

What Is Under Our Control? By: Serae Neidigh

As I sat down to write this piece, my mind flipped through all of the normal topics of reflection on study abroad experiences. I could write about the unlikely friendships I had, and how I connected with people from different countries and backgrounds. I could write about the beautiful places I saw and the New Zealand culture that I grew to love. But all of those topics seem like a facade for the true experience I had studying abroad this semester.

Truthfully, my growth this semester mostly came from a global crisis, rather than my beautiful experiences in New Zealand. Like everyone else, life as I knew it came to a sudden halt in March when the coronavirus became a pandemic. Unlike everyone else, my friends and I were in New Zealand, about as far geographically from the U.S. as you can get, feeling the pull of home strongly but also feeling that we were safer where we were. Staying in NZ as travel bans went into effect meant risking being separated from our families for months and hunkering down in our apartments alone. But leaving meant giving up on a country we were coming to love fiercely, paying thousands of dollars to get on rapidly disappearing flights (that could leave us stranded in northern New Zealand or the western US), and risking exposure to COVID as we moved through multiple international airports. Ultimately, the decision was made for us as Purdue recalled the last study abroad programs in New Zealand and Australia. Feeling simultaneously heartbroken and relieved, we started preparations to return after 6 weeks instead of 16 weeks.

When life involves only emotional mountaintops, the knowledge that things might change is always there. But having an actual end date made every moment so much sweeter. Though our last weeks in New Zealand were our most stressful, they were also the happiest-- we

made new friends, planned trips we had been hesitant to go on, and generally felt that if we had to go out, we were going to go out on a high note. My friends and I supported each other so well, a ragtag group of Kiwis and Americans and Canadians and Swedes, all bonded by our love for New Zealand and our worries for each other. And we each bore the emotional weight of our situation with grace; everyone was allowed to mourn when they needed it, but we were able to put our sadness aside for plenty of happy moments. It is hard for college students to learn to accept that which we cannot control, because we are young enough to believe we can change anything and old enough to change a lot. But learn we did, and we put aside our frustration in favor of humanity, compassion and focusing on the things we could do.

The beautiful thing about time is that everything is sweeter in memory. Over the coming months and years, I know that my sadness about leaving will slowly be forgotten. What I will remember is the exquisite turquoise of New Zealand lakes and rivers, the feeling of driving on a winding mountain road and feeling lucky to be alive, and how the sky was so open and wide that it almost touched the earth. And when I remember the current crisis, I will remember how bonded I felt to everyone around me, how people often asked “how are you doing?” and really wanted to know. At a time when the world was at its worst, our humanity was at its best.

