

Observations of a Post-Communist Classroom

During my two years of teaching English to teenagers in East Slovakia, I will never forget the day my prized A+ student stood before the class in a mock political rally and announced, "If I were President of the country I would first kill all of the gypsies." As her peers nodded in harmonious agreement, I think I must have turned several shades of purple thinking how the heck I was going to deal with this remark in the last five minutes of class! In a calm sort of internal panic, I asked how many in the classroom were Christian. Of course, all 25 students raised their hands. So, I asked them if they thought Jesus would kill the gypsies too? The room was silenced with blank stares. They had never been given the chance to think freely and challenge their own cultures, values, or ideological views.

bloc town 20 minutes from the Ukraine border.

As time passed during my two year term, it became apparent to me that these intelligent and studious kids were memorizing most all of these school subjects in preparation for their graduate exam called the "maturita", a final written and oral exam covering all of the subjects studied during their four years of high school. I remember being dumb struck by a definition given by a student about New York, describing the area of Brooklyn as full of negroes. It was this awe inspiring moment that urged me to focus my teaching on individuality and creative thinking if I wanted to make some sort of sustainable impact on these kids and walk away feeling I had accomplished something more than just English conversation.

Upon my return home to the United States, I was presented with

my ever challenging life question of what to do next. My only experience teaching in the U.S. was substituting for the public school system with fond memories of sending not one, but many students to the principal's office not only for misconduct, but disrespect towards me, the teacher. I couldn't bare the thought of teaching American kids again and missed my Slovak students dearly.

Throughout my travels and observations of other cultures, I often ask myself. "Are we lacking discipline in our culture and exposing our children to too much media trash and not enough cultural and family values?" Is there such a thing as too much impertinent information and material wealth to distract children and their parents from being present, and connected to themselves, society as well as their surroundings?

In a perfect world, perhaps we could find some middle way between two extremes; too tight or too

loose, merging the two cultures.

As for racism, it's a judgment. Am I right? In someway these judgments and social values are taught from adults to children.

Perhaps we as adults can start taking responsibility through our physical and energetic actions to heal and align ourselves with the universe and pass this on to our children. This might be the most fundamental and simplest way we can give to our community on a daily basis.

As Americans, I think it behooves us to take advantage of our freedom to speak and act as responsible and creative citizens in our community, setting wise examples for our children and humanity as a whole.

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The Peace Corps trained us not to "get involved" in any political issues or by any means change their cultural values. The challenge of racism and white supremacy continued to be a struggle for me during my two years of teaching in post-communist East Slovakia. However, if it weren't for my sweet and vulnerable students who respectfully stood up from their desks for me every time I entered the classroom, I probably would not have stuck it out the whole two years. I felt it was up to me to expose them to more about America than what Pamela Anderson and David Hasselhoff could on Bay Watch, the most widely watched television show in Slovakia that year of 1998, followed closely by Dallas re-runs.

On a much more positive note, I was continually blown away by the overall commitment each student had to their school studies and family life at home through cleaning, cooking and working in their family gardens on the weekends. In fact, every Monday morning I would ask each student what he or she did over the weekend and redundantly I got the same reply from each student; "I went to the disco tech with my friends, studied, cleaned the flat and worked in the garden." It was obvious to me that there was not much of a choice when it came to activities in this rural Eastern