

THE GIFT OF SCOTLAND

Two Grads Reap Rewards of Parish Pulpit Fellowship

The Graduate Study Fellowship for the Parish Pulpit Ministry is awarded annually to a graduating senior who demonstrates outstanding homiletic and academic potential, and is committed to the parish pulpit ministry in the Protestant Church. Recipients are invited to spend a year studying overseas in the location of their choice. Princeton graduates Erin Dunigan and Jeremy Deck, who both received Parish Pulpit Fellowships in 2003, each made Scotland their classroom for a year.



Photos were taken by Erin Dunigan. Left to right, they picture Erin and Jeremy running in the Rome marathon, a window in a chapel on the Isle of Iona in Scotland, boats in Italy, a standing cross in front of the Iona Abbey, Erin at the Cliffs of Moher in Ireland, a window in an Irish church, fruits and vegetables at a Dublin market, Erin with PTS professor Wentzel van Huyssteen at the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, boats in Venice, and Jeremy in Portugal.

Photos: Erin Dunigan

LIVING LIFE CREATIVELY

by Erin Dunigan

It is ironic, really. Not in the typical sense of the word, but in that “I chose to spend the year in Scotland thinking that since they speak English I will be able to understand them” kind of way.

Let me step back a moment. As a recipient of the 2003 Parish Pulpit Fellowship I spent last year living in St. Andrews, Scotland. My role was as a visiting scholar with the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts (ITIA) at St. Mary’s (the divinity school of St. Andrews University). ITIA is a program that seeks “to discover and demonstrate ways in which the arts can contribute to the renewal of Christian theology” and “to find ways in which the arts can contribute to a sensitive and rigorous engagement of the church with modern and postmodern culture.”

Back to the irony. My topic of study for the year was creativity as a way of encountering God. This idea grew out of a number of experiences during my senior year at Princeton, when these two ideas seemed to keep intersecting.

What began as a mild interest, as I tried to use paints and colors to express feelings during an “art of healing” day in clinical pastoral education, was nurtured when I read Julia Cameron’s guidebook for creativity as a path to spiritual life (*The Artist’s Way*), and blossomed in a final project called “Creativity as Prayer” for my class on prayer and pastoral care.

This concept of creativity as a way of encountering God is based on Cameron’s idea that “art [creativity, in this case] is not about thinking something up. It is about the opposite—getting something down. If we are trying to think something up we are straining to reach for something that’s just beyond our grasp...when we get something down, there is no strain...instead of reaching for inventions, we are engaged in listening.”

This is how I proposed to spend my year—listening and living life creatively. I took a pottery class (my two masterpieces are not exactly symmetrical!) and a mixed-media painting class, and learned to knit and to bake apple pies (the apple pie lessons were courtesy of a visiting mother from Georgia, and not a local Scottish delicacy!). I attended Ph.D. seminars in theology at ITIA, and traveled to new places, including running a marathon in Rome (and along the way realizing that the “big church” we were running toward was St. Peter’s!) and visiting Iceland in January to learn that there the main difference in seasons is noticed not in temperature but in light. I prepared a Scottish Burns Night Supper (complete with haggis, which I actually liked!), and spent time in conversation over meals with friends in the St. Mary’s community. After this year of listening, when it came time to sit down and write about my experience I wondered what I would ‘think up.’ It was then that the irony hit me.

SCOTLAND



Erin Dunigan

In my initial proposal for the fellowship, I was much more concerned about *what* I would study than *where* I would study. As it turned out, the what of my study was indeed valuable, but far more significant was the where.

Scotland provided me with an environment that was similar enough to what I was used to that I was able to function fairly easily. It was different enough, though, that I was forced to be more attentive than I otherwise would have been. This struck me—or, rather, I almost struck it—while I was walking out of a shop in town. Striding toward the door, I reached out to push it open and exit onto the street when my momentum was thwarted. It was then that I noticed the word “Pull.” I realized at that moment, after weeks of having this vague sense of something being just a wee bit off, what the problem was. Every time I entered or left a shop, my first response was the wrong one. Previously I had never bothered to think about whether you pushed or pulled a door based on entering or exiting. It was something that just came naturally, so I figured it was simply the way things were. “Frying in another culture one often learns that the way things are is not always the same.

