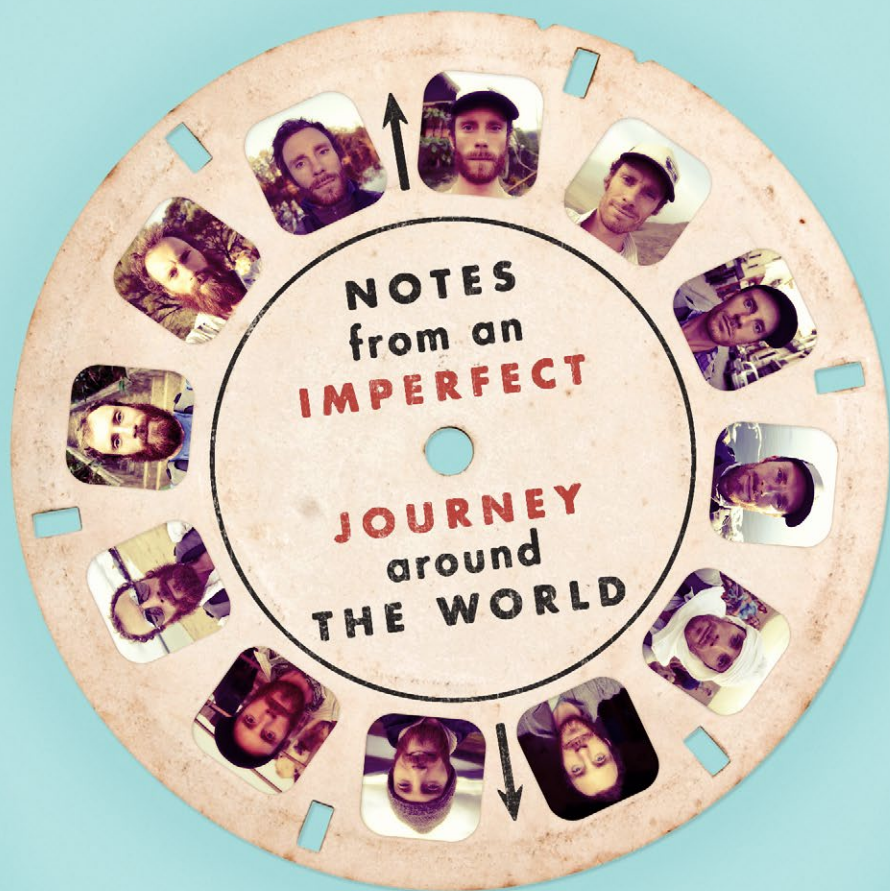


THE
TRAVELLER

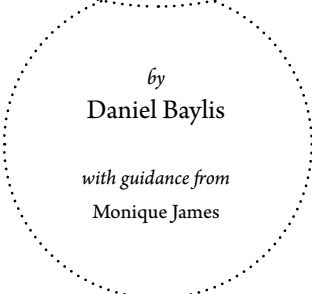


DANIEL BAYLIS



THE TRAVELLER

NOTES
FROM AN IMPERFECT JOURNEY
AROUND THE WORLD



by
Daniel Baylis

with guidance from
Monique James

The Traveller: Notes from an Imperfect Journey Around the World

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*“Believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance,
and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large
that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it.”*

— RAINER MARIA RILKE

This project is dedicated to my four teachers

Mom,
Dad,
Cathy
& Lisa.

I have been to the far corners of the world.
Yet I have not been to a single place
where I could not feel your love.

Thank you.

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PROLOGUE

*What compels a person
to embark on a year-long journey around the world?*

I suppose there are several reasons. Some people want to gargle wines from the most distinguished vineyards across the globe. Others are interested in getting fresh blisters from hiking the world's tallest mountains. More romantic types set out on a quest for love (or maybe just lovemaking) in exotic locations. And then there are those who are simply running from the law.

For me, however, it was plain old curiosity.

I will elaborate.

But first, let me go back and tell you a bit about me. We are, after all, going to be spending some time together. And, heck, I want you to know who I am — or at least how this trip came to be.

I was born in the northern city of Prince George and grew up in a typical Canadian family. On Sunday nights, we ate roast beef for dinner, usually accompanied by a dish of microwaved creamed corn. On weekends, my father took pride in maintaining a green lawn, while my mother tended to carrots in the garden. My only sibling, an older sister, consistently made the honour roll while collecting MVP awards at soccer and volleyball tournaments. I was a less notable child. I enjoyed mud puddles and took piano lessons (but I progressed little further than an unremarkable version of “Für Elise”). As a family, we would take

the truck and camper to a nearby lake, where we'd paddle our red canoe and play card games while listening to country music. If we deviated from the other households on our freshly constructed suburban block, our "rebelliousness" came from the fact that the fifth member of our clan — a German Shepherd named Kinda — was a lesbian. That's about as weird as it got.

Throughout my childhood, both of my parents worked as teachers. My mother taught at an elementary school and my father at a secondary school (instructing math and physical education). Their salaries provided the family with enough means to own a home, to drive an imported car (Subaru!) and to even vacation in Disneyland. If you ever need snapshots of middle-class Canada from the 1980s, look no further than my family's photo albums.

After graduating high school, I did what was largely expected of me: I went to university. There I toyed with new lifestyle choices such as vegetarianism and novel concepts such as alcohol. Unfortunately, my grades were below par due to my inability to understand what on earth was occurring in my Economics 101 course, paired with a general lack of passion for my program (recreation and leisure studies). Consequently, I did what confused kids do: I dropped out. I didn't know what in the blazes to do with that term everyone seemed so focused on — "career."

For nearly a decade, I drifted and tinkered. I tried my hand at a variety of activities that were eye-opening but didn't necessarily lay a foundation for a clear future. I improved my music skills at a community college, worked as a barista at a café and spent a string of summers planting trees in the mountains of British Columbia. Eventually, I moved across the country to Montreal. It was there where I successfully failed at a couple of romantic relationships, learned to speak a bit of French (albeit with a really bad English accent) and made a few great friends along the way. Midway through my twenties, with a deeper sense of resolve to explore that notion of "career," I returned to school to finish a university degree. I wanted to make something of myself. ◉

THE SEEDS OF this journey — and subsequently this book — were planted on a rainy April afternoon. I was at a café with a latte in hand and all the intentions in the world to study diligently. With only a few final exams remaining, I was mere days away from actually graduating. To the detriment of my grades, however, my attention refused to focus on the class notes strewn in front of me. Instead, I was lost in daydreams about the future.

At that point, I could only see a few months in advance. I had confirmed a summer job as a community service tour director for a group of teenagers. But what would happen after that? I had no idea. September would bring a new abyss: no more classes to attend yet no professional life to gracefully transition into. Unlike training in nursing or engineering, the degree I was about to acquire in Human Relations did not equate to a job or even a specific profession. The unknowns of the situation were both exciting and daunting.

Between sips of coffee, I flipped my notebook to a blank page. And then I asked myself a small question (one that all those university credits still hadn't managed to solve): *What do you want to do with your life?*

That afternoon, I gave myself the go-ahead to think big and not sensor myself — to keep my feet on the ground but also to shoot for the stars. A bunch of ideas came out of that brainstorm, some more realistic and achievable than others:

- *Travel the world*
- *Improve my French language skills*
- *Record an album*
- *Run a marathon*
- *Get a motorbike*
- *Open my own café*
- *Write a book*

I knew it would be helpful to choose one thing and start working toward it. So I selected the first thing that had come to mind, the top item on the list: *I was going to travel the world.* ☉

SO THERE I was, a twentysomething kid with a dream to see the world — how precious! Despite my lofty desires, however, I knew I wasn't actually ready to ride a donkey across Chile or meditate on a Nepalese mountain. For starters, I didn't have any money. Sure, it wouldn't necessarily take exorbitant amounts of cash to explore foreign countries. But at that stage, my financial worth was a two-figure savings account and a rusty 10-speed bicycle.

Even if I had been blessed with a trust fund, I had a more pressing reason to defer an adventure. If I took off to travel immediately after school, I'd only be prolonging the "career" question that remained unresolved: *How will I contribute to this world?* Travel, I feared, wasn't going to give me the sense of greater social involvement that I craved.

I was done with being a drifter.

I was sick of being a student.

I wanted to contribute.

