

Calculated Risk: Fear of Excellence



By Dennis M. Kirschbaum, ARM

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Facility, Program and Transportation Safety

“When one makes a journey, one has stories to tell.”

— German Proverb)

Think globalization is a new concept? Think again. This summer my journey of a thousand miles began with a single step — on to a Washington, D.C. metro train. Every year the Smithsonian Institution sponsors its Folklife Festival, which brings together three different cultures on the mall between the U.S. Capitol and the Washington Monument. For each festival the Smithsonian brings people from each culture who demonstrate their crafts, art and music over several weeks. Past festivals have featured India, New York City, Louisiana and Romania.

This year the concept was a little different. Rather than feature a number of disparate cultures, the festival had a central theme. The theme was the journey along the Silk Road, the trade route that ran from Japan to Italy beginning more than two thousand years ago. Dozens of pavilions stretched out between Constitution and Independence avenues. Each pavilion contained crafts, artists, musicians, performers or exotic foods. The mall was very hot, dry and dusty and amidst the crowds, the smells and sounds, it was not so hard to imagine that one had journeyed to another time and place. Visitors came in droves.

What is it about a journey that so intrigues us? Why does it seem that virtually every U.S. city and many countries list tourism as one of the top industries? In spite of its hardships, discomforts and potential for mishap, millions take to the road every year to experience something different. For most it's an opportunity to challenge themselves. A chance to see, smell and touch the unknown?he exotic?hat which is different.

I have had the opportunity to travel from time to time on business. Those of you who travel on business, especially if you do it often, know that traveling on business is not like being on vacation. The airplanes, the hotels, and often the cities (what you get to see of them) all start to look alike after a while. The envious comments from friends and co-workers are for the most part unwarranted.

Yet I must admit that even on the most grueling business trips I have learned something, seen something new, talked to someone interesting or had an experience I would not have had at home. Some of my travel memories include being in Columbus, Ohio, on a day when the temperature was minus 12° F., flying through a tropical storm in Florida (amazing cloud formations), and tasting the best sushi I ever had in San Diego.

There are many people who don't like to travel, yet love to read about foreign lands, study maps, or buy

luggage they may never use. What is the lure? Why is travel so compelling?

It seems to me that travel is an external manifestation of the inward journey of the human spirit. The change of seasons, the coming and going of holidays, even the ebb and flow of the week constantly remind us that life is cyclical. But that isn't to say that life is a circle. Each year finds us in a slightly different place in both time and space. Our journey has both linear and cyclical aspects and resembles a spiral more than a circle. Each day truly lived finds us a little higher, a little further along the path. It's new experiences, new ideas, that lift us and carry us along the road. Not surprisingly, pilgrimage has always been an important part of most religions. One of the five pillars of Islam is a journey called the hajj. The essential practices of Islam provide that, if their circumstances permit, a Muslim should make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime. For many Christians and Jews a journey to Israel, the Holy Land, tops the wish list.

Without a doubt, it's the experiences we have on the journey that matter far more than the distances traveled. Though there were a few like Marco Polo who traveled the Silk Road from end to end on a journey that lasted 24 years, most of the ancient traders made short journeys, sold their goods and traveled home again. Often things that were traded traveled much further than the individuals who carried them. Yet while the things completed their journeys intact, those who transported them were changed forever by the stories, the cultures, and the ideas of those they encountered.

Of course, it's possible for the soul to journey while the body remains close to home. I recently heard about an elderly man who rarely left his village in Loudoun County, Virginia, and only once ventured outside the state. When asked why he didn't get out and see the world, he said that he still had not seen all of the village where he had lived nearly his entire life! He wanted to get below the surface of the everyday world and explore the essence of what lay beneath. Likewise, poet Emily Dickinson made a magnificent journey though she rarely left her tiny house in Amherst, Mass.

English poet Philip Larkin, who hated to travel, once said, "I wouldn't mind seeing China if I could come back the same day." Yet for many of us, the journey of our soul is aided by new experiences that come with a physical journey. Travel tests our assumptions, tries our intellects, and stimulates new thinking and ideas. That's why I suspect that teleconferences and video technologies will never put a serious dent in business travel. We need to step outside our lives and work from time to time in order to take a fresh look at them.

Travel does entail risk. Though as usual our perceptions of the risks are based on emotion rather than fact. We think about the risk of getting on a plane, of being in a strange place, of not being able to communicate. But the real risk is that the experience will change us, will make us grow, cause us to discover that the world isn't as we imagined.

The Silk Road Festival was the inspiration of Cellist Yo-Yo Ma who, as he traveled around the world for his work, became convinced that by helping people to understand other cultures and traditions, he could further the cause of peace. Indeed, as I walked from Nara to Istanbul on that hot July day, I marveled at the beautiful celebration of life and the human spirit I saw in the faces of those who I encountered along the road. I felt a curious kinship with them as I pondered the exotic experiences of America that these travelers would bring home with them. It seemed to me that our life is a bit of a journey along the Silk Road — often a series of short jaunts and day trips, the endpoint of which is often not clear. A longer trip, on the other hand, one of days or weeks, may afford opportunities to step back and share a meal, a moment, and a conversation with those we meet, people whose understanding of the world is radically different from our own. It's in such encounters, our destination may be glimpsed, if not completely revealed. Bon Voyage!

Dennis Kirschbaum is Director of Campus Administrative Affairs for Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. He can be reached at (202) 449-6526 or via [e-mail](#).