***Boundaries;***

*“A ship is safe in harbor,*

*but that’s not what ships are for”*

* William G.T. Shedd

Four years ago, I left Vietnam to come to Cincinnati, America to pursue a higher education. Exactly three years ago minus a few days, I just came back from Paris on the Contemporary Paris Honors seminar. This time last year, I also returned from traveling to five cities in Spain on a backpacking trip. A summer later, I embarked on a journey to Paris and stayed in Europe until four months ago. I am about to graduate in a month.

What happened? How did that happen?

What did I do? How did I do?

What? How? What? And How?

I could go on and write a ten-page paper on what happened in all those years because to me, they are all still vivid in my mind. However, to tell what happened is easy; to relive the moments in your head and think about “what’s next” is not quite.

I think about my experience in Europe even now, months after the exchange program. I think about how it all started, and that I did in fact achieve a dream that I had built for years. I think about the cruelties of a Parisian life, and the wonders of being a (lost) wanderer. I also think about the fact that I was already in my 20s, almost done with my undergraduate degree and about to enter a different world that is slightly different from traveling. These thoughts tie in together somehow. They impact each other; without one, another would not be.

1. How it all started is not really a story, but a lesson of how setting up a goal can lead up to a reality. A goal could be as concrete or as vague as you wish, depending on what type of goal it is. For me, it was clear that I wanted to live in Paris for a while. However, the bigger picture I had in mind was that I wanted to see and experience Europe with my own eyes and mind. I did not really have an idea of how to do it at that moment, but I was looking out for opportunities and that did make all the difference.

Opportunities are around and everywhere, yet it takes a pair of seeking eyes in order to realize that. Most people also tend to think that the opportunity is out of their reach and hence would hesitantly miss out on it. It is a natural thing for us to behave that way; I myself have done that before countless times. However, I would find myself regretting not taking the risk. Regrets are indications of dissatisfaction with one’s self, and if you know me at all, that is not how I choose to live my life. From a goal to a reality, the path, or paths, taken is surely not the easiest, but nothing great in life is achieved effortlessly. I have learned, from this Eurotrip especially, how determinations can help push forward a goal, but it is our overcoming of our fears of failures that brings us a step further, making the outcome a lot more worthwhile.

1. The cruelties of a Parisian life and the wonders of being a (lost) wanderer are still the most crucial parts of that mentioned reality, because I did go through the worst and best things that could possibly happen to anyone when living abroad. Reality is not a fantasy; it could be, though, if you choose to live that way. I chose to see Paris as a fantasy for about a week or two when I first arrived. I had always been in love with the city, for its romanticized image and glorious years of history in both arts and architecture. I saw my dream for years come true in front of my eyes, and thought life could not ever get better than this. I was wrong: it got worse, then better, then a quality of life that I am not sure how to explain.

Things get bad at times easily in life, and that is when we should think about the situations and assess what has gone wrong. The assessment should lead to the question of whether we can change or do anything about the situation. Sometimes we can, and other times we cannot. When it is absolutely out of our control to change the consequence of something, it is a sign that we need to move on and create impacts on other things. When all the mishaps happened to me in Paris (aka my pickpocketed wallet, my getting kicked out of the apartment, my struggles of not speaking fluent French, etc.), I found myself helpless and frustrated, wondering “Why now? Why me? What did I do to deserve this?” Truth is, we ask those questions everyday and every time something does not turn out like we expected, and again, that is a natural reaction. However, I have learned that if we know when and how to pick ourselves up from all the downs that are thrown at us, we would be able to see new things await. That does take courage and self-reassurance that things will get better; in other words, optimism is key. In my case, although I was ridiculously broke and temporarily homeless, I found other ways to improve the situations and as a result, had some of the best, last few weeks in Europe.

1. Then the thoughts about life after Europe, with capstone studio, job search and a life that I don’t think any graduating students would ever be ready for; but me, will I be ready? Somehow, life in Europe is similar to that of a college graduate: full of surprises, uncertainties and decision-making. Europe made me realize graduate school was not for me. The decision did not come easy because that signified a change that I was going to go through that might have an impact on the rest of my life. Question like “what if I am making the wrong decision?” and “if not graduate school then what?” kept appearing in my head every night before bed. I made a decision anyway, and I had to stick with it. Just like everyone else, I honestly do not know how things will turn out, but, essentially, I do believe that if things are meant to be, they will happen. I did my part and so all I have to do afterwards is to continue living with no regrets. Life is too short for ‘what ifs’. The paths we choose to take should be where we put our focus and mind into, making them the right decisions because no matter what, we learn and grow at the end of the journey.

At this very moment, I too have many questions that need answers to. If there is one thing Europe has taught me well, that is to expect the unexpected so we can live and be amazed at how things turn out every day. In life, we will encounter various situations that are not always perfect, and thus it takes a lot to embrace and turn them into positive experiences. After all, life is challenging yet rewarding if we know how to make the most of out it while staying true to the person that we are. To take it a step further, we must push boundaries, ready for any challenge life has got to offer. The potentials that each of us has are there for us to show to the world and to ourselves what we are capable of doing. I believe I am no different from any other person of my age, except I knew what I wanted to achieve and pushed myself to attain my goals. And because of that, I no longer regret doing anything in the past couple years; that is perhaps my greatest achievement yet, until the next chapter of my life, starting in about a month. Let’s see where this ship heads.