Fortunately, my expectations of what it meant to "contribute" were low. I was relatively confident that the cure for cancer was *not* residing inside my cranium. My goal was just to get a job. Basically anything beyond slinging coffee would suffice. I was certain that I could be, at minimum, a non-inept administrative assistant or even a mildly entertaining flight attendant. I wanted to support myself. To stand on my own two feet. To become more than an overgrown zygote feeding from the umbilical cord of society. So I got to work getting work.

After a few months of botched interviews and too much time spent alone in my underwear, I finally landed a job and began my professional career in a cubicle at McGill University. For days on end, I gazed into Excel sheets, talked about my weekends around the water cooler and became a master at alphabetizing stuff.

A half-year later, I caught a bigger break. Based on my previous experience writing for my university's student newspaper and maintaining a personal blog (yeah, before it was even cool!), I landed a job as a content producer with the Montreal tourism bureau. For the next two years, I threw myself into my role by writing articles, taking photos and creating videos about a city

that I loved.

Were my contributions to society great? Well, if you value cutting-edge online tourism articles — such as “Montreal Museums Matched to your Personality Type!” — then, yes, my contributions were great. Perhaps more importantly, I got a sense of my capabilities: I could meet deadlines, I could pitch ideas (and get them approved), and I could entertain people. Ultimately, the bigger breakthrough had nothing to do with contributing. Instead, I learned that I had the ability to step up to a challenge and accomplish something. With that in mind, I could now wrap my head around a bigger goal. ◉

AS THE MONTHS hurried past, thoughts of travel marinated in my mind. In my everyday life, I began to exhibit the symptoms of a person dreaming of international adventures. I spent working hours covertly opening tabs of various travel websites. On the weekends, I browsed through outdoor adventure stores for the sole objective of ogling backpacks. Maps of the world became an increasing source of arousal. The more I entertained the notions of travel, the more I began to ponder my own game plan. If I were to set off into the world, what type of trip would I take?

First and foremost, a big journey was something I would need to do *alone*. I saw it as my own self-determined rite of passage. Besides, being alone meant that I could call all the shots.

Furthermore, unless a thunderstorm of cash came showering down upon me, any type of long-term adventure would have to be done on the cheap. There'd be no fine dining at exclusive restaurants. Fancy elephant safaris were out of the question. There was no point in dreaming of swanky spas. On the other hand, I had no interest in tormenting myself either. I wasn't going to starve on a fixed “one-meal-per-day” budget or fool myself into thinking that hitchhiking from Berlin to Beijing would make an attractive cost-saving option. I envisioned low-cost flights and inexpensive ways of engaging with people. Yup, practicality would be my ticket.

Perhaps the most pragmatic option for adventure-seekers on a tight budget is to find international work opportunities. If I opted for this approach, I could set up a job teaching English in South Korea. Or I could nab an internship with an NGO doing development work in Ghana. My main concern with these types of undertakings, however, was that I'd be locked into a single experience, at a single location. Is that what I wanted? I wasn't certain. If I were to embark on a trip of a lifetime, I might feel more compelled to cover ground.

Whatever my approach would be, my central objective was to travel in the most basic sense of the endeavour: to see different landscapes, meet new people, taste exotic foods and, in turn, to see how all these things would impact me. I sought adventures that had elements of connection, of insight, of education. Essentially, I was curious, not simply to just see new places but to experience them.

What I really wanted, I realized, was *involvement*. ◉

TWO AND A half years after that fateful April afternoon spent dreaming in a café, my 30th birthday was approaching. Up until that moment, the journey that stewed in my head was primarily a lofty pipe dream, something that I lusted for — but ultimately as real as Santa Claus riding a unicorn across Neverland.

It was one morning in early autumn when an interaction at the office catalyzed a life-changing decision. I was sitting at my desk writing a blog post about the cobblestone streets of Montreal's historic district when the campaign manager approached me and began to discuss next year's marketing plan. Things were scaling up. They had a new and prestigious role with my name on it.

"We've got big plans for you, Daniel!"

I was flattered, of course — what favourable sentiments! I had gone from a lowly non-contributing social leech to having an agency incorporate *me* into their strategy. Wowsers. Who wouldn't appreciate such fawning? However, after the manager continued on his way and the initial ego swelling subsided, I

realized another aspect of the announcement. And I was slightly alarmed. Somebody else had plans *for my life*.

That night I went home and had a long, hard soul-searching session about what these big plans really entailed — and, more importantly, what they meant *for me*. On the verge of entering a new decade, was I at the steering wheel of my own life? Was I putting down the foundation for a future that I'd feel proud of? What about my list of dreams?

The evening's existential crisis made a couple of things clear: 1) the call of travel was not getting any quieter, and 2) I had never been better equipped to respond. To make world travel feasible, countless variables needed to align. My personal health had to be robust. My family's health had to be steady. I needed to be without larger financial obligations, such as mortgages or Mafia debt. As far as I could see, my ducks were all in a row. Left without any big excuses, I faced an unavoidable question.

If I didn't do a trip now, then when would I?

Before going to bed that night, I wrote a sincere email to my boss. If the agency was incorporating me into their strategies (which, again, was terribly complimentary), I thought it was necessary to intervene sooner than later. I expressed my gratitude for the opportunities granted. And then I revealed that I wasn't planning on renewing my contract.

I needed to start planning something else. ☉

AFTER SENDING THE email, I felt like puking.

What the hell had I just done?

As the days went by, little by little, the shock of my career suicide became less pronounced. I even grew giddy. I wasn't going to be a travel writer anymore. I was going to be an actual traveller. As such, it was time to stop dreaming and start scheming. What would be *my* strategy for the upcoming year? Where would I go? How would I get elbow-deep into cultures that were different than my own?

I wasn't so starry-eyed to believe that I could see the *entire*

world. I determined that if I were to allocate one month each to 12 different nations over the course of the year, I might achieve a happy medium between community participation while still seeing a significant amount of the globe. I'd purposefully choose distinct microcosms — with varying geography, cultures and backgrounds — to provide a diverse sampling of the world. This is where it got interesting. If I were to visit two countries (on average) on each of the six inhabited continents, I would need exactly 12 months. The math involved in planning the project seemed rather serendipitous.

I had heard about certain online networks that matched independent projects — farms, guest houses, vineyards, schools and more — with people looking to help. This made sense to me. It was the practical way I had envisioned travelling. I'd exchange labour for room and board. This way, I could engage with local communities, and maybe I'd even pick up some new skills.

The trip began to take form. I would leave in January. I'd go into the world, visit 12 countries and do what people did before money even existed: engage in reciprocal relationships. ☉

THAT DECEMBER, I signed over my cherished rent-controlled apartment to one of my best pals. My most important items — photos, books, tax receipts, a suitcase of plaid shirts, a stovetop espresso maker and my Leonard Cohen vinyl records — were neatly tucked into a storage space the size of an airplane lavatory. The rest I gave away. One by one, I hugged my Montreal friends with a mixture of guilt and glee.

I went west for Christmas. In British Columbia, I kissed my family and packed a final backpack. Then, on the first day of January, I eagerly stepped forward into the world and into a journey born from curiosity.

Not looking to give or receive charity. Simply seeking to participate. ☉

JANUARY

New Orleans, United States of America

“Ladies & gentlemen,” the chief steward announced, “please stow your tables and return your seats to their upright position. We’ve begun our descent to the Louis Armstrong Airport. Thank you for flying with us — and have a great year.”

My stomach turned a bit. What had I signed myself up for?

Curled up in seat 35F, I was staring out the window into the night sky, contemplating my situation. Stretched below were flickering lights of freeways and oil refineries. Surrounding me was an arena of stars. I had never felt so little.

My tongue was dry against the roof of my mouth. The other passengers on the flight were acting as if everything was completely normal. But everything did not feel normal. It was as if I had approached an unknown forest and then convinced myself that it would be a fun idea to enter, explore and see if I might come out the other side. And now that I had taken a few steps forward, the setting seemed a hell of a lot darker and more isolated than I had initially imagined.

It was the first day of January, and I was only a few hours into what was supposed to be a year-long personal odyssey around the world. I had quit a cushy job, renounced my rent-controlled

apartment and bid my friends and family farewell, downplaying the significance of the drastic lifestyle change. But already, I found myself second-guessing my decision to cut all ties and pursue a highly romanticized travel dream.

