

Another New Normal

May 1st, 2015

One year ago tomorrow, we were saying goodbye to the MV Explorer and transitioning into a New Normal – life after Semester At Sea. It was bittersweet to return home, but it was also exciting because we were returning home as completely different people. We were no longer just college students, but we were now *world travelers*.

That's right, we had just circumnavigated the globe and were now the smartest and worldliest people in the world. Our wisdom was infallible and no one could ever dare challenge us on world politics or geography. We weren't afraid of *anything*. We knew everything about everything and we would all now go on to start entirely new lives and go out to save the world and we would never feel afraid or unsure of ourselves ever again.

Well ok, maybe that's not what happened.

Coming back home, I was still generally the same person my friends and family saw only a couple of months ago. I was a 21-year-old who had seen more of the world than most people will ever see in their lifetime, but I was still just a 21-year-old trying to graduate college and figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't suddenly have this magical glow around me that showed off my insight or my new worldly perspective. If anyone remembered that I went abroad they would just ask what my favorite country was and that was it. It seemed like no one noticed or cared that I was now a world traveler.

But I was ok, because I didn't mind. I didn't care how people reacted (or their lack of reaction), because I didn't need other people to validate my feeling that I was a different person. It wasn't a drastic transformation, but I knew that I had changed in many small yet important ways. I was now naturally more calm and patient, both with dealing with other people and with how I handled my own worries. Whereas before I would have played it safe, I now try to challenge myself to get out of my comfort zone and ask myself, "What's the worst that could happen?" or "Why not?" I'm now eager to try new things, to be spontaneous, and to explore what I've always assumed was already explored. Life was no longer about wishing and waiting for life to happen – it was now about *making* life happen.

I can go on, but you get the idea that I returned home feeling good in my New Normal self. However, throughout this year I felt like something was missing...

When I think about the reasons why Semester At Sea was so special, I tend to sum everything up with one word: *Engaged*. In nearly every moment on the MV, we were engaged to a life at sea on our floating university. From the seasickness, to the pasta and potatoes, to the countless hours sitting outside and starrng off at the endless horizon, I was reminded each day of how our lives now revolved around the ocean. Every moment on land was equally engaging since each week we were in a new part of the world, with new languages to learn, new sights to see, and new ways to get sick or die. On both land and sea, every day was a new experience.

But back home, that constant engagement with life has disappeared, and you don't know what you have until it's gone. Instead of traveling to a new country every week, I go to the same classes each week and go to the same parties with the same people. The days now seem to flow right into each other with nothing much happening and all my friends are just going through the motions. Some days I can't help but to fall back into rhythm too.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing, to return to a life of familiarity, but it's scary when the mundane and complacency of everyday life is slowly making me forget what that SAS wanderlust once felt like. At the end of our voyage, I vowed that I would never forget all the stories and memories that I made and that I would make every moment back home just as amazing as life on SAS. However, those experiences are now only memories and over time I remember less and less. On SAS every day was amazing, but back home I have to consciously make every day feel like an experience, which isn't easy. Since I don't see SASers every day, I have to refer to old photographs and journal entries to remind myself of all those memories so that I don't forget them. I used to hate Facebook, but now I love seeing one of you guys pop up on my newsfeed every now and then to remind me that everything we did actually happened.

And speaking of Facebook – isn't it hard trying to stay informed on world events when you're bombarded with so much crap on social media and the news? Before SAS, I was never too concerned with news of the countries I had never been to, but now I watch TV and read the news and can only think of how one-sided the coverage is and how different the world is when you actually see it with your own eyes. A lot of times, I feel like I'm slowly losing touch with the world outside America and forgetting all the little moments of SAS that made seeing the world so special. It's frustrating trying to explain to other people what our voyage means to me, but it's even worse when it's getting harder *for me* to remember what our voyage means to me.

I've always associated sunsets with SAS and I thought that watching sunsets back home would help me remember what that constant engagement felt like. But whenever I saw a sunset this year, it actually made me sad. It was still beautiful, but it wasn't the same. Was it because I was reminded that SAS did all the work for me, by providing the people and the opportunities to make every moment amazing, but now it took a more conscious effort to nurture that wanderlust and that connection to the world that I once felt all the time? Maybe, but I think it's something else. I think it's because I wasn't missing the sunsets - I was missing the *people* that I watched the sunsets with.

At first it was great coming home and reconnecting with old friends, but once the excitement of my homecoming faded I felt a sort of disconnect between my new self and my old friends. Just as I had changed on SAS my friends had also changed, or maybe my friends hadn't change and I was seeing them in a new light. Our conversations and interests, once a comfort and a source of security, now made me feel awkward and lonely as I could no longer relate to my friends the way I did just a few months ago. I now have to sensor what I was saying, either out of fear of coming off as an arrogant brat ("Oh I'm sorry, you haven't circumnavigated around the world?") or to save myself the trouble of trying to explain the unexplainable ("Yeah, Semester At Sea was amazing...").