This is true in language, too: “fries” are “chips” and “chips” are “crisps.” “Pounds” are what you pay or spend, and “stones” are what you weigh. If you tell someone they have “nice pants,” you are complimenting their underwear, and if you are due to arrive somewhere at “half two” and show up at 1:30, you will be an hour early.

I found out almost immediately upon arrival that the Brits all wanted to discuss what I thought about “my Mr. Bush,” and I didn’t have an inkling whether discussing politics might be on my list of polite, get-to-know-you chit-chat.

These seem mundane examples, but they illustrate the need to pay attention when living in another culture, even one that has so many outward similarities to your own. It is this heightened sense of awareness that I attempted to nurture during my Scottish year.

Within Scotland, St. Andrews, a small town with three main streets that is nestled between the North Sea and the ruins of a 13th-century cathedral, provided a slower pace and rhythm of life, conducive to these ideas of listening and being attentive.

Finally, within St. Andrews, the community of St. Mary’s became a wonderful place of being able to live out this life of listening in relationship and conversation with others.

Life in another culture also affords an opportunity to step outside the “normal” way of thinking and reacting, to see events from another perspective. Some examples for me were listening to news of the election of California’s Governor Schwarzenegger on the BBC’s Radio One alongside my South African flatmate; learning about “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland from a Northern Irish friend and then traveling to Northern Ireland to witness the fragility of the peace; discussing the differences between Scotland and Princeton with Princeton’s new president during a photo shoot in Edinburgh (I told Dr. Torrance that the Halo Pub in Princeton is actually an ice cream parlor and a must visit!).

Travel writer Rick Steves, in his “backdoor” philosophy of travel, says this:

We travel to enjoy differences—to become temporary locals. You’ll experience frustrations. Certain truths that we find “God-given” or “self-evident,” like ice cream drinks, bottomless cups of coffee, hot showers, and “bigger” being “better” are suddenly not so true. One of the benefits of travel is the eye-opening realization that there are logical, civil, and even better alternatives.

Within Scotland, St. Andrews, a small town with three principal streets, nestled between the North Sea and the ruins of a 13th-century cathedral, provided a slower pace and rhythm of life, conducive to these practices of listening and being attentive. And it is a place where I found myself listened to and attended to. St. Leonard’s Church, one of four Church of Scotland congregations in the town, became my church home for the year, a place where I was known by name and where the congregation, not flashy but faithful, gathered week after week.

This year was a unique opportunity in allowing me the freedom and flexibility to live a life of attentive listening. As I seek a call to ordained ministry in the PCUSA, it is my hope that I will continue to listen. Above all else, this year has been a gift. For that I am truly grateful. ■

Erin Dunigan presently lives, writes, and takes photographs in California.

REFORMING RELATIONSHIPS

by Jeremy Deck

I must admit that whenever I discuss the parish-pulpit fellowship with someone, I receive jealous stares and remarks like, “It must be rough having to study something you love without having to worry about a grade” and “How did you cope with having to travel around Europe for a year?”

It was indeed with extreme joy that I learned I had received this fellowship for overseas study and travel. Having heard wonderful things about Scotland, and wanting to learn more about my adoptive mother church (I joined the PCUSA after my junior year at Princeton), I decided to spend the year in beautiful (though rainy) Edinburgh.