Thus far, my approach to managing the emotions that surfaced as my departure grew nearer had been to reiterate a series of self-affirmations:

- *This trip is no big deal.*
- *I'll be back in a year.*
- *People are always doing this sort of stuff.*
- *I'm going to meet wonderfully fascinating people.*
- *Whatever happens is simply "meant to be."*
- *Suck it up, buttercup.*

But at that moment, as I soared a couple thousand metres above the earth, it finally sunk in that everything familiar was officially surrendered.

My heart raced.

My breath quickened.

My eyes grew damp.

My mind raced with self-doubt.

Why do you have such grand fantasies of doing something "special" with your life? Everything was just fine and dandy. Leaving everything was a big mistake, bucko. Don't you think you're being a tad self-indulgent? You have a family back in Canada that could really use your support and presence. Do you think you're actually going to be happier? You're going to return exhausted and confused and overloaded with debt.

My head was spinning with uncertainty. Would this year be worth it? Would the returns justify what I'd given up? ☉

THE PLANE TOUCHED down unceremoniously. I located my backpack on the luggage carousel and stepped out of the airport. I had expected Louisiana to be semi-tropical, but the night air was crisp. I hailed a taxi and threw my bag in the trunk.

“How much to get to the Lower Ninth Ward?” I asked as I sat on the cracked leather seat. I felt proud to be negotiating a price before departing, as some of my better-travelled friends had advised me to do. I was determined to be a good traveller.

“Why do you want to go to the Lower Ninth Ward, brother?”

“I’m going there to volunteer.”

The driver’s eyes scanned me through the rearview mirror, reading my face.

“Well ... we can let the meter run,” he responded slowly, “or I’ll give you a flat rate of 40 bucks.”

Considering that I would not have any income for a year, \$40 seemed awfully steep. But metered rates were always a gamble with variables such as traffic accidents and unforeseen road construction.

“Let’s go with the flat rate,” I conceded.

The taxi pulled away from the airport and into the night. I peered out the window, attempting to soak in as much as I could: the concrete freeway, the glowing billboards, the haunting immensity of the Louisiana Superdome (where thousands of people sought refuge after Hurricane Katrina). Late-night Saturday traffic was minimal, with no road delays to slow us down.

We were heading to a volunteer house that served as the headquarters of Common Ground Relief, an organization where I had arranged to help for the month of January. I had an address but no map, and the driver did not have a GPS system. He was guiding us on instinct; I was proceeding on trust.

We passed over the ominous-looking Claiborne Bridge and crept gradually through the Lower Ninth Ward, slowing to read road signs and trying to determine where exactly Deslonde Street was located. The taxi rolled past buildings boarded shut, vacated properties with the skeletal remains of houses, and entire strip malls that had no apparent signs of functioning business. After

20 minutes, two things were evident: firstly, we were lost, and secondly, I was pleased that I had chosen the flat rate.

A rescue phone call would need to be made. I dug out a phone number that I had been given and convinced the driver to lend me his mobile phone. Luckily, someone at the volunteer house picked up the line, and it was rapidly determined that we had missed a turnoff immediately after crossing the bridge. And so we retraced our steps along the same empty streets — the taxi ride becoming an informal tour but without any historical commentary or appropriate photo ops.

Shortly before midnight, the taxi finally turned onto Deslonde Street and came to a stop at an unassuming two-storey blue house with a small porch decorated in climbing vines. Painted onto a piece of plywood hanging from the porch, the Common Ground Relief logo — a fist holding a hammer — confirmed that I was in the right place.

“Good luck, brother,” said the driver. He didn’t bother waiting to see if I got into the house.

Under the weight of my backpack, I wobbled up the front steps and knocked tentatively. The door crept open, revealing a sleepy-eyed young woman in sweatpants and a paint-streaked T-shirt. She introduced herself as Denise, the volunteer coordinator, and invited me into a bright orange living room with unfinished plywood floors. In the corner sat a Charlie Brown-style Christmas tree decorated with paper snowflakes. Apart from the drone of cars on Claiborne Bridge, all was quiet.

“Everyone’s pretty chilled out tonight,” Denise whispered, watching my eyes wander around the room. “We all went pretty hard last night for New Year’s celebrations. All of the other volunteers are in bed.”

“Darn. I’m always late for the party,” I joked, wanting to make a friendly first impression.

Denise smiled and proceeded to give me a quick tour of the main floor of the volunteer house, which included a lemon-coloured kitchen, a simple bathroom complete with a basket of sunscreen and condoms, a couple of administrative offices and the

living room, which also doubled as an eating area. Overall, it was stark, but the bright colours helped make it feel lively.

“I’ll show you to where you’ll be sleeping,” Denise said, leading us out the front door. “It’s a room called The Shaft.”

“Great. I’m definitely ready for bed myself.” I wondered why we were going out the front door and how a room gets a name like The Shaft.

I followed her down the stairs and along the outside of the house to a separate entrance to the basement. She pushed a door open into a dorm room, flipping on the fluorescent overhead lights and stirring a couple of bodies from their New Year’s Eve recovery comas. Denise directed me to a vacant bunk and bade me goodnight. I quickly turned off the lights, trying to minimize my intrusion and hoping to escape being branded as the obnoxious new guy who turns on all the lights in the middle of the night.

Using the glow of my iPod, I rooted through my backpack to extract a clean shirt, my sleeping bag and a toiletries bag. I located my toothbrush and toothpaste and then made my way into the adjacent hallway, only to see a series of closed doors. Which one was the bathroom? Since I didn’t want to risk intruding on any other volunteers, I returned to The Shaft, slipped on my fresh shirt and crawled into a cramped lower bunk, mossy teeth and all.

I lay in the dark and took a deep breath. I was doing it. I was living out my dream of travelling for a year. In the ghetto of New Orleans. In a dark, foul-smelling dorm room. ◉

TO LAUNCH THEIR adventures, some world travellers might have immediately bought a ticket to a far-flung exotic destination. But not me.

Don’t get me wrong, distant lands were definitely on my travel agenda, but I also reasoned that you don’t necessarily have to go overseas to find transformative experiences. With this in mind, North America became an important stop on my

list of destinations. My home continent, despite being terribly un-exotic in the eyes of friends and family, would make a great starting point. The culture shock would be less jarring, and the jet lag negligible.

To make things interesting, I decided to select a place that I had never visited before. I examined a map of North America. The energetic appeal of New York City immediately grabbed my attention. I could spend a month starring in a Broadway show, no? However, I had already been to the Big Apple, so that option was ruled out. Northern California called with its progressive culture and world-class wine, but I was afraid that it wouldn't provide enough of a departure from the type of social circles I gravitated to at home. The Canadian province of Newfoundland had its quaint charms, but was perhaps a little too sleepy to be a rousing first destination. And Texas was ... well ... Texas. I wasn't sure I was ready for that level of culture shock.

When my eyes fell on New Orleans, all other options evaporated.

New Orleans had been a longtime fascination. After taking a college course in jazz history, I added the city to my list of urban dream destinations — places that I wanted not only to see but to really experience. With a unique culinary heritage, racial intricacy and history of dramatic natural disasters, the city beckoned like a smooth Louis Armstrong trumpet solo. And since I had the Cajun flair of a moose, there would be just enough cultural difference to make the month intriguing.

Plus New Orleans had the word “new” in it, and this was a small but significant quirk. This would be the first month of my big journey. It was a new chapter in my life, where I would have new experiences, meet new people and face new challenges. Sure, it was a minor semantic coincidence, but I couldn't resist the parallel. ◉

DAYLIGHT ARRIVED, REVEALING slats of wood a mere foot from my nose. The cramped bottom bunk was so compact that I could

smell my morning breath rebounding off the top bunk.

I turned my head and took a better look at this dormitory mysteriously called The Shaft. The room featured three wooden bunk beds, along with a couple of shelves spilling with wrinkled clothes, torn books, empty liquor bottles and well-worn boots. The walls were the colour of mint chocolate chip ice cream, but instead of speckles of chocolatey deliciousness, they were dotted with nail holes and splotches of dirt. A two-foot Buddha statue, wearing colourful Mardi Gras beads around his neck, sat serenely under the window.

Suddenly the bed swayed as someone rolled over on the upper bunk. I sensed a set of eyes peering over the edge, but I pretended to still be asleep. I wasn't quite ready to make conversation. ☉

I HAD ASSUMED that one of the benefits of arriving on a Saturday night would be that I'd get to spend Sunday adjusting to my new surroundings. But that's not exactly how it worked out.

