares and sponges and isopod crustaceans in my hands; marine life forms I knew only from textbook diagrams; all of the details were there, but again, it was so much more than I ever thought it would be.

We went to town. Packed clay streets with short stretches of asphalt between the bars and bodegas Al Capone had frequented to escape Prohibition.

A close look showed that the asphalt was mixed, not with gravel, which was scarce so close to the sea, but instead with conical snail shells, millions of them, brought by the truckload from the limitless supply along the estero shore.

The sharp iodine scent of old ice under newly caught shrimp and flounder drifted up from the market, only two shacks long in those days, and the distant clanging of short, muscular fishing boats in the harbor, got louder as a jewfish, as big as a Volkswagen, was hauled out one of the holds for butchering.

A one-armed man put your bolios into a bag at the bakery, and a tiny, ancient woman corrected your Spanish as if you were her grandchild as you selected tomatoes y cebollas in her corner tienda.

Years later when you lived here full time to collect data for your dissertation because it was cheaper than living in Berkeley (a month's rent there paid all expenses in Mexico for six), you heard she had died of liver cancer; maybe from the antimony she had taken, not once but three times, as a young girl working in that bar at the edge of town, to keep her own grandmother alive.

You knew this because Eduardo, your Spanish tutor, insisted that you "stop speaking English altogether," and lately, you had started dreaming in Spanish too.

Panama was next, to study a different sort of crustacean, and with it, immersion in a different culture, a different pace of life, different food, politics, social norms, places it was okay to go, and places you had to avoid.

The tropical humidity soaked you in sweat when you got off the plane, this time after an 8 hour ride from Miami, where a Cuban airport barber with a Castilian accent convinced you to cut all your hair off at once.

Lying in bed with louvered windows and a well-used overhead fan, listening to the calls of "dripping-faucet" frogs (they really do sound that way). The yammering and screeching of green parrots in the banana trees before sun up, and riding swells out to the reef at Largo Remo, holding onto the anchor line of the skiff so you could see breaks in the coral, pointing for George at the tiller to go left or right.

The metallic clang of tropical thunder, so loud that every strike seems to be hitting the building. Learning where the French bakeries were in Colon, left over from when the “flower of French youth and beauty” came there, trying valiantly, and failing, to build a canal through the Isthmus.

You spent hours wandering through Mount Hope cemetery wondering how many hundreds had died before their 25th birthday of yellow fever, or malaria, or both. And the rich midday meals of tomato-stewed beefsteak, with thick, grilled corn “tortillas,” baked plantain, and flan for dessert, because, “you need to eat to stay cool.”

And then Amsterdam, where a multinational crowd sat at a café after the evening session and the conversation changed with each new arrival. Depending on the language of the majority of persons seated, the conversation shifted from Dutch, to German, to French, and at last to English when everyone noticed that two Americans, with our limited command of anything but our native tongue, had just arrived.

I remember wanting so much to have that facility with language. To be enough of a citizen of the world, that language would never be a problem. It seemed at the time that the only ones able to do this were those that had travelled extensively. And even with my well-used passport, I clearly had a long way to go.

Then Japan where I was a towering gaijin above a sea of black-haired heads in a train station lacking any signage I could understand, until a smiling uniformed schoolgirl led me right to the Shinkansen gate.

And Finland for the first time, discovering why some Estonians called the late night revelers there, “our four-legged friends.” Then conferences and lectureships in Mexico, Denmark, Brazil, Sweden, Hungary, Norway, Saipan, and all the rest.

What is the point of retelling these stories? I am doing this to remind you that all of you have, or will soon have, stories like this of your own. You have all chosen to become, “citizens of the world.” A phrase that in some ways may seem cliché.

But I am confident that you know it is not.

You have all chosen to allow your reality to exceed your own expectations. And I believe you have all found, already, that the best way to do this is to explore the world beyond your home.

All of you *already* have a global perspective, or you would not be here.

Your perspective extends, not just to global learning, but also to commerce, politics, social conventions and language. You know that this point of view is essential to the way we can expect to live in the coming century.

By learning and respecting how other people do this, you broaden yourself as a person, and you expand your knowledge as a human being.

I am telling you this to help you realize that in my view, you have made the right career choice.

You have chosen to explore the world as part of, *or all of*, your job. At an early stage in your career, you understand that a global perspective will keep you thinking beyond yourself.

And in doing so, you will help the less-perceptive among us, to become what you already are.

I applaud your decision to let your reality continue to exceed your expectations.

Good luck to you all.

And thanks for listening.