I stood on the curb with two large suitcases, wondering what I was going to do next. Five minutes ago, I just signed the papers of release in which the church stated they would not be responsible for me once I walked off their property. I was at a loss.

How did I land myself amidst a Christian cult at sixteen in Seoul, South Korea?

Three months earlier:

“How would you like to go to Korea for a month over the summer? There’s a Korean Experience Program sponsored by a church for $300. We just need to pay for your round-trip flight,” my mother proposed, showing me the ad in the local Chinese newspaper.

“Sure.”

I arrived in Korea with a group of young adults, ranging from high schoolers eager to experience Korea to college students volunteering as English teachers. Once we were provided a schedule of the next couple of weeks, we quickly realized what we had gotten ourselves into. Mind lectures that were assured as voluntary turned out to be mandatory three times a day, every day, lest you wanted to have a one-on-one with the pastors to discuss why your “heart was not open to God”. Pastors proclaimed that the church had the right interpretation of the Bible and “the Devil was working” behind those who had their own thoughts. We had to throw away our own thoughts because they were from Satan. Pressure increased as students were called to share their testimonies of conversion. Relationships began to change between those who were faithful and those unaffected, even between couples and siblings.

Friends fell deeper into the debates of worship, sacrifice, forgiveness, and the meaning of life. Over the days, as more of my friends were drawn into the lure of the church, I found solitary contentment instead of loneliness. I found Christianity simply irrelevant to me. I realized how little I was affected by the meaning of God, and more by the rules dictated by my environment. I breezed through many mind lectures of "open your heart", "the devil possesses you if you do not love God", and moments of sleep paralysis as "demons taking form on your chest". I was disinterested in what it all meant.

“If that is your truth, you may keep it,” I told my friends. I showed clear disinterest, often preoccupied with drawing in my little notebook during mind lectures, absorbed into depicting the pastor gesturing behind a podium, the tightly clasped hands of peers down the row, the soft giggling of some friends behind me. My friends at church surprisingly found me entertaining.

In church, I found it wasn't so much about how to live your own life as it was about how to live the life already lived by those before you. I couldn't relate because that was never a perception of life that I accepted. I was more interested in finding a way of life that fit my personality more than a way of life that God could accept. Besides, I was Buddhist.

This specific church had missionaries go to different third world countries, holding out food in one hand and the Bible in the other. The missionaries would learn the dances and songs of

those cultures and bring them back to Korea, traveling and performing them to public audiences in different cities. They moved many of my peers, mostly high school and college kids, around to fill up empty seats in the auditorium for these performances, even though many of us were recruited under the notion of a Korean experience program or volunteer work as English teachers.

Nevertheless, when I left the confines of the church, I was at a loss. I was 16 years old, alone in a foreign country where I could barely speak the language and had no connections.

I navigated myself to the closest guesthouse in Seoul.

Every day, I stayed in the dark of my room at the guesthouse, stressed by the fact that I was alone. No longer part of a community, no longer with my friends, and incredibly far from the familiarity of family. No one could help me figure out what to do next. I laid down throughout the day, playing with my phone, feeling lost. Every day, I walked into the communal kitchen and had a toast with peanut butter and jam on it. Three times a day.

On the third day, the loneliness and the misery was too much. I bawled. After a minute, eyes swollen red and cheeks no longer trembling, I was resolute. I was sick of my own misery. I went out to take a look outside.

It’s one of the lonelinesses of the human experience that you hold on desperately to things that make you comfortable but miserable, and you only realize what you have when you’re almost about to lose it.

I ventured out, wandering around the same blocks, stopping along the sidewalk to sample hearty fish cake skewers and rice cakes doused in spicy and sweet sauce. I stopped at the Korean army stew restaurant where the *ahjumma* folds the noodles in for me, and made it back just in time for another slice of toast for dinner.

Every day, I wandered out farther and farther. I started to catch the train to different parts of the city and always returned before it got too dark outside. I didn't really do anything, I just kept walking and wandering all day, absorbing the sights and the scents of the city. I enjoyed simply being with the sights, smells, and people around me.

I admired the humdrum of the morning traffic. I acquainted myself with the chirps of birds in the small alleys of shops. I drew in the color and the conversation to accompany the quiet space in my mind. What was once a stressful environment, I found myself most comfortable out walking, knowing that I remained the same no matter how my environment changed. Unfamiliarity no longer scared me because knowing myself despite that discomfort comforted me. It brought me solitude. I took a pottery class nearby. I had picnics at the park. I made friends with other guests.

"Wherever you go, there you are." - Jon Kabat-Zinn

My friends often regal me with stories of bungee jumping in Bali, off-roading in the Sahara, and petting lions at the African safari. Often, they talk about getting away from the stress of work and the boring conundrum of life at home.

But I don't believe the purpose of travel is to escape your everyday reality. Travel is meant for experiencing a new perspective of your life, enabling you to be with yourself completely. If you change depending on your environment, what part of you before was real, and what part of you now is real? To understand the person you are, no matter where you go, see how you change… and see if you find it worth keeping. It's just a matter of what kind of attitude you will take in unfamiliar places and the approach you find most rewarding for you. Traveling shouldn't change who you are, it should bring the best parts of you out more.

Self-discovery is more than simply accumulating accurate descriptive facts about oneself. The goal is to define the direction of further study by "picking out a range of situations that occur frequently or involve possibilities that lever the system onto new paths." Put another way, we are trying to "'tune' the constraints supplied by the new laws so that the study concentrates on interesting domains not easily apprehended or explored in the original setting." - [Source]

My adventure in Korea sparked that for me. It inspired later solo travels throughout the rest of my life. I found comfort in my rituals which created the foundation on top of which spontaneity and exploration blossomed from. There was mental space in my head to form and reform the truths about life I thought I always knew. That mental clarity fueled my curiosity and naturally brought forth ideas that I've always dreamed about but never acted upon.

"It's all a question of imagination. Our responsibility begins with power to imagine. It's just like Yeats said: in dreams begin responsibilities. Flip this around and you could say that where there's no power to imagine, no responsibility can arise… it doesn't matter whose dream it started out as, you have the same dream. So you're responsible for whatever happens in the dream. - Haruki Murakami, Kafka on the Shore

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Fei-Ling Tseng, Bryan Liu, and Chris Wong for the immense feedback on this essay.

Clarify circumstances in the beginning, work more blossoming and introspective aspects of travel, and the difference from escapism.