On my first real day in New Orleans, I found myself in an off-centred state, not really knowing what to do with myself. I longed to be assigned a task, a small responsibility that would provide me with structure and help me navigate this foreign situation less awkwardly. It's the same thing if I go to a party where I don't know anyone. I appreciate it when the host gives me something to do, like circling the room and offering up the bread bowl filled with spinach dip. Such tasks prevent me from getting drunk by myself in a corner.

That first morning, I eventually rose, dressed, found a bathroom and wandered around the premises. The house was quiet, and people were few and far between. I overheard a couple of other volunteers casually talking about going to see Second Line, the weekly big brass parade. But they concluded that their immediate concerns involved sipping tea on the porch, doing laundry and tackling other Sunday chores. It was also clear that sleep and rehydration were still high on their to-do lists after all the New Year's Eve debauchery. So after a lacklustre breakfast of

toast and jam, a quick flip through *The Times-Picayune*, and a total failure to successfully engage with the other volunteers — *Where was a bowl of spinach dip when I needed one?* — I decided to take matters into my own hands. I set off on my own to see a bit of New Orleans.

I walked and then I walked some more from the Lower Ninth Ward, over the canal on the St. Claude Avenue Bridge and through the Bywater district. I spent more than an hour ambling the quiet streets, noting the litter and boarded-up homes, before eventually coming across a massive two-storey concrete levee, evidence of the city's vulnerability to greater natural forces. I decided to follow it, happy to have a clear and stable point of reference.

The levee led me to the famous French Quarter. Resting on a park bench in Jackson Square, I sat in the sunshine and watched a high school brass band performing swing standards. Across the square stood stately French colonial buildings and an imposing church with a pointy steeple. The smell of horse manure and deep-fried *beignets* (southern doughnuts) drifted past. When the performance ended, I wandered through the covered French Market, gazing across piles of cheap leather purses, Cajun spices, shot glasses adorned with saxophones, and voodoo dolls of various sizes. A foam trucker's hat with the words "Big Easy" embroidered across the front appealed to my tourist sensibilities, so I purchased it. Back in the open air, I meandered along Bourbon Street, where a man walked past flailing his arms and praising Jesus for his abilities to heal.

It was then that I realized what I had really wanted to find that afternoon: something tangible from my first day, some affirmative evidence that I had made the right decision to renounce my comfortable lifestyle for a year of drifting. But between the tackiness of Bourbon Street, the lineups for doughnuts and the tired expressions on most people's faces, I couldn't help but feel like the French Quarter was a cheap caricature of the New Orleans that I had envisioned. The sentiment surrounding this important first day was a quiet anticlimax summarized in

one syllable: Meh. And a larger question arose that frightened me: *After dreaming of this trip for so long, had I set myself up for disappointment?*

An intense craving for caffeine led me to an unexceptional café on a side street lined with cast iron balconies. With a steamy cup of coffee in hand, I crouched on the sidewalk against a stone wall and observed a four-piece band. The performers had enough musical chops to rival any jazz band I would have paid to see at home. But what was more entertaining was how they interacted with the pedestrians who passed by, playing a bit more boisterously whenever a generous individual dropped a bill in their open guitar case. The bass player looked at me and tipped his hat. I smiled and nodded back. It was kind of him to acknowledge me. ◌

WHEN IT CAME time to choose a place to help out in New Orleans, I knew I wanted to join an organization that dealt with the consequences of Hurricane Katrina. I had heard that rebuilding efforts were *still* ongoing, years after catastrophe had struck, and I wanted to understand more about this significant event in recent American history. There were, however, a couple of hitches. Such as the reality that most organizations charged volunteers an arm and a leg to become involved. And perhaps more importantly, the fact that I possessed absolutely no building skills. What organization would even want me?

With less than a month remaining before my big departure from Canada, I had yet to secure a host for that important first month, and I began to accept that I might have to pay for my first work-exchange experience. The thought of paying to volunteer was contrary to my travel strategy of finance-free trading; I was seeking opportunities to exchange a few hours of work per day for food and accommodation. I was willing to bend my travel guidelines, however, for the sake of compelling and educational experiences. At the last minute, I finally found a good compromise.

Common Ground Relief was suggested to me by an acquaintance in Montreal who, after discovering I would be heading to New Orleans, messaged me with an unsolicited recommendation that would shape my first month. He had spent many months with the organization and mentioned that it had offered him “rewarding work and community.” As I researched more, I discovered that Common Ground Relief had been formed to respond to the devastation created by the catastrophic flooding brought on by Hurricane Katrina. With thousands of residents suddenly lacking food, water and shelter, the organization’s initial mandate was to provide basic survival necessities to anyone who needed support. Once the emergency response was over, the work transferred to basic clean-up efforts. Volunteers might have found themselves wielding a crowbar as they gutted thousands of homes or staffing a health clinic and women’s shelter. Today, projects revolve around repairing and rebuilding homes (painting, flooring, drywall, insulation and more), as well as offering free advice at a legal clinic, testing residential soil quality and providing education about gardening.

Common Ground Relief sounded like a place where I could give a little and learn a lot. They required \$10 per day to cover food, but I reasoned that working for a reputable host was worth the money — *especially* for the first month. So I completed the application and waited with fingers crossed that they might accept an unskilled guy like me.

In the days that followed, I received an email of approval and got in touch with Thom, the director of operations. He outlined what I should expect — to get splattered in paint and sleep in a dorm room — while warning of overly strict American customs officers who had unsympathetically denied entry to Canadian would-be volunteers in the past. He also cautioned me about the chilly winter temperatures that New Orleans could experience (to which I chuckled and thought to myself: *I’m a Canadian. We practically invented cold temperatures*). Thom quelled my fears about having no discernable skills to offer and assured me that if I could use a wheelbarrow, my presence would be appreciated and put to good use. ◉

“DANIEL, YOUR RESUMÉ said that you have experience planting trees, right?” Denise called over to me. I was standing in the kitchen, packing a brown bag lunch with a peanut butter sandwich and a waxy apple. It was Monday morning, my first day on the job.

“Uh, yeah.” I responded. “I used to plant trees in the summertime, in the wild mountains of British Columbia.” I added the “wild” part rather gratuitously, hoping she might perceive me as strong and capable.

“Great. I need you to lead a crew. You’ll take them to plant trees.”

“Wow ... um ... sure.” My emotions — a nervous form of excitement — were predictable to a certain extent. But I never expected to be thrust into a leadership role. This would be my first big surprise of the day.

“Great. You’ll be working with Mary Ann — you know, the girl from New Jersey,” said Denise before ducking out of the kitchen.

Once I finished packing my lunch, I headed out to the front porch where I found my co-captain standing in a grubby pair of jeans and a bandana. About to begin her final semester as a nursing student specializing in burn care, Mary Ann had also recently arrived to Common Ground Relief herself for a two-week volunteer stint. We had met the night before when she was assigned a bunk in The Shaft. I had told her about my plans for the year, and she had shared stories about the time she hitchhiked across South America and subsequently got a staph infection so bad that sores popped up all over her body. Her left leg got so swollen and painful that she couldn’t walk. What struck me more than her grandiose tales was her nonchalant way of relating each experience.

With our hands in our pockets, we stood strategizing. Or at least pretending to strategize.

“So, you know what we’re doing?” Mary Ann asked, peering over her wire-rimmed glasses.

“Not really.”

“Cool. Me neither. But I’ve got the new Black Keys album.

So whatever we do, we got good music.” Mary Ann nodded her head to an imaginary beat.

Minutes later, Denise hopped up the porch stairs with a clipboard in hand and began to brief us. We were to be released into the Lower Ninth Ward with a beat-up truck, a couple of shovels and a collection of four-foot-tall magnolia, maple and cypress saplings. We also had a list of residents who had expressed interest in free trees. Our crew would be a group of insurance-industry professionals from the Deep South who had been flown to New Orleans to watch an important football game — a “rewards trip” for strong corporate performance. While in town, they were also scheduled to do some community service.

“That sounds doable, right?” Denise asked. Mary Ann and I both gave her the thumbs-up. But before she rushed off to brief a house-painting crew, Denise emphasized one important detail. “Please let the corporate folks do the digging.” She smiled and looked me directly in the eye to make sure I understood. I did.

The next thing we knew, a massive bus turned onto Deslonde Street and approached with a cloud of dust and engine noise. It pulled to a stop in front of the two-storey blue house. One by one, the businessmen and businesswomen waddled off the coach in matching corporate-branded T-shirts — a swarm of pasty skin and southern accents.

