2005

Thoughts on Travel and Doors

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Traveling to a new place always triggers a combination of excitement and anxiety for me, and oddly enough often for the exact same reasons: the wonders of the new and unknown and the horrors of the new and unknown. I revel in the opportunity for change, a break from routine and the ordinary, an opportunity to expand my teaching practice and to gain more international experience in my discipline. Yet I always hope that there will be enough things that are the same, and that those things be the ones that are most important to me. For me the sights and sounds are important but smell is the most heightened sense; the sense that reminds me I have moved beyond my comfort zone.

It is hard to describe to someone who has not traveled alone the energy it takes to participate in public life in another country and culture. The big things are assumed and you prepare for them, but for me at least it is the little things that can put me over the edge. I expect not to be able to communicate easily, although I have to say that with some creativity you can in fact communicate in another language. You have to have the time and be willing to look foolish and to be misunderstood and to be persistent in your commitment to making yourself understood. But little things you might not expect to be different can be the things that can put you over the edge.

Take for example the doors in Sarajevo. First of all most of them are always closed. Office doors remain closed even when occupied and when not occupied closed and locked, even if you have just walked down the hall. The etiquette seems to be knock and then barge in where you will be told to enter and sit down or that it is a bad time and try again later. If you are having trouble opening the door it complicates things exponentially.

During my stay in Sarjevo I found myself consistently pushing or pulling the wrong way in almost every encounter with a door. As I approached the entrance to my apartment I inserted the key and pushed, meeting resistance and realizing once again that I must pull. At the US Embassy cultural affairs offices, where I went to the Office for Public Affairs to use the computer and ask questions related to daily life, for security purposes the doors are very heavy. These metal doors have all kinds of buttons and key pads and are an excellent replacement for weight training if opened and closed on a daily basis. Again, I would push and push thinking that I was not physically up to the task of opening the door, only to realize that I should have be pulling not pushing. And the hard part here was that you were under constant observation as you struggled with the doors. Police or security guards observed from glass enclosed cages, in fact some of the doors required that they hit a buzzer so you could begin your work out.
Doors in restaurants were a totally different matter. They appeared to be disguised as windows and it was impossible to tell where to enter many establishments. In the nice weather it was a bit easier as doors were usually left open, but as the weather got cooler it was more difficult to tell how to enter. These doors were also electronic and as you stood in front of them they opened automatically, but of course you had to approach them head-on or they wouldn't work. Some days I was just not up to the task of finding the door.

Such was the case with the restaurant in my apartment building. It was on the first (read ground) floor at the western end of the building. I was in the middle of the building on the third (read fourth) floor. And on first sighting of the restaurant I thought, *How convenient.*

I was active in my neighborhood. I shopped at our local green market and purchased veggies and fruit. I found the bakery my landlady said was the best in the area and I certainly agreed with her. I found the cheeses and yogurts to be divine. And, the small house around the corner that grills chickens on a spit in the porch area for you to purchase and bring home to eat, was in fact the best chicken I have ever eaten. The local wines were not only a spectacular but also inexpensive.

But, on some occasions I didn't want to feed myself, I wanted to go out to eat. I wanted to order a dinner of something I never had before, try a new wine and see who frequented local restaurants. I thought it would be perfect to develop a relationship with the restaurant in my building...convenient, local and not touristy, mentioned as a nice restaurant by several colleagues. If I could only figure out how to get in.

I cased the place several times, usually when it wasn't open so I didn't draw too much attention to myself, as it had windows on three sides. There was a small patio so I believed the doors must be somewhere near there for easy access for the wait staff. There was no indication, extra moulding or different sized panes or change of color or texture, that indicated that these windows might in fact be a door. But I could not see where else the doors might be hiding. I continued to do reconnaissance with the hope of a hot meal once I cracked the code.

I did in fact crack the code for most doors, those that were not disguised as windows, in my apartment and most other buildings. I now realized why I was so confused. Opening doors is not something we give much thought to; we do it on an unconcious level. The doors of Sarajevo have a piece of moulding that is in fact connected to the door, not the door frame. In the US that piece of moulding is part of the whole door frame, not the individual door. So I see a door, unconsciously
note the moulding and believe I should be pushing away from that, not pulling the whole thing to me.

Once I figured out this difference it was much easier to interpret each door, at least those that weren't disguised as windows. I actually welcomed the weight of the AID building doors as part of my rigorous daily workout, adding resistance training to my aerobic 4 mile walk to and from the university office.

All of this struggling with doors was really a metaphor for change on multiple levels. We often prepare ourself for the big stuff, or assume the big stuff is what we need to address in order to move forward, individually or collectively. But in fact it is the little stuff, those underlying assumptions that are so ingrained in our psyche that they are unconscious, that can do us in and get us into trouble. Those things that we don't see as different, and are, can lead to frustration and misunderstanding on a grand scale, even though they are very small things, like doors.

Once I began teaching I reworked some of my lectures and activities. I used my experience with the doors of Sarajevo to look at my own assumptions with a more critical eye.

I eventually got brave enough to find a hair salon to have my hair trimmed and styled before I needed anything too big. My students were very helpful in building my vocabulary and basic requests. I wanted to check out the salon and my communication skills so I didn't end up with red hair like most woman my age.

And eventually I did crack the code of the restaurant door in my building.