My new disconnect was a reminder that just a year ago, I was living with some of the most wonderful people that I'll probably ever know and that now we're all scattered across the world. Whenever I wanted to talk to any of you guys on the ship, I would just knock on your door. Now I need texting, Facebook, Skype, long road trips, or expensive plane tickets to keep in touch. I miss being able to walk to the piano lounge or the pool deck and always find people who wanted to hang out. I miss our open mics and our Cards Against Humanity games, our gatherings in the Union, and all our other community events (even if the Yellow Sea was unfairly outnumbered during Sea Olympics. I'm still not bitter about it or anything). I miss being able to just sit in silence with other people and admire the beauty of the ocean. Plain and simple, I just miss you guys a lot.

This year I've made it to a few SAS reunions and every time I reconnected with a SASer I was caught off guard by my sudden giddiness. When I'm with one of you guys, I actually feel like a normal person again, as in my strange and wonderful New Normal self. Does that make me crazy? Possibly. Because of SAS, I still think it's either an A Day or B Day. If a friend of mine is dating a new girl, I'll ask him if he's dating her because she's actually cute or if she's just ship cute. I'll occasionally yell "Attention

ship's company" or "Ubuntu" really loud and everyone looks at me as if I'm crazy but I don't care *because they just don't get it*. If being a SASer means that I'm crazy, then I like being crazy, and I would rather have hundreds of crazy people scattered across the world that I miss than not have so many people in my life to miss at all.

Many of us are about to transition into another New Normal – life after graduation. It is a life that is full of possibilities and is entirely up to us. We're still young but the decisions we make now will have the greatest impact on the rest of our lives, which is both exciting and terrifying. If you're not graduating this year or haven't already, believe me when I say that it'll happen sooner than you think.

I bet that there are a lot of you who don't have plans for after graduation and you might be freaking out about what to do. Or maybe you do have a plan, but maybe it's not what you envisioned for yourself. You might be starting a very unglamorous job that offers financial security and little else. It might feel strange, possibly hypocritical, that you're not selling all your possessions and backpacking the rest of the world or starting a nonprofit. Even if you do have your "dream job" maybe you realized that a "dream job" is still a job that requires a lot of commitment and sacrifice.

I am inspired to know that some of you are actually going to drop everything and start nonprofits and save the world. We need you awesome people to continue being awesome. However, I know that many of us after SAS felt very small in a large world. I think a lot of us came home with more questions than answers as our perception of the world and of ourselves were confronted and challenged. It was ok to travel into the unknown and take crazy risks because we knew that we would eventually return home, but now we're entering the "real world" where we have to start making plans for our own lives without such a large safety net. If we didn't discover what we wanted to do on SAS, where will we find it now?

We are about to enter the New Normal of post-graduation, a transition full of anxiety and change that everyone struggles through, including world travelers. It's hard enough dealing with the fading memories of SAS and the distance between our friends, but now we also have to deal with this pivotal moment in our lives. And the next New Normal – will it be getting married? Starting a family? Becoming grandparents? Retiring? Dying? It's all open water from here on out. No one is going to tell us what we should do, because no one really knows *what* to do. There are no green sheets for life.

However, I don't think that's a bad thing. I'm not going to pretend that I have the answers; I have no foresight into the future and I still have my

own worries. However, I do not think that SAS taught us that we can or should know everything. In this New Normal, we will all lead different lives and confront different challenges. We will all make many more mistakes and there will be times when we feel helpless and unsure of what to do. This can be scary, but it doesn't have to be. Fear and self-doubt are essential parts of life and no amount of experience, faith, or travel will ever completely rid us of fear. I described the burdens that come with being the luckiest people on earth, but *that still means that we're the luckiest people on earth*. Nothing then should stop us from pursuing the lives we want to live.

So if I have a challenge for all of you, it's this: don't let Semester At Sea be the highlight of your life. May it be an important part of your life, but let it be the introduction to something better. Let our voyage be the time when you became comfortable with how big the world is and how small you are. Let our time together be the moment when you realized that there is still so much to see and so much to do. Don't look back on your life and think that you peaked in your early-20s. The best is yet to come.

So I'll close with the same thing that I said a year ago, because I still think that it holds up well today: May your days be full of joy and wonder. May you always remember the moments that you were challenged, confused and hurt by the world, and may you also remember all the moments, both big and small, that made you feel invincible and on top of the world. May you continue to travel the world, but may you also rediscover your old home and challenge yourself to see your home for what it could be rather than what it once was. May you continue to watch the sunrises and sunsets wherever you may be and may you always remember the people who you watched them with, but also embrace the people who now watch the sunsets with you.

This is our New Normal. May we embrace this new way of thinking and make the world a better place for ourselves, a place where we don't set limitations but rather we set destinations. May we always be Emerald Shellbacks. May we always be world travelers. May we always be friends. May we always be, Semester At Sea.

With love,
Brady Gerber

PS: I can't wait for the *25 Jump Street: A Semester At Sea* movie. Let's all meet up in Cape Town and see it together. Sounds good? Great, see ya there.