Muting my skepticism, I forced a welcoming grin. Internally, however, I couldn’t help but wonder about the efficacy and ethics of a corporate group dropping into a fractured neighbourhood for a few hours of tokenistic volunteerism. Who was really benefiting from this? Then again, the insurance company had probably made a hefty donation to make it worth the logistical feat of accommodating 40 volunteers for only one day.

Once my crew was assembled, we set off into the neighbourhood to knock on doors. We asked residents where they wanted their new trees and began digging holes. That’s when I had my second big surprise of the day: planting trees in the Lower Ninth Ward was not just a landscaping effort, it also bordered on archaeology. Each time we opened up the earth, we found debris and

treasures that the post-hurricane flooding had brought in from around the Mississippi basin. Buried in the ground were shards of broken bottles, chunks of dishware, gnarled utensils, toy marbles and, perhaps most hauntingly, dirt-smearred Barbie dolls.

At our third house, we uncovered a large piece of plastic that might have been a piece of car bumper. That's when one of the corporate crew members — a woman with high hair and breasts that barely fit under her T-shirt — approached me.

“So, Dane-yul,” she drawled, “why are we planting them types of trees?”

“Well, from what I know,” I responded, “cypress trees have an ability to soak up a lot of water, to act like sponges. Which is important in an area prone to flooding.”

I might have sounded smart, but I really wasn't — I had asked the exact same question to the wetlands coordinator at Common Ground Relief earlier that morning.

As much as I enjoyed that split second when I nailed my job as crew boss, I soon regretted positioning myself as a knowledgeable go-to person. Suddenly, the rest of the gang started to pipe up with a deluge of questions: *Is it really safe to build houses here again? How does Common Ground Relief get its funding? What measures have been made to ensure that another disaster will be avoided? Who owns all the abandoned homes?* I answered the inquiries as best I could, sharing the nuggets of information I had acquired over my meagre 36 hours in the city. But more often than not, I simply had to own up to my own ignorance on the subject.

As we headed to our fourth house, I began to feel remorseful about how quickly I had dismissed my crew at the outset. I had braced myself to deal with a group that was steeped in over-privileged ignorance or, at best, simply wrought with middle-class apathy. But their questions were relevant and spoke to an awareness that was anything but indifferent.

In fact, if I could gauge anything from our short time together, I'd say they were good-intentioned folks who genuinely wanted to help out while gaining a better understanding of the events

and issues related to Hurricane Katrina. They had come to the Lower Ninth Ward, if only for a morning, to help and to learn.

So were their intentions any less valid than my own? ◌

THE NEXT DAY I was assigned to lead another tree-planting team. But instead of directing a group of insurance folks, Mary Ann and I were in charge of a cohort of college freshmen and freshwomen from the University of Virginia on a goodwill mission during their winter holidays. Again, we set off into the neighbourhood. Given their eager attitudes and youthful physiques, this crew of six could plant a four-foot sapling in a matter of minutes. This meant we had plenty of leftover time to hang back and listen to residents share their tales from the neighbourhood. These were the folks who came back after Hurricane Katrina, the people who were either brave enough to return to ground zero or had no other options.

The residents we met spoke of loved ones lost as a result of the storm, as well as from other causes, such as old age or disease. They seemed nostalgic for days gone by, days when their families were still together. Few locals actually used the words “Hurricane Katrina.” Instead they referred to it as “The Storm.” Immense squalls hit the Gulf Coast every year, but whenever someone mentioned The Storm, we knew exactly what they meant.

Late in the afternoon on that second day, an old man with a purple ball cap and a limp approached as we dug holes for cypress trees at a retirement community.

“The insurance companies have not honoured the protection policies of hundreds of homeowners in the Lower Ninth Ward,” said the old man, who had introduced himself as Mr. Jackson.

We paused from digging and gathered in a circle around him, a wide-eyed audience.

“Those corporate bastards refused to pay out in fear of bankruptcy. They were worried about their own bottom dollars. But we are people. They don’t see that.”

Several of the students averted their eyes. I wondered what

yesterday's corporate folks would have thought if they had heard what Mr. Jackson had to say.

“We made agreements with them, and they didn't follow through. We were abandoned.”

After his speech, Mr. Jackson took the time to offer each of the crew members an encouraging pat on the back. He might have been angry with the insurance companies, but he was welcoming with us. And to be honest, I couldn't help but think that he must be the life of the party at the retirement home.

We continued forth, planting more trees and chatting with more residents. Each tree was a small gesture, but the smiles and appreciation we received led us to believe we had done something greater. In a neighbourhood where abandonment from corporations and governments had become part of daily life, the simple symbolism of planting a cypress tree was laced with the potential for regeneration and hope. And I felt honoured to participate in the gesture. ◉

IT WASN'T JUST the smell of beer farts and paint fumes in The Shaft that posed a threat to my slumber cycles. It was also the soundscape that arises when living in close proximity to energetic young people who value good times over bath times. During the night in that basement dorm room, it was not unusual to be confronted with a variety of auditory stimuli: a drunken volunteer returning from a blues concert, the murmurs of two volunteers cavorting on a lower bunk or, the worst offence of them all, chronic snoring.

You might think that because I was an aspiring world traveler, I would be an adventurous and extroverted character — you know, the type of person who embraces communal living as some sort of ideal model for collectivism. Sure, I dig socialism. And I certainly appreciate my fellow humans. But my preferred way to appreciate my fellow humans is after I've had an uninterrupted eight hours of sleep in a spacious bed in a sound-proof room. The fact of the matter is that I've always had hermit

tendencies. If given the option between a boisterous party with energetic music and tequila shots or a quiet night at home with a book and duvet, I've always been apt to choose the latter. In fact, after many years of living solo in my own apartment, I can be quite territorial over personal space. Thus, the shared accommodations at Common Ground Relief were a direct affront to my curmudgeonly boundaries. There was rarely an instance when I might sit and read the newspaper alone, and even though I did get a moment of respite in the shower, the act of pulling someone else's hairball out of the drain made me weep quietly.

The saving grace, however, was that everyone was kind of awesome. The Shaft, it turned out, was an acronym for "Short-term Housing And Fun Times." The room was one part functional bunkhouse and one part ever-evolving scrappy art installation: six unmade beds, a ladder hanging from the ceiling, incense ashes scattered across the dresser, a map of New Orleans taped loosely to the wall. The cast of volunteers staying in the dormitory fluctuated, and over the course of the month, I shared the space with a string of eccentric dorm-mates. For example, there was a wise-beyond-his-years 18-year-old from Seattle named Lukas, a Parisian bundle of awkward English and absolute joviality known as Boris, and Mary Ann, the unflappable New Jersey nursing student.

In the evenings, after the working day was finished, my fellow volunteers and I would often pile onto the organization's rickety old bicycles and take mini-adventures around the city. We enjoyed free mouth-watering curry at the local Hare Krishna centre. We danced to the Treme Brass Band's vintage big band songs in the heart of the famous neighbourhood with the same name. In a dingy local drinking hole called Kajun's Pub, we watched the New Orleans Saints in a tense playoff game, celebrating touchdowns with fluorescent Jell-O shots. Most adventures were concluded with a late-night bicycle parade of woozy volunteers returning to the Lower Ninth Ward.

As for my interrupted sleep, I soon developed a special technique that helped me get through the night. While the standard

way to use a pillow is to place it under the head, I discovered that it was more effective when used *on top* of the head. Positioned just so, it acted as a surprisingly good defence against smells, sound and light. The trick was to apply just the right amount of pressure, to crush it forcefully enough over my skull to block out Boris's snoring or the odour of damp socks, but just delicately enough so as to not suffocate myself. When The Shaft was particularly noisy, I used earplugs as backup. Still, the pillow would remain in place to filter the smells and to mitigate any instances of a foolish person flipping on the fluorescent overhead light.

In a way, the combination of working during the day and sleeping in The Shaft at night felt like a radical version of summer camp, but instead of tug-of-war and Kool-Aid, we had power tools and whisky. Just never at the same time. ◉

ONE AFTERNOON DURING my first week as a crew boss, all the trees that needed to be planted had been planted. Consequently, I was released early from my volunteer duties for an afternoon of leisure. Curious to explore more of the Lower Ninth Ward, I left the volunteer house and started walking north, away from the Claiborne Bridge and into uncharted territory. Along the avenue was a series of newly constructed houses — angular buildings with elevated foundations and solar panels, built to withstand storms and architectural boringness alike. (These were the hip eco-friendly homes of Brad Pitt's rebuilding organization, Make It Right.)