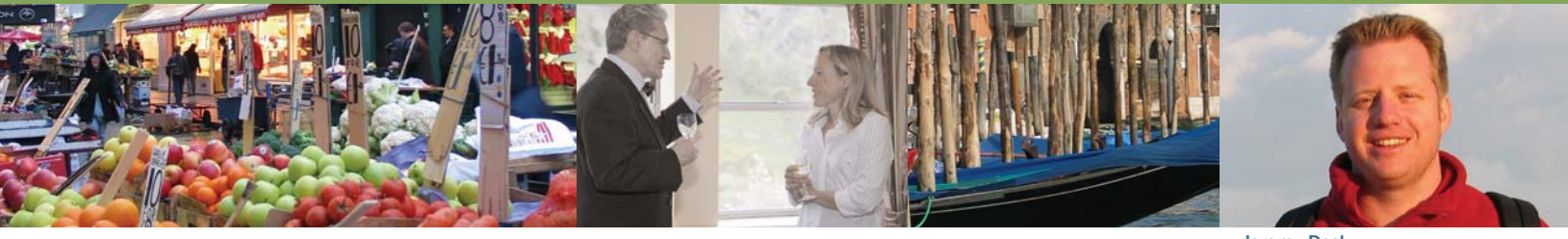
The fellowship allowed me to study preaching in a different culture, fostering a greater understanding of my own culture in turn. My studies took me to different churches each week to experience an array of preaching styles. A number of preachers shared with me their approaches to homiletics and their insights into the art of pastoral ministry. One of these pastors, whose Episcopalian church has actually been gaining members (a rarity by local standards), told me how difficult it was to keep his congregation from atrophying. He said he has seen an entire generation go virtually untouched by the church. Those words often echoed in my head when I visited churches where the young seemed absent, and the old, lifeless. It impressed upon me, time and time again, the importance of maintaining vitality across every demographic.

I carried my new insights into the pulpits of several Scottish churches. Preaching in a foreign land was a rewarding but trying experience; I had not realized how much I rely on my knowledge of culture in preparing my sermons. For my first sermon in Newton Mearns, a Glasgow suburb, I preached about saints past and present, including Mother Teresa. It was during a meeting with the pastor only one day before I preached that I was reminded of the highly volatile Catholic/Protestant dynamic in Glasgow. It is a city that has been torn apart by sectarianism, culminating frequently in violent soccer games between the Rangers and the Celtics (Glasgow’s two preeminent teams). While the pastor assured me that it would “probably” be okay to include Mother Teresa in my sermon (I am unsure to this day whether or not his “probably” was sarcastic, though I felt the sermon was well received), I was still fearful of venturing into a topic that has accounted for so much pain among so many. The experience helped me see that preaching must take seriously both the content of the gospel and the context in which it is preached.

The culture shock didn’t end there, as I was repeatedly made aware of how much I rely on “shared knowledge.” From the monetary currency to the usage of words, from what constitutes a “good society” to the prevalent understandings of God, I could no longer assume that I was on common ground with passersby. It was often in the simplest of things that differences would reveal themselves. If you don’t ask a waiter for your bill, you’ll be sitting in the restaurant until it closes. I had worked as a waiter back home, where it was usually our goal to get people in and out as quickly as possible, the better to save time for our patrons and make more money for ourselves. Coming from a country where speed and efficiency are prized, the ability to sit and converse with those around me without feeling pressure to leave was a dramatic and welcome change.

The year was also a time to reflect on what I had learned at Princeton Seminary (something that we rarely have time to do while we’re there), and the journey that would begin when I returned to the States. I was reminded of the importance of relationships, both in ministry and in our own lives.

SCOTLAND



Jeremy Deck

I became friends with a German university student who initially thought I was a religious fanatic for attending church, not to mention my aspiration to become a pastor. Growing up in post-war Germany, he had been taught the dangers of trusting in things emotional. Thus, he relied on logic and empirical evidence, distrusting anything that related to faith. Through hours of listening and conversation, during which he seemed to be testing whether I had a brain, I was slowly able to gain his trust. While he still may think I am somewhat crazy, one of his parting wishes was for me to give him some theological writings to mull over. Our friendship taught me the difficulty and importance of gaining trust, especially among a generation that feels burned by what they have seen in the church. It also revealed that when we are willing and able to give time to others, God can break through any walls, be they theological or cultural.

As I return to North America, I look forward to the challenge of being a parish minister. I carry with me the naiveté of a recently graduated seminarian, coupled with the experience of being a stranger in a strange land. It is my hope that as I begin a five-month internship at a church in Altavista, Virginia, I will be able to return the gift that was given to me in this fellowship—that I will proclaim justice, even amid fear; listen to others, despite the hurried pace of our society; and take the time to build relationships, especially with those who are skeptical of “religious people.” ■

Jeremy Deck is pastoring at a church in Altavista, Virginia.