Eventually I reached the end of Deslonde Street, which was cut off by an immense brush-covered levee. The wall was impossible to see over or climb, so without any specific destination in mind, I decided to hang a right and kept strolling through what seemed to be a "less rebuilt" corner of the neighbourhood. The levee was on my left, boarded-up houses on my right. A few blocks further along, I came to a signpost marked "Bienvenue" and a set of stairs leading up the side of the levee to a visitor's platform. I was immediately curious because the platform

provided a vantage point over something I had never actually seen before: a bayou.

Like folks who are not from the southern U.S.A., my impressions of a “bayou” had been informed by steamy Louisiana-based movies and Hank Williams songs. I had certain expectations of what a bayou might be, and they generally involved either a dark form of voodoo drama or, conversely, a knee-slappin’ swampy good time. I imagined gloomy trees dripping with vines, lily pads the size of sombreros, and a menagerie of toads, dragonflies and alligators — and maybe even some slow-moving mist to really set the mood. Yet as I stood atop the platform and looked across “Bayou Bienvenue,” I couldn’t help but feel slightly underwhelmed, that perhaps something was missing from the scene.

Bayou Bienvenue looked like an oversized mud puddle. The brown expanse of water stretched for a couple of kilometres, the distant shore lined with overgrown bushes. The most notable landmarks were a series of scattered weather-washed vertical stumps in random spots throughout the bayou. The slough was anything but mystical. It looked like a place where trees went to die. A sort of cypress abyss.

During my stint as a tree-planting crew boss, and through subsequent interactions with the Wetlands Coordinator at Common Ground Relief, I had learned more about the environmental complexities of the New Orleans region. One of the most important take-aways of my month thus far was a new respect for wetlands. The spongy attributes of swamps, marshes and bogs act as a form of protection against natural disasters, with the potential to absorb water and to maintain the ecological balance essential to the region. In fact, Common Ground Relief had started a tree nursery to ensure the restoration of native ecosystems throughout the Gulf Coast region and to repair the damage done by the saltwater intrusion, a consequence of human-built canals. And by the looks of the broken-down bayou, the organization had its work cut out for it.

Having seen enough, I stepped down off the platform to continue on my stroll through the Lower Ninth Ward. As I walked, I

sang to myself quietly: *Dress in style and go hog-wild, me-oh my-oh. Son of a gun, we'll have big fun on the bayou.*

But I tagged an extra few words on the end: *That is, if it still exists.* ◉

AFTER MY INITIAL late-night arrival to The Shaft, I later relocated to a much-coveted upper bunk bed. One evening, I was sitting on that top bunk plucking gobs of sticky white mess from my hair (after a day spent painting ceilings) when a new volunteer sauntered into the dorm. She was taller than average and wore a knee-length dress cut from red fabric with a jalapeño pepper print. Her ragged shoulder bag was adorned with a series of buttons that attested to various personal beliefs and identities: “Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you” and “Food Not Bombs” and “P is for Polyamory!” From first appearance, she was the kind of character you might expect to see in an art film. Except this was real life.

“Hiya. I’m Edda,” she said self-assuredly in an Australian accent, dropping her backpack onto one of the lower bunks. The rest of us in the room took turns introducing ourselves politely and then returned quietly to what we were doing.

“Do you mind if I turn on some bounce?” Edda interjected, an open question to the room.

“What does it mean to turn on some bounce?” I asked.

“You know, New Orleans ‘bounce’ music?” She read the look of confusion on my face and continued. “It’s like a luscious version of hip hop from New Orleans,” she explained, “but where you lean over and thrust your ass in the air.”

Edda put her hands on the dresser beside the Buddha statue and proceeded to demonstrate. After a couple seconds of booty thrusting, she fell over laughing.

It was a fine introduction to an individual who would subsequently affect the course of my year-long journey. ◉

THE MORNINGS FELL into a reliable groove, which suited my affinity for predictability just fine. The average daybreak ritual was to wake up early, head upstairs to the kitchen to pack my lunch and enjoy a moment of personal space — a short meditation before the other sleepy-eyed volunteers stumbled into the kitchen. Then I would escape to the porch with a steamy cup of Earl Grey, a bowl of instant porridge and the local daily newspaper tucked under my arm. For the sake of planning my trip, it was important to keep up-to-date with world events — I would need to avoid war zones or areas of political instability.

But, more imperatively, I needed to check my daily horoscope. If the Sagittarius blurb was favourable, I soaked up every word and shared my fortune with the morning zombies as they trudged up the stairs. If the prognosis warned of impending doom, I would toss the paper aside and mumble something along the lines of “Astrology is bullshit!”

Eventually, the other volunteers would join me on the porch and wait patiently for Denise to assign our duties for the day. And each morning while waiting, I wondered if that would be the fateful day when my complete lack of handyman skills would be exposed. It’s not that I was uninterested in the trades or renovations or building work. It’s just that I had never really had the opportunity to explore my handyman potential. (No, correction: I never had the *right* opportunity to develop these skills.)

You see, in high school I was a bit of a runt. The guys who signed up for woodworking, auto mechanics and other trades-based endeavours were the same guys who ritualistically slammed me against the hallway lockers. Thus, for my own personal protection, I avoided those classes with the same brand of avoidance that prepubescent boys use to circumvent the gymnasium shower room (which is a comparison I employ with experience).

Outside of school, the role of family handyman was played by my under-qualified father, who earned the position primarily because he has hands and is a man. Dad is famous for saving the house from a dead pine tree that risked falling through the roof and into the bathroom. With his chainsaw, he managed to

fell the tree but subsequently snapped a set of power lines and left the neighbourhood without electricity for a couple of hours. Luckily, only a squirrel was killed during this episode. His general approach was to get projects done quickly so that we could focus on more interesting activities: cross-country skiing excursions, canoeing in the local lakes and stealing road signs. Besides, I was often too busy accentuating my nerddom with piano lessons or Toastmasters Club or gymnastics training — which incidentally proved helpful to dodge shoulder checks in the high school hallways — to really learn how to be a handyman from my dad. And in light of the aforementioned events, that was perhaps for the best. Any way you slice it, I had arrived at the age of 30 with a handyman skill set comparable to that of a trombone. A sad trombone.

And so it happened that late one evening during my first week, Denise approached me with a look of conspiracy and inquired deeper into my handyman history.

“Hey, Daniel,” she tilted her head and grinned, “have you ever laid tile before?”

Her optimism was adorable.

“No,” I admitted. “But I have laid some other things ... ” I paused and raised an eyebrow for comical effect. She refrained from rolling her eyes and continued.

“Would you be into helping John and Myke with a tiling project? There’s a lot of work to be done, and they could use an extra set of hands.”

“Such as bringing them coffee?”

Denise just shook her head, smiling.

“No,” she continued. “You are going to learn how to tile. It’s easy.”

The next morning, after a cup of tea and a frightfully discouraging horoscope, I stood beside one of the company trucks in a faded flannel shirt and well-worn blue jeans. Around my hips was a crusty leather tool belt, which had been left in The Shaft by a previous volunteer. I posed with a tentative sense of pride, knowing that I had achieved, at the very minimum, the esthetic

of a handyman.

Eventually, Myke and John came strolling down the steps of the volunteer house and toward the truck. They said nothing about my staged outfit — which I interpreted as a good sign — and soon we were off to the construction site: a new house that had relatively few remaining jobs before the homeowners could move in.

I followed my two comrades up the front steps and into the unfinished kitchen, where we began planning our work.

“Well, it’s usually best to start laying the tile from the first visual entry point of the room,” said Myke.

“True,” replied John. “Let’s just make sure we don’t end up with some really awkward strips of tile around the cupboard toe kick.”

“Good point,” added Myke. “We also have to be careful because sometimes the backer board can be a bit blistery in places. Any thoughts, Daniel?”

Both guys looked at me. I froze. “Uh ... nope.” I tilted my head and rubbed my chin, as if to give the impression that I was deep in thought. “I ... uh ... I think it’s going to look mighty fine.”

“Great! Let’s get to work,” concluded John. I followed the guys outside.

Myke began to mix mortar, telling me about the delicate balance of powder and water as he proceeded. Maybe he could smell my inexperience, since he carefully explained the steps as he moved along. What a relief to be with someone who seemed to have no expectations of my knowledge or ability! That said, I still wondered if one of them would crack a passing joke about my ineptitude or apply a quick shoulder check in response to my obvious bookishness. But as the hours progressed, Myke proved to be a patient and accommodating teacher. If he had any issues with my rookie status, he did a remarkable job of concealing them. And John didn’t even complain when I put in my earphones and began to sing along to Ray LaMontagne.

Throughout the course of the day, I learned how to cut tile, carefully apply mortar with a trowel and correctly space each

tile with these delightful foamy devices named “tile spacers.” It turned out that Denise was right — basic tiling wasn’t all that hard. In fact, it was sort of fun. I was having a great time and felt like I was the one who was gaining. In a neighbourhood recovering from a catastrophic natural disaster, was that even allowed?

That evening, during our Friday night spaghetti dinner, I boasted to the other volunteers about my wizard-like abilities in tiling. The others nodded graciously, none of them stating the obvious: *Yeah, but a toddler could lay tile*. For me, the experience was a minor victory. Later on, after beer, darts and more tipsy bike riding, I crawled into my bunk bed and drifted to sleep, dreaming of the house that I would construct when I returned to Canada — oh, what beautiful floors it would have! ◉

EVEN THOUGH SHE arrived to the volunteer organization after I did, Edda had already spent some time in New Orleans and was familiar with the various festivities happening around the city. Her personal belief system — equal parts Catholicism and mystic witchery — meshed well with the voodoo vibe of The Big Easy. And since I love an oddball, they meshed well with me too.

Hailing from Lismore, a small town in New South Wales, she had funded her international travels by offering services ranging from doula work to nude modelling to festival planning. Each of these experiences provided her with a unique point of view, complemented by her university studies in Community Trauma. It was not surprising that she was consistently the first volunteer to initiate conversation with citizens of the Lower Ninth Ward. She usually approached them with a guiding question: “How can we best facilitate healing?” The answers involved lengthy yet insightful sentiments about rebuilding the neighbourhood. And Edda would simply listen.

When the working day was through, most of us volunteers crashed, exhausted from painting or demolition work, but Edda often went out alone to one of the many parties happening around town.

“Edda,” I asked one evening as she prepared herself for a bondage workshop, “aren’t you tired?”

Standing in front of a cracked mirror in The Shaft, Edda paused from applying her cherry-coloured lipstick. She looked up toward my bunk bed through the reflection.

“Yeah,” she replied. “But we only live once, right?”

And then she stood up, put a spiked collar around her neck, blew me a kiss and headed out into the night. ◉

CAMPFIRES ARE THE original entertainment system. They have always appealed to me more than television or movies (or, dare I say, books). Not only is the mixture of heat, colour and crackle intoxicating, but the stories that emerge around a firepit are somehow more poignant, more gripping than in any other setting. On the quieter evenings at the volunteer house, a popular activity was to round up scrap pieces of wood, light a fire in the backyard and huddle around with a guitar and a flask of whisky.

However, when Edda decided to host a “Full Moon Ceremony” around the campfire, I greeted the idea with reluctance. My 21st-century social conditioning has blessed and cursed me with a great deal of cynicism. Any activities involving “moon” and “ceremony” leave me with notions of long-haired, flower-clad pagans dancing around a fire chanting appropriated Eastern mantras. Which is all fine and dandy, but miles away from anything that I’ve ever been able to relate to spiritually. My mystical moments are achieved when walking in solitude through nature or popping a zit in a really difficult place to reach on my back. And the general theme is that I do these things alone.

At first, I hummed and hawed over whether I’d attend. Because Edda had become a friend, I felt a certain obligation to go. But then again, Edda had also invited me to a kinky party, which I bashfully declined. In the case of the Full Moon Ceremony the kicker was my own inner dialogue, which stated matter-of-factly: *Daniel, if you don’t try this, it could be evidence that your spirit is suffering from a great degree of boringness. This is why you are*

travelling. Buck up and get out there. And so I pulled myself off the bunk bed, traded my suspicions for a warm sweater and headed out to the backyard to explore a potentially meaningful moment with my fellow volunteers.

A handful of folks had already gathered and were sitting casually around the wheelbarrow-turned-firepit. I sank into a squeaky wooden chair and placed my palms over the fire. The evening was surprisingly cold. Even though Thom had warned me about the potential for icy temperatures, I hadn't truly believed it until now.

Edda was wearing her long chili pepper dress and had a blanket over her shoulders. She walked from person to person with a bundle of smoldering sage. One by one, she invited us to stand and then wafted smoke over each of our bodies as part of a smudging ritual. The custom, I was told, served as a cleansing agent to the spirit. I could not recall the last time I had interacted with another person in an intentionally spiritual fashion. The fact that someone had decided to take the time to help me do my divine housework was considerate.

"We gather at the full moon as people have done since ancient times, on the brightest night of the month when the moon has come to the end of its cycle," said Edda.

To my right, I noticed a small altar constructed of photos, candles, incense, fruit, flowers and trinkets.

"The moon has a major impact on the tides, women's fertility cycles, human behaviour, the growth of plants — everything upon which it casts its light, really." Edda's tone was neither syrupy nor unnecessarily precious. "It's helpful to pay attention to the moon's power so we can better harness its energies and consciously work with the shifts that this celestial body effects."

I scanned the other participants. Denise watched attentively, with her head tilted to one side. Mary Ann pushed her glasses up her nose, occasionally nodding. Myke was cleaning mortar out from under his fingernails. Boris stared into the fire.

"By honouring the moon, we honour the passing of time, we focus on the sacredness in our lives and we celebrate being a

human being on this earth.”

With the calming glow of the fire, the lingering smell of sage and the soft intonation of Edda’s voice, the space felt safe, even sacred. I couldn’t help but appreciate the purpose of the moment, the deliberate celebration of “being a human being on this earth.” This was definitely not something I did in my day-to-day life.

“I invite you each to take a piece of paper,” Edda said, moving the service forward. “On this paper, write down an intention that you wish to explore, a goal that you’d like to send out to the universe or an emotion that you’d like to purge.”

Again, I looked around the fire and saw contemplative expressions from my fellow full-moon ceremony devotees. I pondered my own wishes and intents. They came simply: good health for my loved ones and strength to continue my journey. After we had scribbled down our thoughts, Edda invited us to individually share our sentiments aloud or to simply throw our notes into the fire. When my turn came, I read my items without explanation and then threw the paper into the flames, watching it momentarily light up the silent faces around me. Then, as a personal contribution, I passed a bottle of Johnnie Walker around the fire. One by one, we cheers’ed the moon and then took ceremonious swigs.

“Now we’ll each select a Goddess Guidance card,” Edda announced, producing a deck of cards that contained 44 goddesses from various spiritual practices around the world. “I encourage you to focus your energy and then select a card that speaks to you.” Soon the cards were in my hands. Unsure of what it meant to “focus my energy,” I simply imagined that I was Gandalf and placed a hand magically over the deck, hoping for the best. I drew Maat.

“Maat is the Egyptian goddess of integrity, fairness and justice,” I read from the card. “She brings order to chaos and advocates for honesty and truthfulness in social interactions.”

“What does that mean for you, Daniel?” Edda asked.

“It means I need to stop lying,” I stated and then paused for a dramatic effect. “Guys, my real name is Chuck.”

Edda shook her head and smiled.

“I’ll bet it’s a simple reminder to be a good guy,” I followed up more truthfully and then passed the deck to Boris, who accepted the deck neither with eagerness nor reluctance.

As the other volunteers drew their cards, I continued to ponder the possibilities of Maat’s messages. I was hesitant to attribute too much meaning to it all, yet curious to see how a mere suggestion might challenge my thinking. Ultimately, I decided that the card was a subtle encouragement to be respectful over the forthcoming months as I made my way across the planet.

After we had all drawn our cards, Edda closed the ceremony with a final blessing, and as a group we sent another round of whisky salutations to the moon. Then some folks headed off to bed, but I stayed behind, hypnotized by the twinkling embers of the bonfire. ◉

DESPITE THE FULL moon ceremonies and tipsy bike rides, it was impossible for me to forget where I was — in a neighbourhood that had a hefty share of adversity. Yes, many reconstruction efforts had taken place, but the Lower Ninth Ward still had numerous apocalyptic nooks and crannies: hollowed homes, piles of debris and lots overgrown with tall grasses. Many roads were in disarray, with potholes that could swallow small cars. For every house that had been rebuilt, there seemed to be two abandoned ones, and the strip malls along the main avenues of North Claiborne and Saint Claude were like frontier ghost towns. Years after the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward had still not been restored to the community it once was.

Prior to the storm, the neighbourhood boasted the highest percentage of African American home ownership of any corner of the United States. People were invested in the area. After the storm, however, thousands of folks opted to relocate to different corners of New Orleans, if they chose to return to the city at all. And subsequently, in the Lower Ninth Ward and throughout the city, a sort of “Cajun diaspora” has occurred.

A stronger levee has since been constructed around the perimeter of the Lower Ninth Ward. And, as it stands, the region has been deemed a safe and reasonable place to rebuild homes and reconstruct community. But after an event of such magnitude, trauma had intruded (and refuses to leave) the neighbourhood's psyche. The community still struggles with a number of challenges — inadequate housing, unemployment, crime and an aging population — and, from what I sensed, continues to grapple with a bigger question: *Who are we now?*

A number of community organizations, including Common Ground Relief, are committed to the redevelopment of the Lower Ninth Ward. Some of these projects are strictly community-driven initiatives to restore the neighbourhood to the way it once was. Other organizations have contemporary and externally led mandates that aim at shifting the architectural legacy of the area, such as constructing futuristic-looking houses that are more sustainable and built high on stilts. The collective future of the community is, understandably, a contentious issue with residents and stakeholders. You might say that the immediate forecast for the Lower Ninth Ward is still somewhat stormy. ◦

ON ONE OF my last days in New Orleans, Edda took me to visit Smitty, an 80-year-old man who often helped out at Common Ground Relief as a residential advisor. Smitty was one of the great elders of the Lower Ninth Ward; he had grown up in the neighbourhood and knew it better than anyone. Among the volunteers, he was something of a legend. Smitty's house was located on a street that had been more successful in recovery efforts. The houses surrounding him had new weather-resistant siding. There were even flowers in some of the yards.

We arrived in the early afternoon, locked our bikes to the chain-link fence, wandered up a set of creaky steps and knocked on the door.

"Welcome, welcome," he said as he waved us in. "Just let me finish up here."

The elderly black man was settled in front of an old desktop computer, working on his soon-to-be-released memoirs. We took our shoes off and stepped onto the plush grey carpets of his living room. The walls had been recently painted and still remained bare. The only décor was the books, which were sprawled out on knee-high shelves that lined the room. It looked more like a library than a living room.

After finishing with the computer, Smitty darted into the kitchen and quickly returned with a pot of green tea. We settled onto a simple grey couch (the only place we could sit other than the floor) and blew the steam off our teacups. Smitty pulled off his glasses. He told us about growing up in the Lower Ninth Ward and how he had left to work for a couple decades in Hollywood. The steadily increasing cost of living in California eventually drove him back to New Orleans, where he could afford to live out his days in a home that he actually owned. He had returned before The Storm and had been one of the last people to leave the neighbourhood during the flooding, mainly because he had nowhere else to go. His house — the one we were sitting in — had been largely destroyed by the surge waters, and then gutted and rebuilt by Common Ground Relief.

With the subject of the Lower Ninth Ward on the table, Edda posed her classic question.

“Smitty,” she began with her honest sense of curiosity, “how can we best facilitate healing in the Lower Ninth Ward?”

A look of frustration fell over Smitty. He shook his head and exhaled forcefully.

“Forget about healing!” he exclaimed, much to our surprise. “Every organization rolls in here and wants to make a difference. They do great work and we’re very much appreciative. But they’re not going to do a damn thing to change the future of this neighbourhood unless the people of the neighbourhood want to change themselves.”

Smitty took a second to collect his thoughts and then unfolded his wrinkled hands.

“What we need is to expand our minds,” he continued,

illustrating his point by extending his fingers out from around his head. “The only way we are going to reach a better place is if we educate ourselves. The path to the future is made possible by education.”

And that’s all he had to say about healing. ◉

JANUARY PASSED QUICKLY. The first leg of the journey would be nostalgically recalled as a meaningful debut to my adventure. Common Ground Relief set the standard to which I would subsequently compare all other months. It provided the setting for a series of winning travel variables: the opportunity to learn new skills, experience a culturally textured location, engage with locals, hang out with a memorable confluence of volunteers and, most importantly, contribute to a project that was doing some great work.

The month provided some important lessons that would inform the rest of my journey and beyond. Possibly the most significant nugget was that it is permissible to have both good times and educational experiences in a struggling setting. Residents of New Orleans will attest to the importance of the first Mardi Gras celebrations after the storm. The annual festivities helped bring a sense of normalcy and enjoyment to a city facing an unknown future. Of course humour and festivity are not appropriate for every situation, but the intention to rebuild or renovate emotional spaces is as important as the physical spaces. A smile works differently but as effectively as a trowel. Not only is joyfulness legitimate, but I’d say it is vital to the recovery process.

The celebratory tone of New Orleans and of the people at Common Ground Relief also enabled me to move past some of my hesitations about leaving home. And, at the risk of sounding sentimental, I began to see that this voyage, in its own way, could be a year-long full moon ceremony — a simple celebration of being a human on this earth.

Eventually, the moment of my departure from the volunteer house arrived. I slipped a bottle of whisky under Denise’s pillow

for the gang to discover later, as there would be more moons to salute. I administered boisterous hugs to my fellow volunteers. I took a final inhalation of The Shaft's unique aromatic blend.

A horn beeped impatiently, informing me that the car was waiting. Thom had offered to drive me to the airport, and Edda insisted on coming along for the ride. I tossed my backpack in the trunk, and we were soon zooming along the New Orleans freeway, passing the same billboards and urban concrete sprawl as when I had arrived late that night on the first day of the month. Perhaps it was the daylight or perhaps something in me had shifted, but the Louisiana Superdome, an iconic image of Hurricane Katrina, seemed less immense.

The car pulled into the departures level. Thom hopped out and gave me a no-nonsense hug, the kind of quick adios you'd expect from someone who runs a non-profit organization with a high turnover rate. I turned to Edda. She took my cheeks in her hands. "Be safe and brave on your journey," she whispered into my ear. And then she wrapped her arms around me, squeezing the air from my lungs. A small salty storm formed on my cheeks.

I stood watching as the car pulled away. But Edda didn't look back. Instead, she stuck a hand out the window. It wasn't waving goodbye. It was waving me forward. ☺



ABOUT THE WRITER

DANIEL BAYLIS WAS born in British Columbia, educated in Edmonton and refined in Montréal. He holds a degree in Human Relations from Concordia University, has planted more than 250,000 trees and has run a grand total of one marathon. His professional credentials include articles for *Fast Company*, *Huffington Post* and *The Guardian*, as well as content collaborations with Tourisme Montréal, *enRoute Magazine* and N/A Marketing. In his spare time, he enjoys yoga and drinking Malbec.

Find him at www.danielbaylis.ca.

“Daniel had the chutzpah to quit an excellent job, leave his friends and home to travel the world on his own. Tell me you aren’t dying to know his secret.” —**Doug O’Neill, Canadian Living Magazine**

“Inspiring and laugh-out-loud funny, [The Traveller] is a must-read for anyone thinking about taking a gap year.”
—**Jessica Lockhart, Verge Magazine**

“Daniel’s got the kind of honesty and storytelling genius that makes me weak in the knees.” —**Candice Walsh, Matador Network**

TWELVE MONTHS. TWELVE COUNTRIES. TWELVE TALES.

As Daniel Baylis approached his 30th birthday, he asked himself a tough question: *Who’s at the steering wheel of my life?* The verdict came back unclear, so he decided to take immediate action. He gave up his job and his rent-controlled apartment to tackle one of his biggest dreams—to travel the world.

With an objective to not only see places but also to experience them, Baylis spent an entire year sampling a variety of volunteer positions. From an elementary schoolroom in Peru, to Edinburg’s Fringe Fest, to an organic goat farm hidden in the hills of Galilee (and many places and projects in between), he dove headfirst into immersive travel experiences.

With a touch of introspection and a heap of humour, *The Traveller* presents literary snapshots of twelve very distinct global destinations. What emerges is a portrait of an individual trying to be helpful, along with all the people who helped him along the way. Lively and compelling, *The Traveller* is required reading for anyone who dreams of international adventures—or for anyone who simply dreams.



SPARKS

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